

## THE ECOLOGY OF SUNNAH: PROPHETIC FOOD PRACTICES BETWEEN ENVIRONMENTAL RATIONALITY AND SYMBOLIC IMITATION

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### Abstract

Prophetic dietary practices are widely emulated across Muslim societies as part of the living tradition of the Sunnah. Yet their global circulation often occurs beyond the ecological and social setting in which they first emerged. This article develops the concept of the Ecology of Sunnah to reinterpret prophetic food practices, especially the tradition of breaking the fast with dates, through the relationship between environmental rationality and symbolic imitation. Using qualitative conceptual research and documentary analysis, the study integrates Islamic studies, anthropology of religion, sociology of practice, food studies, and Islamic environmental ethics. The findings show that dates reflected ecological rationality in the arid Arabian environment because they were accessible, durable, and nutritionally efficient for rapid energy restoration after fasting. In many contemporary Muslim societies, however, this practice increasingly functions as a symbolic marker of religious authenticity and global Muslim belonging. The article argues that contextual interpretation does not weaken the Sunnah. It clarifies its ethical wisdom. The proposed framework offers a way to understand prophetic traditions as practices that combine devotion, ecological awareness, social meaning, and adaptive guidance for diverse Muslim contexts.

*Key words: ecology of sunnah; environmental rationality; global islam; prophetic food practices; symbolic imitation*

### Abstrak

Praktik makanan profetik banyak diteladani masyarakat Muslim sebagai bagian dari tradisi hidup Sunnah. Namun, peredarannya secara global sering berlangsung di luar konteks ekologis dan sosial tempat praktik itu pertama kali tumbuh. Artikel ini mengembangkan konsep Ecology of Sunnah untuk menafsirkan ulang praktik makanan Nabi, khususnya tradisi berbuka puasa dengan kurma,

melalui hubungan antara rasionalitas lingkungan dan imitasi simbolik. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif konseptual dengan analisis dokumen, serta memadukan kajian Islam, antropologi agama, sosiologi praktik, kajian pangan, dan etika lingkungan Islam. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa kurma mencerminkan rasionalitas ekologis dalam lingkungan Arab yang kering karena mudah diperoleh, tahan lama, dan efisien secara nutrisi untuk memulihkan energi setelah berpuasa. Dalam banyak masyarakat Muslim kontemporer, praktik ini semakin berfungsi sebagai simbol autentisitas keagamaan dan keterhubungan dengan umat Islam global. Artikel ini berargumen bahwa tafsir kontekstual tidak melemahkan Sunnah. Tafsir tersebut justru memperjelas hikmah etikanya. Kerangka yang ditawarkan membantu memahami tradisi profetik sebagai praktik yang memadukan ibadah, kesadaran ekologis, makna sosial, dan tuntunan adaptif bagi konteks Muslim yang beragam.

Kata kunci: *ekologi sunnah; global islam; imitasi simbolik; praktik makanan profetik; rasionalitas lingkungan*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Islamic practices are not only theological prescriptions but also lived traditions that develop through interaction with social, cultural, and environmental contexts. Across Muslim societies, the Sunnah—the normative practices and traditions of the Prophet Muhammad serves as a fundamental reference for daily life, ritual conduct, and ethical behavior. Among these practices, prophetic dietary traditions occupy a distinctive place in Muslim religious culture. One of the most widely practiced examples is the tradition of breaking the fast during Ramadan with dates. This practice has been preserved for centuries and has become deeply embedded in Muslim devotional life across diverse regions, from the Middle East and North Africa to Southeast Asia and Europe. However, as Islam expanded beyond the ecological environment of the Arabian Peninsula, the replication of prophetic practices often occurred in contexts very different from the original socio-environmental conditions in which those practices emerged.

In the classical Islamic tradition, prophetic practices are commonly interpreted through normative frameworks such as fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence) and hadith studies, which emphasize the authenticity, transmission, and legal implications of prophetic traditions (Brown, 2019) (Kamali, 2008). While these approaches have contributed significantly to the preservation of Islamic teachings, they often focus on the textual authority of the Sunnah rather than its contextual logic. As a result, the ecological, social, and practical dimensions that may have shaped many prophetic practices receive less analytical attention in contemporary scholarship. In recent years, however, scholars have begun to highlight the importance of contextual interpretation in understanding Islamic traditions, particularly in the fields of anthropology, sociology of religion, and Islamic studies (Asad, 1986) (Geertz, 1973) (Mahmood, 2005). These perspectives emphasize that religious practices are not static rituals but dynamic cultural forms that interact with local environments and social structures.

The tradition of breaking the fast with dates offers an illustrative case of this broader phenomenon. In many Muslim societies, including those located in tropical regions such as Indonesia and Malaysia, dates are widely consumed during Ramadan as a symbolic continuation of prophetic practice. Yet dates are not native to many of these regions and are often imported at significant economic cost. This raises an important question: to what extent are prophetic dietary practices rooted in the environmental realities of early Islamic society, and how do their meanings transform when reproduced in different ecological contexts? Addressing this question requires moving beyond purely normative interpretations of the Sunnah toward a more interdisciplinary perspective that integrates insights from anthropology, sociology, and environmental studies.

From a historical perspective, the Arabian Peninsula, the geographical context of the Prophet Muhammad was characterized by arid desert environments where dates constituted one of the most accessible and nutritionally efficient food sources. Dates are rich in natural sugars, fiber, and essential nutrients, making them particularly suitable for rapid energy restoration after prolonged fasting (Al-Shahib & Marshall, 2019). Moreover, dates are easily preserved and transported, which historically made them an essential component of desert subsistence economies. Within this ecological setting, breaking the fast with dates was not only a religiously meaningful act but also a practical response to environmental conditions and human physiological needs. This suggests that certain prophetic practices may reflect forms of environmental rationality, meaning that they emerged in response to specific ecological and social realities.

