

DECONSTRUCTING THE KIAI AND SANTRI RELATIONSHIP: A CRITICAL REVIEW OF POWER AND CULTURAL DYNAMICS

*Balya Ziaulhaq Achmadin¹, Mohammad Asrori¹, Ahmad Barizi¹, Abdul
Malik K. Amrullah¹, M. Muntahibun Nafis²*

¹Universitas Islam Negeri Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang, Indonesia

²Universitas Islam Negeri Sayyid Ali Rahmatullah Tulungagung, Indonesia

Email: balyaziaulhaqachmadin@gmail.com

Received: October 16, 2024

Revised: November 20, 2024

Accepted: November 25, 2024

Abstract

This study aims to reveal the dynamics of the relationship between Kiai and santri in traditional pesantren. This research deconstructs the relationship between Kiai and Santri in the Indonesian socio-cultural context. Through a critical approach, this study examines the dynamics of power and cultural influences that color the relationship. By analyzing various sources, this study reveals the complexity of the Kiai and Santri relationship that goes beyond the traditional teacher-student relationship. The results show that the relationship between Kiai and santri in traditional pesantren is built on the basis of strong religious and cultural values. Kiai holds a central role as a spiritual leader and teacher, while santri place themselves as obedient and respectful students. This

relationship is characterized by a clear hierarchy, where Kiai has great authority and influence over santri. However, the dynamics of this relationship do not always run smoothly. There are potential conflicts that arise due to differences in interpretation of religious values, differences in socio-economic backgrounds, and the influence of changing times. Kiai are required to be able to maintain a balance between maintaining traditional values and adjusting to the demands of the times and their relevance to social and political changes affecting the relationship between Kiai and Santri

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengungkap dinamika hubungan antara Kiai dan santri di pesantren tradisional. Penelitian ini mendekonstruksi hubungan Kiai dan Santri dalam konteks sosial-kultural Indonesia. Melalui pendekatan kritis, penelitian ini mengkaji dinamika kekuasaan dan pengaruh budaya yang mewarnai hubungan tersebut. Dengan menganalisis berbagai sumber, penelitian ini mengungkap kompleksitas hubungan Kiai dan Santri yang melampaui relasi guru-murid tradisional. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa hubungan Kiai dan santri di pesantren tradisional dibangun atas dasar nilai-nilai religius dan kultural yang kuat. Kiai memegang peran sentral sebagai pemimpin spiritual dan guru, sementara santri menempatkan diri sebagai murid yang patuh dan hormat. Hubungan ini ditandai dengan hierarki yang jelas, di mana Kiai memiliki otoritas dan pengaruh yang besar terhadap santri. Namun, dinamika hubungan ini tidak selalu berjalan mulus. Terdapat potensi konflik yang muncul akibat perbedaan interpretasi nilai-nilai agama, perbedaan latar belakang sosial-ekonomi, dan pengaruh perubahan zaman. Kiai dituntut untuk mampu menjaga keseimbangan antara mempertahankan nilai-nilai tradisional dan menyesuaikan diri dengan tuntutan zaman serta relevansinya dengan perubahan sosial dan politik memengaruhi hubungan Kiai dan Santri

Keywords: *Kiai, pesantren, relationship dynamics, santri, socio-cultural context*

Introduction

Pesantren, as traditional Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia, have played a significant role in shaping the nation's character and producing influential figures across various fields. For centuries, pesantren have been centers of religious learning, moral development, and knowledge dissemination. Within this context, a unique relationship exists between the Kiai, as a spiritual leader and teacher, and the santri, as students seeking knowledge and guidance (Majid, 1997). This relationship is often described as a sacred teacher-student bond, marked by profound respect and obedience. The Kiai is regarded as a figure of great authority and influence, while the santri adhere to the rules and guidance provided. Rooted in traditional values and local culture, this relationship model has sustained pesantren for generations.

Over time, socio-cultural changes have added complexity to the dynamics of the *Kiai-santri* relationship. Factors such as globalization, technological advancements, and changing mindsets among the younger generation have challenged the traditional model of this relationship. These shifts raise important questions about the relevance and sustainability of the *Kiai-santri* relationship in a modern context (Dhofier, 2011).

The rapid flow of information and culture due to globalization has significantly impacted various aspects of life, including pesantren. With easier access to technology and information, the younger generation, including santri, now obtain knowledge not only from Kiai but also from diverse sources available through the internet and social media. This shift in mindset poses challenges for Kiai in maintaining their authority and influence. Santri exposed to global information and culture may develop alternative views and interpretations of the religious values and traditions taught in pesantren, potentially leading to conflicts and differing perspectives (Hamdi, 2015).