Despite this ecological dimension, contemporary Muslim societies often reproduce prophetic food practices primarily as markers of religious identity rather than as contextually adaptive behaviors. Sociological research on religion has long demonstrated that ritual practices can function as symbolic systems through which communities construct collective identity and moral belonging (Geertz, 1973). Similarly, (Bourdieu, 1977) concept of habitus explains how repeated social practices become embodied cultural dispositions that reproduce social norms over time. Within this framework, the consumption of dates during Ramadan may function less as a response to ecological necessity and more as a symbolic affirmation of religious authenticity. Such practices can become forms of what scholars describe as performative religiosity, in which outward imitation of tradition reinforces communal identity even when the original contextual rationale is no longer present (Mahmood, 2005).

The global spread of Islam has further intensified this phenomenon. As Islamic practices travel across different cultural and environmental landscapes, they undergo processes of reinterpretation, adaptation, and symbolic transformation. Anthropological scholarship has emphasized that religious traditions are continually reshaped through interaction with local contexts (Asad, 1986). In Southeast Asia, for example, Islamic practices have historically interacted with indigenous food cultures, agricultural systems, and climatic conditions that differ significantly from those of the Arabian Peninsula (Azra, 2004) (Hefner, 2000). Nevertheless, certain prophetic practices particularly those associated with food continue to be replicated in ways that prioritize symbolic continuity over ecological adaptation. This raises broader questions about how Muslim communities negotiate the relationship between normative tradition and contextual rationality in the practice of religion.

Existing studies on prophetic food practices have largely focused on two dominant perspectives. The first examines the nutritional and medical benefits of foods mentioned in the prophetic tradition, often referred to as “Prophetic Medicine” (tibb al-nabawi) (Salim, 2017). These studies frequently highlight the health advantages of foods such as dates, honey, and olive oil. The second perspective concentrates on jurisprudential analysis, investigating the legal status of prophetic dietary recommendations within Islamic law (Kamali, 2008). While both perspectives contribute valuable insights, they share a common limitation: neither adequately addresses the environmental and sociocultural context that may have shaped these practices in the first place.

This limitation reveals a significant research gap in contemporary Islamic studies. Although scholars have explored the symbolic meaning of religious rituals and the sociological dynamics of Muslim practices, few studies have examined prophetic traditions through the lens of ecological rationality. In particular, there is a lack of theoretical frameworks that explain how prophetic practices interact with environmental contexts and how these practices are transformed when transmitted across different ecological settings. Furthermore, existing research rarely investigates the tension between contextual wisdom embedded in prophetic practices and the tendency toward symbolic imitation in contemporary Muslim societies. Addressing this gap is crucial for developing a more comprehensive understanding of how Islamic traditions function within a global and ecologically diverse world.

To address this gap, the present study introduces the concept of “The Ecology of Sunnah.” This concept refers to the idea that certain prophetic practices were shaped by environmental conditions and therefore contain forms of practical wisdom that are contextually embedded within specific ecological settings. Rather than viewing the Sunnah solely as a set of fixed behavioral forms, the Ecology of Sunnah perspective emphasizes the relationship between prophetic practices, environmental rationality, and social adaptation. In this sense, the Sunnah can be understood not only as a normative model for imitation but also as a source of contextual insight that encourages rational engagement with local realities.

The theoretical framework of this study draws upon three major bodies of scholarship. First, anthropological theories of religion emphasize the symbolic and cultural dimensions of ritual practice (Geertz, 1973). Second, sociological theories of practice highlight how repeated actions become embedded in social structures and cultural habitus (Bourdieu, 1977). Third, critical approaches to Islamic tradition emphasize that religious practices evolve through historical and discursive processes (Asad, 1986). By integrating these perspectives, the study proposes a new analytical lens for understanding how prophetic traditions are reproduced, interpreted, and transformed across diverse environmental contexts.

Based on this theoretical perspective, the study seeks to explore the following central question: How can prophetic food practices be understood through the lens of ecological rationality, and how do these practices transform when reproduced as symbolic religious traditions in global Muslim societies? More specifically, the study aims to examine the relationship between environmental context, prophetic practice, and contemporary patterns of religious imitation. Through this analysis, the study contributes to broader debates about contextual interpretation, religious symbolism, and the globalization of Islamic traditions.

The main argument of this article is that prophetic food practices, such as the consumption of dates during Ramadan, originally reflected forms of environmentally grounded rationality that responded to the ecological conditions of early Islamic society. However, as Islam expanded across the world, these practices increasingly acquired symbolic meanings that emphasize identity and religious authenticity rather than contextual functionality. Recognizing this transformation does not diminish the religious significance of the Sunnah; rather, it highlights the importance of understanding prophetic traditions in relation to their historical and environmental contexts. Such an approach can open new possibilities for contextualizing Islamic practices in ways that remain faithful to their underlying wisdom while responding to contemporary realities.

Ultimately, this study argues that interpreting prophetic traditions through the framework of the Ecology of Sunnah provides a more holistic understanding of Islamic practices. By acknowledging the interaction between environmental rationality and symbolic imitation, scholars can better explain how religious traditions travel, adapt, and acquire new meanings within global Islam. This perspective also offers important implications for Islamic education and contemporary religious discourse, encouraging a shift from literal imitation toward a deeper appreciation of the ethical and contextual wisdom embedded within the Sunnah.

In contemporary Islamic studies, however, scholars increasingly recognize that prophetic practices were embedded in the historical and environmental realities of early Islamic society. Understanding the Sunnah therefore requires not only textual analysis but also contextual interpretation. As argued by Talal Asad, Islamic traditions should be understood as discursive traditions that evolve through historical processes and social negotiations. According to this perspective, religious practices are not static prescriptions but living traditions continually interpreted and reinterpreted by Muslim communities. This approach opens space for examining how prophetic practices interact with changing cultural and environmental contexts as Islam spreads across diverse regions of the world.

Anthropological perspectives on religion further contribute to this understanding. The anthropologist Clifford Geertz conceptualized religion as a system of symbols that establishes powerful and enduring moods and motivations in human societies (Geertz, 1973). From this perspective, religious rituals function not only as acts of devotion but also as symbolic practices that express collective identity and moral meaning. In Muslim societies, prophetic traditions often operate within this symbolic dimension. Practices associated with the Prophet, such as specific modes of dress, food consumption, or ritual performance, can become markers of religious authenticity and communal belonging. Consequently, the replication of prophetic practices may sometimes prioritize symbolic continuity over contextual adaptation.

Sociological theories of practice also provide valuable insights into how religious traditions are reproduced across generations. The sociologist Pierre Bourdieu introduced the concept of habitus, referring to the durable dispositions through which individuals internalize social norms and reproduce cultural practices (Bourdieu, 1977). Within this framework, repeated religious behaviors gradually become embodied practices that appear natural and unquestioned. In the context of Islamic ritual life, the imitation of prophetic practices may thus function as a form of habitus in which Muslims reproduce inherited traditions as expressions of piety and communal identity. While

such practices strengthen religious continuity, they may also obscure the contextual logic that originally shaped those traditions.

Classical scholarship remains important because it protects the authority of the Sunnah through careful attention to transmission, textual reliability, and legal implication (Brown, 2019) (Kamali, 2008). However, conceptual research in contemporary Islamic studies also needs to ask how a prophetic practice functions after it travels to another ecology. This question is not only legal. It is cultural, social, and environmental. Asad's notion of Islam as a discursive tradition helps explain why a practice can remain linked to prophetic authority while its meaning changes across time and place (Asad, 1986).

One area where this dynamic becomes particularly visible is in the domain of prophetic food practices. Numerous studies have examined the foods mentioned in the prophetic tradition, often within the framework of Prophetic Medicine (Tibb al-Nabawi). These studies highlight the nutritional and therapeutic benefits of foods such as dates, honey, olive oil, and black seed (*Nigella sativa*) (Salim, 2017). Among these foods, dates occupy a prominent position in Islamic tradition. Historical records and hadith literature frequently mention the consumption of dates by the Prophet, especially in relation to fasting during Ramadan. Scientific research has also confirmed that dates are rich in natural sugars, vitamins, and minerals, making them an efficient source of energy restoration after prolonged fasting (Al-Shahib & Marshall, 2003). For this reason, many contemporary studies emphasize the health benefits of breaking the fast with dates.

Food studies add another layer to this discussion. (Mintz & Du Bois, 2002) show that eating is never merely biological because food connects bodies, economies, identities, and moral worlds. In environmental anthropology, (Ingold, 2000) argues that human practices emerge through dwelling in particular environments. These perspectives help explain why a food item such as the date can be read as a religious sign and as an ecological response. The same fruit may represent nutrition, memory of the Prophet, market circulation, and the imagined geography of Islam.

Scholars of globalization and religion have observed that the transnational circulation of religious symbols often strengthens collective identity within global religious communities (Roy, 2004). As Islamic practices spread across the world, certain symbols associated with the Arabian origins of Islam may acquire heightened significance as markers of authenticity. In this context, the consumption of dates may function less as an ecological necessity and more as a symbolic affirmation of connection to the prophetic tradition. Such practices can be interpreted as expressions of symbolic religiosity, where the outward replication of tradition becomes a visible sign of religious commitment.

Recent Indonesian Islamic scholarship also shows the need for interdisciplinary reading. Studies in *Jurnal Pusaka* have discussed tawhid, theology, digital da'wah, tafsir, spirituality, and social transformation in ways that connect Islamic ideas with contemporary realities (Al Hamimy & Prayogi, 2025) (Hamidalloh & Arosyiddin, 2026) (Malikha, 2025) (Mardiah, 2025) (Sholih & Rozi, 2025) (Wahab & Annissah, 2025). This article continues that orientation by treating prophetic food practice as a site where text, symbol, ecology, and Muslim everyday life meet.

Within this framework, prophetic food practices are understood as historically situated responses to particular ecological and social circumstances. When these practices are transmitted to

different cultural environments, they may undergo processes of reinterpretation and symbolic transformation. Some communities may adapt the underlying wisdom of prophetic practices to local contexts, while others may emphasize the literal imitation of outward forms as expressions of religious identity. Examining this tension between contextual adaptation and symbolic imitation offers valuable insights into how Islamic traditions function within the diverse landscapes of global Islam.

*Table 1. Research gap and conceptual positioning of the Ecology of Sunnah*

Research stream	Main contribution	Remaining limitation
Prophetic medicine and nutrition	Explains health benefits of dates, honey, and other prophetic foods	Often weak in social and ecological interpretation
Fiqh and hadith studies	Clarifies normative status and textual authority of the Sunnah	Often does not focus on environmental context
Anthropology and sociology of religion	Explains symbol, habitus, discipline, and global religious identity	Often not grounded in Islamic textual concerns
Islamic environmental ethics	Explains stewardship, moderation, and ecological responsibility	Often does not examine specific prophetic food practices
Ecology of Sunnah	Connects prophetic practice, environmental rationality, symbolic imitation, and contextual adaptation	Offers the conceptual contribution of this article

## 2. METHODS

This study employs a qualitative conceptual research approach to examine the relationship between prophetic food practices, environmental rationality, and symbolic religious imitation in contemporary Muslim societies. Conceptual research is particularly appropriate for studies that aim to develop new theoretical frameworks and reinterpret existing traditions through interdisciplinary perspectives (Creswell, 2018). In the context of Islamic studies, qualitative approaches have been widely used to analyze religious practices, symbolic meanings, and socio-cultural transformations of religious traditions (Geertz, 1973) (Asad, 1986). By combining textual interpretation with socio-anthropological analysis, this research seeks to construct a theoretical model termed “The Ecology of Sunnah,” which explains how prophetic practices interact with environmental conditions and cultural contexts.