The dynamics of *Kiai-santri* relationships in traditional *pesantren* are shaped by intricate power and cultural dynamics. As spiritual leaders and teachers, *Kiai* wield significant authority, including control over the rules,

curriculum, and activities within the *pesantren* (Dhofier, 2011). *Santri* are expected to follow these guidelines and demonstrate respect and obedience. This hierarchical relationship is deeply rooted in local traditions and cultural values that emphasize the sanctity of teacher-student bonds (*sami'na wa atho'na*, or "listening and obeying") (Dhofier, 1990). *Kiai* are regarded as highly knowledgeable and wise, with their words and actions serving as guidance for the *santri* (Irawan, 2022). Additionally, their influence often extends beyond the *pesantren*, impacting the surrounding community and reinforcing their role as respected leaders (Abubakar, 2020).

However, the dynamics of power and culture in these relationships do not always align smoothly. Diverging views between *Kiai* and *santri* on religious values and traditions can lead to conflicts and disagreements. While *Kiai* emphasizes preserving *pesantren* traditions, *santri* may desire more freedom to explore and develop their own interpretations and viewpoints (Dhofier, 1990)

Conflict and differences in views between *Kiai* and *santri* can occur due to several factors, including: (a) Differences in Interpretation of Religious Values: Differences in interpretation of religious values can arise due to the influence of globalization, technological advances, and changes in the mindset of the younger generation. *Santris* who are exposed to global information and culture may have different views and interpretations of religious values taught in *pesantren*. (b) Differences in Socio-Economic Background: Differences in socio-economic background can lead to differences in views on the way of life, moral values, and the role of *pesantren* in society. *Santris* who come from different socio-economic backgrounds may have different expectations of *pesantren*. (c) Influence of Changing Times: The changing times pose new challenges for *pesantren* in adjusting to the needs of the times. *Kiai* are faced with the challenge of maintaining traditional values and adjusting to the demands of an increasingly modern era (Mas'ud, 2004).

Historically, the charisma of *Kiai* has positioned them as pivotal leaders within their communities. Beyond their roles as religious leaders,

Kiai serve as heads of the *pesantren*, where they are not only recognized as teachers of religious knowledge but also regarded by *santri* as parental figures. This paternal role extends their influence, earning them deep respect and obedience while establishing them as vital sources of knowledge and guidance for their students (Irawan, 2022).

Such a position of *kiai* is essentially that of a patron, a figure on whom *santri* depend. The relationship between *santri* and *kiai* is primarily based on the justification of religious teachings, such as the student-teacher relationship in the *tarekat* environment. Due to the authority of the *kiai*, the position of the *santri* is as a client to the *kiai*. As a patron, the *kiai*'s influence extends beyond the lives of the *santri* to include the surrounding community and even the parents of the *santri* (Yasin & Khasbulloh, 2022).

In addition to religious knowledge, *kiai* are often proficient in medicine, possess *ilmu ghaib* (mystical knowledge), or have other extraordinary abilities, which further solidify their position as patrons within their community. This leader-led relationship within such a cultural orientation, at the very least, fosters a patron-client relationship model of leadership. Definitively, James C. Scott describes the patron-client relationship pattern as follows:

“A reciprocal relationship between two people can be defined as a special case of extended friendship, in which one individual of higher socio-economic status (patron), uses his influence and resources to provide protection or benefits to another individual of lower status (client), in which case the client has an obligation to reciprocate by providing general support and assistance, including personal services to the patron.”

Referring to Scott's explanation above, the role of patrons in the leadership of Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) is carried out by the *kiai* or the *kiai* family. As Dhofier states, *kiai* are patrons because they hold absolute authority and power in shaping the *pesantren* institution. No one challenges the authority of the *kiai*—least of all the *santri* in the *pesantren* environment—except other *kiai* who possess even greater power and authority (Dhofier, 2011). With these sources of authority and power, *kiai* are normatively

placed at the highest status among all other elements in the *pesantren* environment.

Previous studies have extensively explored the dynamics of the *Kiai-santri* relationship within traditional *pesantren*, focusing on its historical, cultural, and religious significance. Dhofier (2011) emphasizes the central role of *Kiai* as authoritative spiritual leaders who uphold the values of *sami'na wa atho'na* (listening and obeying), shaping a deeply hierarchical and culturally rooted relationship. Similarly, Abubakar (2020) highlights the *Kiai's* influence in fostering resilience against radicalism, further showcasing their pivotal role not only within the *pesantren* but also in the broader community. Irawan (2022) investigates the integration of Sufism and environmental practices, demonstrating the broader social and ecological impact of *pesantren* leadership. Additionally, Faisal et al. (2022) discuss the role of *Kiai* in strengthening religious moderation through their traditional authority. However, while these studies provide valuable insights into the cultural and religious foundations of the *Kiai-santri* relationship, they often focus on its normative and historical aspects, with limited critical examination of how socio-cultural changes, globalization, and shifts in generational mindsets influence these dynamics.