The research focuses on prophetic dietary practices, with particular emphasis on the tradition of breaking the fast with dates during Ramadan. The subject of analysis is not individual participants but rather religious practices and discourses surrounding prophetic food traditions in global Muslim societies. These practices are examined as socio-cultural phenomena that reflect broader processes of religious transmission, symbolic identity formation, and environmental adaptation. Previous studies have demonstrated that religious rituals can function both as practical behaviors and symbolic expressions of collective identity (Geertz, 1973) (Mahmood, 2005). Therefore, the present study treats prophetic food practices as cultural practices embedded within historical, environmental, and social contexts.

The research procedure was conducted in several stages. First, a systematic literature review was undertaken to identify scholarly works related to prophetic traditions, Islamic food culture, environmental anthropology, and the sociology of religion. Key publications in Islamic studies, anthropology, and sociology were reviewed to establish the theoretical foundations of the study. Classical discussions on the authority of the Sunnah and prophetic traditions were examined alongside contemporary works on the sociology of Islamic practices and globalization of religion (Brown, 2009) (Kamali, 2008) (Roy, 2004). This stage aimed to identify dominant perspectives in the literature and to locate the research gap concerning the ecological dimension of prophetic practices.

Second, the study conducted a contextual analysis of prophetic dietary traditions, particularly those related to fasting and food consumption mentioned in hadith literature. These texts were examined to understand the historical context in which prophetic food practices emerged. Previous research indicates that dates were a central component of the subsistence economy in the Arabian Peninsula due to their nutritional value, resilience in arid climates, and long shelf life (Al-Shahib & Marshall, 2003). Such ecological conditions suggest that prophetic dietary recommendations may have reflected practical environmental considerations in addition to religious significance. This stage of analysis therefore focused on identifying the environmental rationality embedded in prophetic practices.

Third, the study conducted a comparative socio-cultural analysis to examine how prophetic food practices are reproduced in different Muslim societies beyond the Arabian Peninsula. In regions such as Southeast Asia, where ecological conditions differ significantly from desert environments, Muslim communities often continue to replicate prophetic food traditions despite the availability of alternative local foods. Scholars have argued that such practices may reflect processes of symbolic religious reproduction and identity formation within global Islam (Hefner, 2000) (Roy, 2020). By comparing ecological contexts and cultural practices across regions, the study analyzes the transformation of prophetic food traditions from environmentally grounded practices into symbolic religious expressions.

The materials used in this research consist primarily of academic publications, classical Islamic texts, and scholarly studies on religion and ecology. These sources include peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and academic monographs addressing Islamic tradition, sociology of religion, environmental anthropology, and food studies. The use of interdisciplinary sources is necessary because the research seeks to bridge multiple academic fields in order to develop a comprehensive conceptual framework. The integration of Islamic scholarship with anthropological and sociological perspectives allows the study to examine prophetic practices from both normative and contextual viewpoints.

Data collection in this study relied on documentary analysis, a method commonly used in qualitative research to analyze written sources and textual materials (Bowen, 2009). Documents were selected based on their relevance to the research theme, scholarly credibility, and contribution to theoretical discussions about Islamic practices and environmental context. The collected data included discussions of prophetic food traditions, sociological analyses of Muslim practices, and environmental studies related to traditional diets. This method enabled the researcher to synthesize diverse sources of knowledge in order to develop a coherent theoretical argument.

The analytical process followed a thematic analysis approach, which involves identifying recurring patterns and conceptual themes within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this study, the analysis focused on three main themes: prophetic practice, environmental rationality, and symbolic imitation. First, prophetic traditions related to food consumption were analyzed to identify their historical and environmental contexts. Second, the concept of environmental rationality was applied to examine how certain practices may have emerged as practical responses to ecological conditions. Third, sociological theories of symbolic practice and habitus were used to interpret how these traditions are reproduced as markers of religious identity in contemporary Muslim societies (Bourdieu, 1977) (Geertz, 1973).

The final stage of analysis involved the development of a conceptual framework, namely the Ecology of Sunnah Model. This model explains how prophetic practices originate within specific environmental contexts, how they contain forms of ecological wisdom, and how they are transmitted and reinterpreted across different cultural and geographical settings. The framework also highlights two possible interpretive pathways in the transmission of the Sunnah: contextual adaptation, in which the underlying wisdom of prophetic practices is applied to local conditions, and symbolic imitation, in which the outward forms of those practices are reproduced as expressions of religious identity. By articulating these dynamics, the model provides a theoretical contribution to the study of Islamic traditions and their interaction with environmental contexts.

Overall, this methodological approach allows the study to integrate textual interpretation, socio-anthropological analysis, and environmental perspectives in order to develop a new theoretical understanding of prophetic food practices. Through qualitative conceptual analysis supported by interdisciplinary literature, the research seeks to demonstrate that the Sunnah can be understood not only as a set of normative rituals but also as a repository of contextual wisdom shaped by environmental realities. Such an approach contributes to broader scholarly debates about the contextualization of Islamic traditions within the diverse cultural and ecological landscapes of the contemporary Muslim world.

### 3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings are presented as discussion because this study is conceptual. The result is not a statistical pattern, but an interpretive argument built from the encounter between sources. The first finding clarifies the environmental logic of dates in the Arabian context. The second finding explains how the same practice gains symbolic force when reproduced globally. The third finding develops the Ecology of Sunnah as a conceptual model. The fourth finding compares ecological contexts across Muslim societies. The final discussion draws theoretical and practical implications for Islamic education, da'wah, and contemporary Muslim environmental ethics.

#### 4.1 Environmental Rationality in Prophetic Food Practices

This study examined how prophetic food practices particularly the tradition of breaking the fast with dates can be understood through the framework of Ecology of Sunnah, which integrates environmental rationality and symbolic religious imitation. The findings are derived from the thematic analysis of interdisciplinary literature, including Islamic studies, sociology of religion, anthropology, and food studies. The results reveal three major findings: (1) prophetic food practices were historically shaped by environmental rationality; (2) the global transmission of these practices

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often leads to symbolic imitation rather than contextual adaptation; and (3) the interaction between environmental rationality and symbolic imitation forms the basis of the proposed Ecology of Sunnah Framework.

The first finding indicates that prophetic dietary practices were closely related to the ecological environment of early Islamic society. Historical and nutritional studies show that dates were one of the most accessible and nutritionally efficient food sources in the Arabian Peninsula. Dates contain high concentrations of natural sugars such as glucose and fructose, which can quickly restore energy after long periods of fasting (Al-Shahib & Marshall, 2019). In desert environments characterized by extreme temperatures and limited food resources, such nutritional efficiency was essential for maintaining physical endurance.

Anthropological research suggests that traditional dietary practices often evolve as adaptive responses to environmental conditions (Mintz & Du Bois, 2002). In the context of the Arabian desert, dates were widely cultivated and easily stored for long periods, making them a reliable source of sustenance. Therefore, the prophetic tradition of breaking the fast with dates may reflect a combination of religious practice and environmental practicality. This interpretation aligns with the idea that religious traditions frequently emerge within specific ecological contexts and embody forms of practical wisdom related to those environments.

The ecological argument begins with a simple observation. A food practice becomes meaningful because it fits a lived environment. In the Arabian Peninsula, dates were not a rare luxury. They formed part of everyday subsistence, trade, hospitality, and bodily endurance. (Al-Shahib & Marshall, 2003) describe the date palm fruit as a food with high nutritional value and broad potential for human diet. Later reviews also emphasize its carbohydrates, fiber, minerals, and bioactive compounds (Al-Dashti et al., 2021) (Ali et al., 2025) (Idowu et al., 2020). These findings support the claim that dates are not only symbolically important in Islam. They also make practical sense in a hot and dry ecology.

The bodily situation of fasting strengthens this point. At sunset, the fasting body needs gradual energy restoration after hours without food and water. Dates contain natural sugars that can be absorbed quickly, while their fiber helps make the intake less abrupt than refined sugar. Ramadan dietary studies show that fasting changes meal timing, sugar intake, carbohydrate patterns, and metabolic responses (Al-Jafar et al., 2024) (Shatila et al., 2021) (Tsitsou et al., 2022). The practice of eating dates at iftar can therefore be read as a form of practical wisdom. It gives the body a modest first intake before a larger meal.

This does not mean that the Prophet's practice can be reduced to nutrition. Reduction would flatten the Sunnah into biology. The more precise interpretation is that prophetic practice often joins worship, ethics, social order, and material life. Breaking the fast with dates expresses obedience and gratitude, but it also demonstrates simplicity. It avoids excessive eating at the first moment of release from hunger. It uses a locally available food that meets a physical need. In this sense, the Sunnah trains the body and the moral self at the same time.

Environmental rationality also appears in the durability of dates. In desert societies, foods that could be stored, transported, and shared had special social value. Dates could sustain travelers, support households, and serve guests without complex preparation. The Prophet's food practice

therefore belonged to a wider ecology of scarcity, mobility, and hospitality. It reflected a way of living in which food had to be simple, accessible, and ethically shared. This dimension is often lost when dates become a seasonal commodity in countries where they are not locally produced.

The concept of environmental rationality helps avoid two extremes. The first extreme treats every outward form of prophetic practice as detached from context. The second extreme treats context as if it cancels religious meaning. The Ecology of Sunnah takes a middle position. It recognizes that the outward practice matters because Muslims love and follow the Prophet. It also recognizes that the wisdom of the practice includes its relation to environment, need, moderation, and benefit. The question is not whether Muslims may eat dates. They may and often should when available. The question is how they understand the practice and whether that understanding can guide ethical action in other ecological settings.

#### 4.2 Symbolic Imitation in the Globalization of Prophetic Practices

These findings support the argument that prophetic food practices should not be understood solely as ritualistic behaviors but also as historically situated practices shaped by environmental conditions. Recognizing this ecological dimension provides a deeper understanding of the rationality embedded within prophetic traditions.

The second major finding reveals that when prophetic food practices spread beyond the ecological context of the Arabian Peninsula, their meanings often shift from environmental rationality to symbolic religious identity. In many Muslim-majority countries located in tropical regions, such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and parts of South Asia, dates are not native crops and must be imported. Despite the availability of abundant local fruits that can provide similar nutritional benefits, many Muslim communities continue to prioritize dates when breaking the fast.

This phenomenon reflects what sociologists describe as symbolic imitation. The sociologist Pierre Bourdieu explains that repeated social practices gradually become embedded in cultural habitus, shaping individuals' perceptions of what constitutes legitimate or authentic behavior (Bourdieu, 1977). Within Muslim communities, the act of consuming dates during Ramadan has become a symbolic expression of adherence to prophetic tradition. As a result, the practice is often replicated regardless of its ecological relevance.

The globalization of Islamic practices further strengthens this symbolic dimension. Scholars of global Islam argue that religious symbols associated with the Arabian origins of Islam often acquire special significance in transnational Muslim communities (Roy, 2004). In this context, the consumption of dates can function as a cultural symbol connecting Muslims worldwide to the prophetic heritage. Rather than being interpreted primarily as a practical dietary choice, it becomes a visible marker of religious authenticity.

Symbolic imitation becomes visible when the practice travels to ecological settings that do not share the same food base. In Indonesia, Malaysia, and other tropical Muslim societies, the environment provides many fruits that are locally abundant and nutritionally useful. Bananas, coconuts, papayas, and other fruits can restore energy and water after fasting. Yet dates often occupy a privileged symbolic position in Ramadan. They are displayed in shops, distributed in mosques,

used in charity packages, and promoted as a sign of proper iftar. The fruit becomes a devotional object that carries a memory of Arabia and a connection to the Prophet.

This transformation is not simply a mistake. Symbols matter in religious life. (Geertz, 1973) explains that religion works through symbols that shape moods, motivations, and a sense of order. Dates therefore can produce religious feeling because they connect an ordinary meal to the prophetic past. The problem emerges when symbolic imitation becomes the only way to understand the Sunnah. When this happens, Muslims may perform the outward form while ignoring the ethical logic of simplicity, local suitability, moderation, and care for available resources.