The existing research gap lies in the need for a critical review of the *Kiai-santri* relationship, specifically addressing how power structures and cultural dynamics are being renegotiated in response to modern challenges. This includes exploring the impact of globalization, technological advancements, and the evolving expectations of *santri* in a rapidly changing socio-cultural context. As noted by Achmadin et al. (2024), the relevance of traditional *pesantren* education models is increasingly being questioned, calling for a deconstruction of the traditional teacher-student relationship to adapt to contemporary realities. This study aims to fill this gap by critically analyzing the shifting dynamics of power and culture in the *Kiai-santri* relationship, providing a nuanced understanding of its transformation in the modern era.

Method

This research employs an ethnographic qualitative approach to analyze the relationship between kiai and santri within the context of pesantren. Conducted in various pesantren across East Java, which represent diverse cultural and social backgrounds, the study aims to capture differing perspectives on existing power dynamics (Trinlae, 2021). Data collection involved in-depth interviews with kiai, santri, and pesantren alumni, focusing on personal experiences, perceptions of authority, expectations, and challenges in daily interactions. Participatory observations were also conducted, enabling researchers to engage directly in pesantren activities such as recitations and social events to better understand social interactions. Additionally, documents like educational curricula and religious texts were analyzed to uncover the values that underpin this relationship.

The research delves into the nuanced interactions between kiai and santri, exploring the influence of broader social, cultural, and economic factors. Through in-depth interviews, the researchers gained not only quantitative data but also qualitative insights into individual experiences and perspectives, offering a holistic understanding of these interactions. Participatory observation provided firsthand insights into everyday practices that support or hinder constructive relationships. Document analysis revealed the normative frameworks shaping kiai and santri behavior, highlighting the values emphasized in pesantren education and their impact on these relationships.

Data triangulation was employed to enhance validity, comparing narratives from various sources and gaining feedback from participants to ensure accurate interpretations. The process of data triangulation not only increases the validity of the findings, but also provides an opportunity to compare different narratives, so that researchers can understand the various viewpoints that exist within the pesantren community (Mavlyutova, 2023). Data analysis in this study are grounded in deconstruction theory, a critical approach pioneered by French philosopher Jacques Derrida. A key concept in deconstruction is *différance*, which denotes the delay and suspension of

meaning. According to Derrida, meaning is never fully achieved because it is perpetually deferred and defined through its differences from other elements (Derrida, 1994).

This study employs *différance* in three significant ways. First, it examines the process of differentiation (*to differ*), highlighting how orientalist interpretations of *pesantren* traditions have created epistemic distinctions, framing these traditions in specific ways. Second, it explores the dissemination of meaning (*to spread*), as orientalist depictions of *pesantren* as conservative and outdated are accepted or contested by different audiences. Third, it addresses the deferral of meaning (*to defer*), revealing how orientalist views delay and reshape the understanding of *pesantren* traditions, leading to their reinterpretation as syncretic, conservative, or out of touch with modernity. This process challenges the core values and beliefs traditionally associated with *pesantren* by local communities (Naas, 2003).

This research aims to contribute meaningfully to understanding the kiai-santri relationship, providing insights into the power and cultural dynamics within *pesantren*. It also aspires to inform inclusive and responsive policy recommendations for the development of *pesantren* education, fostering harmonious and constructive relationships between kiai and santri.

Findings and Discussion

Deconstruction of Kiai and Santri Relationships in the Pesantren Scope

Referring to the phenomenon of deconstruction of *kiai* and *santri*, it is closely tied to the scope of *pesantren* education, where the values embedded in Islamic boarding schools contain three elements that contribute to the formation of a patron-client relationship between *kiai* and *santri*, as described by Scott. First, patron-client relationships are based on unequal exchanges, reflecting differences in status. A client, in this case, the *santri*, receives many services from the patron, the *kiai*, creating a sense of obligation and dependence on the patron. Second, the patron-client relationship is personal. The personalized pattern of reciprocity between *kiai* and *santri*

fosters trust and dependence in the relationship mechanism. This is evident in the culture of *santri* respect for *kiai*, which often resembles individual cult worship. Third, patron relationships are widespread, flexible, and not bound by time (Yani et al., 2022). This flexibility stems from the prolonged socialization of values during the years spent as a *santri*. For instance, a commonly held value among *santri* is the avoidance of arguing with or opposing the *kiai*, as it is believed to bring *kuwalat* (a curse) and render their knowledge ineffective. A curse from the *kiai* is considered severe and deeply feared.

Experts define the patron-client relationship pattern as a connection between individuals or groups in which one party is positioned as the patron or superior, while the other is positioned as the client or subordinate (James, n.d.). From this perspective, *santri* recognize and accept the resources and influence of their *kiai*. The resources in question include value systems, organizational structures, and the *kiai's* authority. The *kiai's* ability to occupy a patron position is rooted in their possession of unique resources that are not available to those they influence or control (*clients*) (Nilan, 2009). These three foundational factors of the patron-client relationship in *pesantren* are evident in the type of leadership employed to manage these institutions. With a strong emphasis on the dominance of *kiai* (and *kiai* families) and adherence to tradition, the resulting leadership style is inherently paternalistic. In this model, the *kiai* assumes the role of protector, teacher, and father figure. This creates a hierarchical structure where members of the *pesantren* are subordinates, and the leader stands above them.

In the broader societal context, a patron often holds a privileged position. The patronage relationship between *kiai* and the community transcends territorial boundaries, extending across cities and provinces. The influence of *kiai* leadership and their expansive networks facilitates communication with external parties, including government and private institutions. The *kiai's* prominence allows them to serve as agents for disseminating government messages, such as development programs. Communities often show greater acceptance of these programs when

conveyed by a *kiai*. This reflects the elevated status of *kiai* within the socio-cultural framework of Javanese society (Umar, 2016).

The positive aspects of paternalistic leadership include a leader's strong sense of responsibility and personal attention to their followers. Such leaders provide protection and foster unity within their group. When a paternalistic leader demonstrates exceptional qualities, trust among their followers grows stronger. However, the negative aspects of paternalistic leadership emerge when the leader is absent or no longer in power. Followers may feel disoriented and lost, with the organization becoming disorganized. This dependency on the leader, akin to a father-child relationship, can lead to instability—just as the death of a father leaves a child in uncertainty (Abubakar, 2020).

In principle, the father-son relationship reflects a hierarchical structure, dividing people into distinct groups, such as officials (*priyayi*) and commoners (*wong cilik*). During royal times, kings often mapped their positions in relation to their subjects, who were further divided into various classes, including peasant families. These groups not only served as tribute-givers but also contributed their labor for community service, reinforcing the king's superior status. This hierarchical relationship laid the foundation for the patron-servant dynamic, which, though not entirely replicated in the context of *pesantren*, has persisted and evolved over time (Achmadin, 2023). In *pesantren*, this relationship is often expressed through the lens of Sufism, as illustrated by the saying of Ali bin Abi Talib: "I am willing to become a slave of my teacher who has taught me one letter; it is up to him whether he wants to sell me, free me, or keep me as a slave." The *kiai-santri* relationship is deeply rooted and often lasts a lifetime. Santri are morally obliged to bring tributes (*torator*) to their *kiai* and perform community service at their residence (Jailani, 2012).

Beyond the *kiai-santri* relationship, another form of interaction exists in *pesantren*: the *kiai-khadam* relationship. This dynamic further reinforces the *kiai's* role as a patron. Unlike regular *santri*, *khadam* dedicate themselves fully to serving the *kiai*, performing daily tasks as an obligation. The *khadam's*

role as a client is driven by the desire to seek blessings (*ngalap barokah*) from the *kiai* (Faisal et al., 2022). While the relationship between *santri* and teachers may be described as familiar, free, and democratic, the relationship between *santri* and the *kiai* or their family is often marked by authoritarian traits. The *kiai* is regarded as a sacred figure, and this dynamic fosters a sense of fanaticism among some *santri*, who may even be willing to sacrifice themselves to defend their *kiai*. This bond is often described by terms like *nunggal guru* (one teacher) and *nunggal banyu* (one source of knowledge) (Majid, 1997).

Indeed, the hierarchical structure of *pesantren* leadership resembles a monarchy, where the *kiai* holds absolute authority over the institution's life and operations. The *santri* are expected to show unwavering respect to the *kiai* in all aspects—religious, social, and personal. Forgetting this bond or failing to maintain respect is considered a serious disgrace, as it risks losing the teacher's blessing. Despite any efforts to democratize the leadership structure, the authoritarian element within *pesantren* life remains strong. The *kiai* is often seen as the sole owner of the boarding school, creating a noticeable distance between the *kiai* and his family on one side and the *santri* or *ustad* on the other (Naim & Qomar, 2021; Manshur, 2020).