Bourdieu's concept of habitus clarifies why the practice can feel natural and unquestioned (Bourdieu, 1977). A Muslim child who repeatedly sees dates on the iftar table may learn that Ramadan feels complete when dates are present. Over time, the practice becomes embodied. It no longer needs detailed explanation. It is carried by family memory, mosque routines, market displays, social media advice, and religious preaching. This is how a practice becomes part of Muslim common sense. The habitus preserves continuity, but it can also hide the original contextual reasoning.

Mahmood's study of piety also helps explain why imitation should not be dismissed too quickly (Mahmood, 2005). In many religious traditions, embodied repetition forms the ethical self. A Muslim may eat dates not because of nutrition, but because the act cultivates love for the Prophet. The Ecology of Sunnah does not deny this. It only argues that pious repetition becomes richer when it includes understanding. Love for the Prophet should lead not only to copying visible forms, but also to learning the wisdom that shaped his way of living.

The symbolic life of dates therefore reveals a broader feature of global Islam. (Roy, 2004) argues that globalization can detach religious symbols from local cultures and produce standardized signs of Muslim identity. Dates, Arabic expressions, clothing styles, and ritual gestures may become markers of belonging to a global ummah. This can strengthen solidarity. It can also create pressure to treat Arabian cultural forms as universally superior to local Muslim expressions. The Ecology of Sunnah challenges this hierarchy by distinguishing prophetic wisdom from unreflective cultural Arabization.

In Southeast Asia, Islam has never existed outside local culture. Historical studies show that Muslim life in the region developed through networks, education, trade, adaptation, and negotiation with local societies (Azra, 2004) (Hefner, 2000). The persistence of dates in Ramadan is therefore part of a larger negotiation between global Islamic symbols and local food cultures. The challenge is not to choose one side absolutely. The challenge is to create a religious literacy that can honor the Prophet while also recognizing the legitimacy of local ecological wisdom.

#### 4.3 The Ecology of Sunnah Framework

The third finding of this study is the development of a conceptual model called the Ecology of Sunnah Framework. This framework explains how prophetic practices originate within specific environmental contexts and how their meanings evolve as they are transmitted across different regions of the Muslim world.

The framework proposes that prophetic practices contain two interconnected dimensions: environmental rationality and symbolic imitation. Environmental rationality refers to the practical

wisdom embedded in religious practices that respond to specific ecological conditions. Symbolic imitation refers to the reproduction of those practices as markers of religious identity, even when the original environmental conditions are no longer present.

The framework places prophetic practice at the center of three relations. The first relation links practice to environment. This relation asks what material conditions surrounded the practice and what benefits the practice produced in that setting. The second relation links practice to symbol. This relation asks how Muslims remember, reproduce, and emotionally invest in the practice. The third relation links practice to interpretation. This relation asks how contemporary Muslims can carry the Sunnah into new contexts without losing its ethical spirit. These three relations prevent the Sunnah from being read in a narrow or fragmented way.

The figure presented below visualizes this movement. A practice begins within an environmental context. It carries ecological wisdom because it responds to food availability, bodily need, social habit, and moral discipline. When the practice moves through global transmission, it can follow two interpretive paths. The first path is contextual adaptation. It seeks equivalent wisdom in local conditions. The second path is symbolic imitation. It preserves the visible form as a marker of identity. Both paths can be meaningful, but they require different forms of religious understanding.

Contextual adaptation does not mean replacing the Sunnah with local preference. It means asking what the Sunnah teaches through a specific practice. If the purpose of breaking the fast with dates includes simplicity, quick but modest energy restoration, gratitude, and accessible food, then a local Muslim community can learn from that wisdom even when dates are expensive or ecologically distant. The community may still eat dates when available. It may also recognize local foods that carry similar benefits. This approach does not cancel imitation. It deepens it.

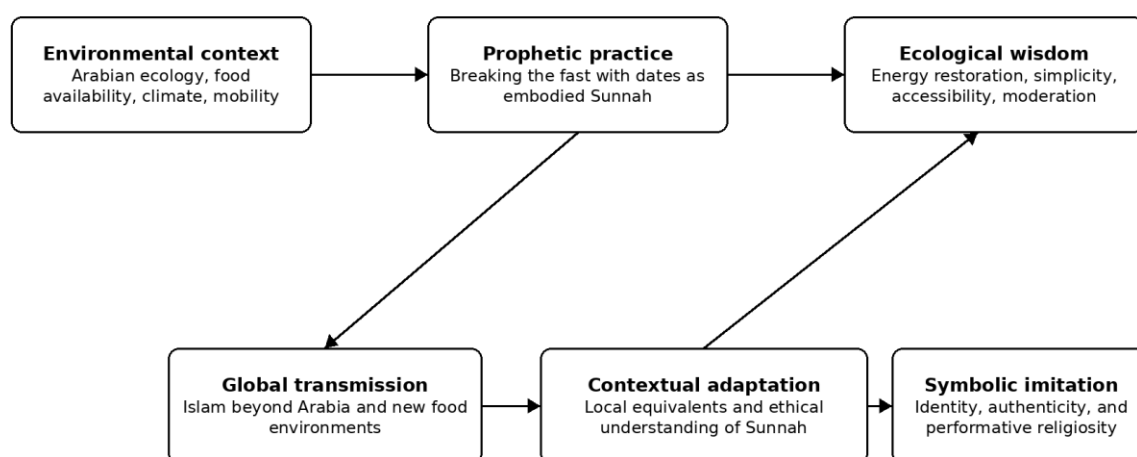
Symbolic imitation also needs ethical refinement. A symbol is healthy when it opens the heart toward meaning. A symbol becomes weak when it blocks reflection. Eating dates may remind Muslims of the Prophet, but the reminder should lead to humility, moderation, and care for creation. If the symbol becomes consumerist display, the ethical meaning is reduced. The Ecology of Sunnah therefore invites Muslims to transform symbolic imitation into reflective imitation. Reflective imitation copies the Prophet with love and studies the wisdom of the act.