The tradition of *pesantren* also embodies elements of feudalism cloaked in religious values, sometimes referred to as *religio-feudalism*. This can be observed in everyday practices, such as when *santri* visit their *kiai*, they do not simply "visit" (*nemoni*) but *sowan*—a term denoting respect. Additionally, the hierarchical structure is evident in the use of language, with levels such as *kromo inggil*, *kromo*, and *ngoko*. Titles further reinforce this hierarchy, as the *kiai* is often referred to as *romo kiai*, and his son is called *gus*, similar to how Javanese nobility use titles like *raden*. This hierarchical awareness fosters an absolute sense of respect and obedience among *santri*, who view their *kiai* not only as a figure of authority but as a conduit of divine grace. This belief in the *kiai* as a pious and chosen leader inspires *santri* to submit wholeheartedly,

believing that blessings in this world and the hereafter are mediated through the *kiai's* love and piety (Isbah, 2020).

The above challenges become increasingly complex in the modern era, as the dynamics of *kiai-santri* relationships evolve in response to globalization, technological advancements, and shifts in the younger generation's mindset. The traditional hierarchical and authoritarian model is gradually shifting toward a more democratic and participatory relationship (Setiyani, 2020). This transformation is further influenced by new paradigms in *pesantren* education, including the management of modern *pesantren* by business professionals. Such developments introduce new tensions and challenges in re-evaluating *pesantren* education in the modern context (A'la, 2006).

Globalization and technological advancements have significantly influenced how young people, including *santri*, think and behave. The accessibility of information through the internet and social media has expanded their horizons, reducing their reliance solely on *kiai* for knowledge. This has fostered a critical and active mindset, prompting *santri* to question the rules and traditions of *pesantren*. Exposure to diverse ideologies and global cultures has further reshaped their views and interpretations of religious values and traditions. These changes challenge the traditional hierarchical *kiai-santri* relationship, necessitating adaptation and increased dialogue to bridge differing perspectives and foster a harmonious, productive relationship (Khasan, 2010).

Patron-Client Heirarchy between Kiai and Santri

The role of a *kiai* is multifaceted. A *kiai* is not only a religious scholar who leads an Islamic boarding school (*pesantren*), but also someone who upholds religious teachings with authority and influence. Some *kiai* do not own or manage *pesantren* but instead act as itinerant preachers, spreading religious knowledge through sermons and community engagement. These *kiai* are often referred to as *Kiai Teko* or *Kendi*, likened to a pitcher of water that quenches the thirst of the community. Their sermons serve as a form of spiritual sustenance. Conversely, *kiai* who manage *pesantren* are known as

Kiai Sumur, or "well *kiai*," with a stationary role where students and community members seek them out for religious knowledge, much like fetching water from a well (Fauzi, 2012).

A *kiai* is also often regarded as an *ulama*—a scholar who dedicates their life to studying religious knowledge, interpreting the Qur'an and Hadith, and guiding the community. In Indonesia, *ulama* are collectively represented through the Indonesian Ulema Council (*Majelis Ulama Indonesia*, MUI), an organization tasked with providing religious rulings and legitimizing government policies on religious matters, such as halal certification. The MUI comprises scholars, intellectuals, and community leaders who are recognized as experts in their fields. Due to its proximity to governmental authority, the MUI is often referred to as "formal *ulama*," with its legitimacy dependent on state recognition. However, many *ulama* operate independently in communities across Indonesia without formal ties to the MUI (Rahman, 2016).

The title of *ulama* develops through gradual recognition by the community, based on the individual's religious expertise and contributions. Horikoshi distinguishes between *ulama* and *kiai* by their social functions. While *ulama* often serve smaller, rural communities, *kiai* wield broader influence due to their charismatic authority. A *kiai's* social reach extends beyond that of an *ulama*, allowing them to play a significant role in guiding moral values and promoting virtue (Sukowati, 2019). However, the distinctions between *ulama* and *kiai* can blur, as a *kiai* often assumes dual roles: as a leader within the *pesantren*, functioning as an *ulama* in the *santri* environment, and as a religious scholar operating beyond the *pesantren* system. In this dual capacity, a *kiai* often collaborates with external institutions to fulfill their role as a religious expert (Fauzi, 2018).

Conceptually, the terms *ulama* and *kiai* differ sharply. The term *kiai* has evolved as a social construct rooted in communal recognition and often associated with religious leadership in the *pesantren* context. In contrast, the term *ulama* is derived textually from divine revelation and reflects a broader theological scope. The Qur'an, in Surah Al-Fathir (35:28), mentions *ulama*,

stating: "And among people, and moving creatures, and grazing livestock are various colors likewise. Only those fear Allah, from among His servants, who have knowledge. Indeed, Allah is Exalted in Might and Forgiving." This verse emphasizes the diversity in creation and highlights that those who truly fear Allah are those endowed with knowledge and understanding.

The Prophet's words, "*Al-Ulama' warosatul Anbiya'*" (Scholars are the inheritors of the Prophets), reinforce the esteemed role of *kiai*. Since *kiai* possess and impart religious knowledge to the community, their status in Islamic boarding schools has become synonymous with the title of *ulama*. A *kiai* is often credited as the founder of villages, clearing land for settlements. There is a widespread belief in the community that villages established by *kiai* are peaceful, safe, and blessed. Consequently, the *kiai* is honored as the village founder, earning the title of village leader for their contributions (Abdullah et al., 2021). Communities frequently recount tales of a *kiai's* mystical powers and profound knowledge, turning these stories into legends. As a result, *kiai* are often personified as embodying noble traits, exemplary character, and sacred qualities. Similar beliefs about the greatness of the *Sunan* or *Walisongo* in spreading Islam in Java are rooted in the mystical narratives prevalent among Javanese people. The influence of Hinduism and Buddhism contributed to the growth of mysticism in Javanese society (Pribadi, 2013).

In Islamic boarding schools, the *kiai* holds the position of sole leader, with high authority in disseminating and teaching religious knowledge. No other figure rivals the *kiai's* power, except for another *kiai* with greater charisma. The *kiai's* role is absolute, shaping the leadership style and development of the boarding school. Within the *kiai* community, younger or junior *kiai* are expected to show respect to senior *kiai*. Similarly, the life of *santri* is marked by a feudal culture typical of a paternalistic society, where younger individuals are expected to respect their elders. While Javanese cultural norms influence traditions within *pesantren*, the respect for *kiai* is also rooted in their religious expertise, such as their mastery of classical texts, educational background, and scholarly achievements (Humaisi, 2019).

The *kiai's* status in *pesantren* traditions is also influenced by heredity. Charismatic *kiai* often pass on their social status to their descendants, who inherit almost the same level of influence as their predecessors (Yasin & Khasbulloh, 2022). For example, the story of a highly respected *kiai* with a significant following and recognition by the government illustrates this phenomenon. Such *kiai* are likened to a forest tiger (*macan alas*): when paired with another tiger of similar lineage, the offspring are extraordinary. Likewise, marriages into influential *kiai* families are believed to produce descendants with significant influence (Mujahid, 2021).

Heredity is an important consideration for *kiai* in forming marriage alliances, as previously discussed. Many Javanese and Madurese people continue to value marriages into *kiai* families, believing that the children will inherit the *kiai's* noble traits. It is not uncommon for families to accept a daughter marrying into a *kiai* family, even as a second or subsequent wife, solely to gain the prestige of such a connection. The high regard for *kiai* families in these societies sometimes borders on excessive reverence, verging on the cult of personality. For instance, when a *kiai* in Jombang was asked about Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur) replacing the traditional Islamic greeting *Assalaamu'alaikum* with "Good Morning" or "Good Afternoon," the *kiai* refrained from commenting. He simply stated that Gus Dur was a descendant of the great *kiai* Hadratus Sheikh Hasyim Asy'ari, emphasizing the importance of lineage (Idris, 2015).

The *kiai's* role as a religious figure and informal leader stems from public recognition rather than formal appointments. A *kiai's* leadership is not tied to government positions or specific groups but arises from the community's acknowledgment of their religious knowledge and its benefits. However, some individuals acquire the title of *kiai* through other means. For example, an official may appoint someone to teach religious knowledge and lead prayers in their neighborhood. Over time, this person may be called a *kiai* by the community due to their role. Yet, such *kiai* often have limited influence, known primarily to the officials they serve. Their duties may

include teaching prayer, conducting Qur'an lessons, and advising on religious laws, primarily for the official's family (Patriadi, 2017)

To hold the title of *kiai*, several conditions must be met. Prospective *kiai* must first become students in a boarding school (*pesantren*), study diligently, and participate in the recitation of *yellow-classical* books. They are also expected to engage in acts of devotion, such as fasting on Mondays and Thursdays or observing other practices recommended by their *kiai* during their time as *santri* (Achmadin & Fattah, 2023). While it is challenging to pinpoint the exact moment when a *santri* transitions into a *kiai*, the process typically takes a significant amount of time—often spanning decades of study in Islamic boarding schools. However, the length of time spent studying is not the sole determinant of a *santri's* readiness to become a *kiai*. Personal development rooted in religious teachings is a fundamental requirement, ensuring that *kiai* are not only knowledgeable but also consistent in practicing Islamic principles (Sulistiyati, 2023). The *kiai's* religious conduct—both in social and spiritual matters—is closely observed by the community. Thus, the personal preparation of a prospective *kiai* is imbued with a profound sense of responsibility, as they are seen as leaders accountable not only to their followers but ultimately to God in the hereafter (Dhofier, 2011).