This framework also connects with Islamic environmental ethics. Contemporary Muslim ecological writings emphasize stewardship, trust, balance, and accountability before God (Basri et al., 2025) (Gada, 2024) (Hidayat, 2023) (Hidayati & Kurniawan, 2022). These themes match the logic of the Ecology of Sunnah. The Prophet's practices can be read as forms of environmental pedagogy because they teach how human beings use resources, restrain appetite, and relate to available food. In this view, the Sunnah becomes a practical grammar for living responsibly within creation.

The connection to tawhid is also important. Tawhid is not only a doctrine about divine unity. It also shapes how Muslims see the world as a coherent trust from God. Recent Pusaka scholarship on tawhid and Islamic education highlights the epistemic role of tawhid in forming Islamic knowledge and educational orientation (Hamidalloh & Arosyiddin, 2026). The Ecology of Sunnah can be located within this tawhidic orientation because it refuses to separate ritual life from material

responsibility. Eating, fasting, buying, sharing, and caring for the environment belong to one moral field.

Figure 1. Ecology of Sunnah Framework



Source: Author conceptualization based on thematic analysis.

#### 4.4. Comparative Analysis of Food Practices in Different Ecological Contexts

To further illustrate the dynamics described above, Table 3 summarizes the relationship between ecological context, available food resources, and religious practice in different Muslim societies. The comparative table below illustrates that the same prophetic practice can take different meanings across ecological regions. In the Arabian Peninsula, dates fit the local environment and carry both nutritional and devotional value. In Southeast Asia, dates often arrive through import markets and gain strong symbolic meaning during Ramadan. In South Asia and Africa, the picture is more diverse because local fruits, grains, and food customs interact with global Islamic symbols in different ways. The table does not rank these regions. It shows how ecology, economy, and symbol shape religious practice together.

The comparison matters because it prevents a simplistic conclusion. It would be wrong to say that tropical Muslims should stop eating dates. It would also be weak to say that the ecological context does not matter at all. A better conclusion is that Muslim food practice should become more reflective. Dates can remain part of Ramadan devotion, but Muslims can also value local fruits,

reduce waste, support ethical markets, and teach the meaning behind the Sunnah. The aim is not substitution for its own sake. The aim is faithful understanding.

*Table 3. Ecological context and prophetic food practices in Muslim societies*

Region	Ecological context	Dominant food practice	Interpretive meaning
Arabian Peninsula	Arid and semi-arid environment; date palms historically central to food systems	Dates as accessible, durable, and energy-dense food	Strong link between ecological rationality and prophetic practice
Southeast Asia	Tropical environment with bananas, coconuts, papayas, and other local fruits	Imported dates often consumed during Ramadan	Dates function strongly as symbols of prophetic authenticity and global Muslim identity
South Asia	Agrarian and urban food systems with diverse grains, fruits, and sweets	Dates used with local iftar foods	Prophetic imitation combines with local culinary customs
Sub-Saharan Africa	Varied dryland and tropical ecologies with local grains and fruits	Dates present in some regions and imported in others	Religious symbolism interacts with local subsistence patterns
Western Muslim minorities	Urban consumer environments and multicultural food markets	Dates available through halal and ethnic markets	Consumption marks identity, nostalgia, and connection to the global ummah

#### 4.5 Discussion: From Literal Imitation to Contextual Fidelity

Second, the study demonstrates that the globalization of Islamic practices can transform environmentally grounded traditions into symbolic religious rituals. This transformation reflects broader sociological processes through which religious practices become markers of communal identity. The findings therefore align with existing theories of symbolic religion and cultural habitus proposed by (Geertz, 1973) and (Bourdieu, 1977).

Third, the Ecology of Sunnah framework proposed in this study provides a new analytical perspective for understanding the transmission of Islamic traditions across different cultural and environmental contexts. By integrating environmental anthropology with sociology of religion, the framework highlights the dynamic interaction between contextual wisdom and symbolic imitation in the evolution of religious practices.

These findings also have implications for contemporary discussions about contextual interpretation of Islamic traditions. Recognizing the ecological dimension of prophetic practices encourages a more nuanced understanding of the Sunnah that goes beyond literal imitation. Rather than replicating external forms without reflection, Muslim communities may benefit from engaging with the underlying wisdom and ethical principles embedded in prophetic traditions.

Finally, this study opens several directions for future research. Empirical studies involving ethnographic fieldwork could explore how Muslim communities in different ecological environments interpret and practice prophetic food traditions. Comparative research across regions may also reveal how local cultures negotiate the balance between symbolic religious identity and environmental adaptation.

The first theoretical contribution of this article is the distinction between ecological rationality and symbolic imitation. These two concepts should not be treated as enemies. In religious life, practical action and symbolic meaning often work together. A prophetic food practice may begin as a practical response to environment and later become a symbol of piety. The problem appears only when the symbol loses contact with practical wisdom. At that point, imitation may remain visible, but understanding becomes thin.

The second contribution is the idea of contextual fidelity. Fidelity to the Sunnah is often imagined as exact replication of outward form. That form has value, especially when it is grounded in reliable prophetic reports and practiced with love. Yet fidelity can also mean remaining faithful to the ethical direction of the Prophet's practice. If the Prophet's food practice teaches simplicity, bodily care, and responsible use of available resources, then a community that applies these principles in its own ecology also acts within the spirit of the Sunnah.

This argument can support Islamic education. Teachers can explain Sunnah not only as a list of recommended acts, but as a living model of wise action. Students can learn why the Prophet ate certain foods, how environment shaped daily life in Arabia, and how Muslims today can practice gratitude and moderation in their own setting. Such learning helps avoid two weak outcomes. The first is blind imitation without understanding. The second is modern dismissal of tradition. A mature Islamic education should produce reflective love for the Prophet.