This study reveals that the relationship between *kiai* and *santri* in *pesantren* is not limited to a spiritual teacher-student bond but also encompasses a complex power structure. The patron-client framework provides a useful lens for understanding this dynamic. As a patron, the *kiai* wields resources and authority that offer protection and benefits to their *santri* (clients) (Mappiasse & Hayadin, 2022). However, this patronage bond is inherently asymmetrical, often favoring the *kiai*. The *kiai* leverages their dominant position to maintain and expand their influence through identity construction, discursive practices, and rituals within the *pesantren*. Conversely, the *santri*, despite being in a subordinate position, are not entirely passive. They engage in negotiations, resistance, and survival strategies to preserve their autonomy and interests. These efforts, although

constrained, indicate that the patron-client relationship between *kiai* and *santri* is not monolithic but dialogic in nature (Aulia, 2018).

In this context, reimagining the *kiai-santri* relationship to foster greater equality is essential. This can be achieved by recognizing the complexities of the relationship, empowering *santri*, and transforming *pesantren* values to allow for more balanced participation and collaboration between *kiai* and *santri*. Key considerations include: (a) the *kiai's* significant authority and influence in traditional *pesantren* and how this influence is evolving in modern contexts; (b) the challenges *kiai* face in maintaining their authority amidst changing times, particularly with the rise of critical *santri* who have greater access to information; and (c) the capacity of *santri* to develop independent perspectives, participate in decision-making, and contribute to shaping *pesantren* values, with the ultimate goal of advancing the transformation of *pesantren* education.

Cultural Overview of the Relationship between Kiai and Santri

In examining the relationship between *santri* and *kiai*, two distinct phenomena emerge: the traditional *salaf* *pesantren* and the modern *khalaf* *pesantren*. In *salaf* *pesantren*, internal elements remain simple, with a high degree of homogeneity and a focus on traditional religious education. The *kiai* dominates the teaching and education system, and interactions between *santri* and *kiai* occur directly, often face-to-face. The *kiai* serves as the teacher of classical *yellow books* (*kitab kuning*), and students can directly seek clarification on complex topics from their *kiai*. The strong influence of the *kiai* in *salaf* *pesantren* is rooted in the simplicity of community social structures and the deeply religious content of the curriculum, which legitimizes the hierarchical relationship between *santri* and *kiai* (Sutomo et al., 2024). In such a setting, *santri* fear committing sins by questioning or protesting a *kiai's* views, as such behavior is considered a violation of religious values (Zulmuqim, 2020).

However, this traditional relationship model changes in *khalaf* pesantren, which integrate elements of modern education, including formal curricula and government-recognized diplomas. *Khalaf* pesantren emerged in the 1970s, offering diverse programs such as public school units, vocational training, and business ventures in agriculture and animal husbandry, often in collaboration with government or private sectors. Graduates of *khalaf* pesantren receive diplomas enabling them to pursue higher education or enter the workforce (Zuhri, 2023). Many formerly *salaf* pesantren have transitioned into *khalaf* pesantren by incorporating general education, such as elementary and secondary schools, and even universities. As this transition progresses, the emphasis on classical Islamic texts (*kitab kuning*) has diminished, as seen in institutions like Pondok Pesantren Tebu Ireng and Pondok Pesantren Darul Ulum in Jombang. The focus has shifted toward modern school-based education, with every *santri* enrolled in formal school units (Sudrajat, 2017).

The relationship between *santri* and *kiai* in *khalaf* pesantren is less dependent than in *salaf* pesantren. The educational process in *khalaf* pesantren is no longer dominated by the *kiai* but involves professional teaching staff, most of whom hold university degrees. These teachers often specialize in general knowledge, such as socioeconomics, technology, and mathematics, areas typically beyond the expertise of *kiai* educated in *salaf* traditions (Nata, 2018). Consequently, *santri* in *khalaf* pesantren interact more intensively with schoolteachers than with the *kiai*. Nevertheless, the *santri's* attitude of *tawaduk* (humility and respect) toward the *kiai* persists, albeit to a lesser degree. While obedience is no longer solely rooted in dependency, the *kiai's* ownership of the pesantren and their religious authority continue to command respect (Kawakip & Sulanam, 2023).

Religious subject matter in *pesantren* often contains moral and ethical teachings, reinforcing the *kiai's* elevated social status. The *kiai* is seen as a source of wisdom, and their advice is regarded as divinely guided. In *khalaf* pesantren, however, clearer boundaries have emerged in the *santri-kiai*

relationship. *Santri* are now better able to discern religious issues from non-religious ones, reflecting their exposure to diverse sources of knowledge and global culture (Mas'ud, 2004).

Challenges and Strategies in Kiai-Santri Relationships

Several challenges shape the dynamics of the *kiai-santri* relationship in the modern era. Access to global information and technology has influenced *santri*'s mindsets and behaviors, leading to differences in interpretations of religious values and traditions between *kiai* and *santri* (Achmadin et al., 2024). These influences have created potential conflicts and necessitated adaptations in *pesantren* practices to maintain the relevance of traditional values in a modern context.