The discussion also speaks to the market. Ramadan consumption often increases demand for special foods, packaging, imported goods, and symbolic products. A Sunnah-based ecological ethic should ask whether such consumption reflects moderation. The Prophet's practice of breaking the fast with simple food can criticize excessive Ramadan consumption. This critique does not require moral panic. It requires practical awareness that devotion should not become waste, status competition, or ecological burden.

At the level of scholarship, the Ecology of Sunnah creates a bridge between Islamic studies and environmental humanities. It allows researchers to study hadith-related practices, food cultures, religious symbols, and sustainability within one frame. It also opens empirical questions. How do Indonesian Muslims choose dates during Ramadan? Do they understand the nutritional and ecological reasons behind the practice? How do pesantren teach prophetic food traditions? How do markets and digital media shape the image of ideal iftar? These questions can move future research from conceptual analysis to field-based study.

A further implication concerns Islamic legal and ethical reasoning. The fiqh status of a practice remains important, but ethical reasoning asks what kind of person and community the practice forms. Kamali (2008) reminds readers that Islamic law cannot be separated from moral purpose and human welfare. In the case of iftar, the legal recommendation to follow the Prophet can be enriched by reflection on moderation, access, bodily care, and avoidance of waste. This makes the Sunnah a source of formation, not only a formal reference.

The Ecology of Sunnah also helps clarify the place of local foods. Local food should not be treated as less Islamic simply because it is not associated with Arabia. A tropical fruit that is shared modestly, obtained fairly, and consumed with gratitude may express values that are close to the prophetic ethic. Dates remain valuable as Sunnah memory, but local foods can also become vehicles of Sunnah meaning when they support simplicity, health, and social care. This view protects Muslim plurality without weakening prophetic love.

Another implication relates to ecological literacy in Muslim families. Parents often teach children to break the fast with dates as a sign of following the Prophet. That lesson can be expanded. Children can also learn why dates suited the Prophet's environment, why fasting teaches restraint, why food waste contradicts gratitude, and why sharing iftar matters. A family practice then becomes a small curriculum of theology, ecology, and ethics. This is where the Sunnah enters everyday education.

The framework may also guide pesantren and Islamic higher education. Courses on hadith, fiqh, Islamic civilization, and environmental ethics can use prophetic food practices as case studies. Students can compare text, geography, agriculture, trade, and contemporary consumption. Such teaching trains them to respect the tradition while asking disciplined questions. It also prevents ecological issues from being viewed as outside Islamic studies. Environmental responsibility becomes part of how Muslims read, teach, and live the Sunnah.

This conceptual move also protects the article from a false opposition between authenticity and locality. Authenticity does not require Muslims to ignore the world in which they live. Locality does not require them to abandon the Prophet. A reflective Muslim practice can hold both together. Dates may remain on the table as a beloved sign of the Sunnah, while local foods can stand beside them as signs of gratitude for the ecology in which God has placed the community. The result is a more grounded piety, one that remembers the Prophet and also reads the environment with responsibility, justice, restraint, humility, and care for local communities in everyday Ramadan practice.

Finally, the article suggests practical indicators for future empirical research. Researchers can observe whether Muslim communities mention health, Sunnah, habit, family tradition, price,

availability, or social pressure when choosing dates. They can compare urban and rural iftar practices, pesantren and household settings, or offline and online religious messages. These indicators can test whether symbolic imitation dominates, whether contextual understanding exists, and whether ecological awareness shapes food choices during Ramadan.

The study has limitations. It does not conduct interviews, surveys, or ethnographic observation. It relies on documentary and conceptual analysis. Because of that, it cannot claim how all Muslim communities actually understand dates or prophetic food practices. Its contribution is theoretical. It offers a model that future empirical research can test, refine, or challenge. The limitation is important because symbolic imitation may vary by class, region, religious education, market access, and family tradition.

Even with these limits, the article shows that the Sunnah can be read as a source of ecological insight. Prophetic practice is not only a memory of the past. It is also a guide for disciplined living in the present. When Muslims understand the environmental rationality behind a practice, they do not lose devotion. They gain a fuller form of devotion. They learn to imitate the Prophet not only by repeating an act, but also by cultivating the wisdom that made the act meaningful.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine how prophetic food practices particularly the tradition of breaking the fast with dates can be understood through the conceptual framework of the Ecology of Sunnah, which integrates environmental rationality and symbolic imitation in the transmission of Islamic traditions. The objective of the research was to reinterpret prophetic dietary practices beyond purely normative or ritualistic perspectives and to explore how these practices interact with environmental contexts and global cultural transformations.

The findings demonstrate that prophetic food practices were historically embedded within the ecological conditions of early Islamic society. In the desert environment of the Arabian Peninsula, dates served as a nutritionally efficient and environmentally accessible food source, providing rapid energy restoration after prolonged fasting. This indicates that certain prophetic practices reflected forms of environmental rationality, in which religious actions were closely aligned with the practical needs and ecological realities of the community. Understanding the Sunnah through this perspective reveals that prophetic traditions may embody contextual wisdom that goes beyond literal imitation of outward forms.

The study concludes that the tradition of breaking the fast with dates should be understood through both devotion and context. In the Arabian environment, dates were accessible, durable, and nutritionally suitable for iftar. In many contemporary Muslim societies, they also function as symbols of religious authenticity and connection to the Prophet. These two meanings do not cancel each other. They show that Sunnah operates through material wisdom and symbolic memory at the same time.

The Ecology of Sunnah framework contributes to Islamic studies by offering a middle path between literal imitation and contextual neglect of tradition. It calls Muslims to honor prophetic forms while also studying their ethical purpose. For Islamic education and da'wah, this approach can encourage reflective piety, local ecological awareness, and responsible consumption. Future research

should test this framework through fieldwork in Muslim communities, pesantren, Ramadan markets, and digital religious spaces. Such research can show how Muslims negotiate the relationship between prophetic memory, local food, ecological responsibility, and global Islamic identity.

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