To address these challenges, *kiai* and *santri* employ various strategies to maintain harmony and avoid conflict. Key strategies include: *first*, adjusting preaching methods: *Kiais* adapt their approach to preaching by acknowledging the cultural shifts and mindsets of the younger generation. They increasingly use social media and technology to communicate religious messages in ways that resonate with contemporary audiences (Achmadin, 2023). *Second*, creating spaces for dialogue: *Kiai* provide opportunities for open dialogue and discussion, allowing *santri* to share their views and address challenges. This fosters mutual understanding and helps bridge differences between *kiai* and *santri*. *Third*, encouraging broader learning: *Santri* expand their knowledge beyond what is taught in *pesantren* by exploring other sources, such as books, the internet, and social media. This broadens their perspectives and enhances their understanding of the world.

Despite these shifts, *santri* continue to respect *kiai* as spiritual leaders and sources of wisdom, maintaining the tradition of obedience while navigating the evolving dynamics of the *kiai-santri* relationship. The future of *pesantren* lies in balancing tradition with modernity, ensuring their continued relevance in a rapidly changing world (Khulusinniyah & Wassalwa, 2017).

The findings of this research provide valuable insights into the evolving dynamics of the *kiai-santri* relationship, particularly in the context of the transition from *salaf* to *khalaf* pesantren and the influence of modern education and globalization. However, several limitations should be noted. First, the study primarily focuses on the structural and relational dynamics within *pesantren* but offers limited exploration of the regional and cultural variations that might affect these dynamics across different parts of Indonesia. Second, while the research highlights the impact of globalization and technological advancements, it does not comprehensively address how specific digital platforms or media influence the attitudes and behaviors of *santri*. Third, the findings rely heavily on a patron-client framework, which, while useful, may not fully capture the diversity of *kiai-santri* interactions in modern pesantren settings, particularly where collaborative or egalitarian approaches are emerging. Lastly, the study pays limited attention to the perspectives of *santri* themselves, potentially underrepresenting their agency and adaptive strategies in navigating the complexities of the *kiai-santri* relationship. Future research should address these gaps by incorporating broader regional analyses, examining specific digital influences, and integrating *santri* perspectives to provide a more holistic understanding of these evolving relationships.

Conclusion

This research, through a deconstruction perspective, explores the dynamics of the *kiai-santri* relationship in *pesantren* and critically dismantles assumptions that have long been considered "natural" and "taken for granted." First, the study reveals that the *kiai-santri* relationship is not merely a spiritual bond between teacher and student; instead, it is embedded in a complex and hierarchical power structure where *kiai* often use their religious authority to maintain dominance and reinforce social boundaries. Second, the study highlights that the identities of "kiai" and "santri" are not fixed or natural but are historically and culturally constructed, often reflecting underlying interests. These identities are continuously reproduced through

discursive practices and rituals in *pesantren*, perpetuating the hegemony of *kiai* and constraining *santri* in subordinate roles, which can inhibit their independence and creativity. Third, the research uncovers how the dynamics of this relationship are marked by negotiation, resistance, and transformation. While *santri* occupy a weaker position, they are not entirely passive; their resistance and strategies for compliance reveal that the *kiai-santri* relationship is dialogic rather than monolithic.

The findings underline the importance of reconstructing *kiai-santri* relationships to promote greater equality. This can be achieved through several actionable steps: first, recognizing the historical and cultural complexities of the relationship to move beyond idealized notions. Second, empowering *santri* to realize their potential and cultivate autonomy, thus enabling them to contribute more meaningfully to their communities. Third, transforming *pesantren* values to foster spaces for more equitable participation and collaboration between *kiai* and *santri*. These changes have practical relevance in creating more inclusive and democratic *pesantren* environments. Furthermore, the insights from this study offer a framework for analyzing power and cultural dynamics beyond *pesantren*, providing a lens to understand similar relationships in broader social and organizational contexts.

References

- A'la, A. (2006). *Pembaruan Pesantren*. Z. Alba (ed.). Pustaka Pesantren.
- Abd. Rahman, R. (2016). Metode Ijtihad Komisi Fatwa Majelis Ulama Indonesia. *Nukhbatul 'Ulum*, 2(1), 159-166. <https://doi.org/10.36701/nukhbah.v2i1.11>
- Abdullah, M., Thohir, M., & Rukiyah. (2021). The Arom of Islamization of Java in The Literature of Pesantren: Study of The Rahman Faithur Book by K.H. Sholeh Darat. *E3S Web of Conferences*, 317, 03008. <https://doi.org/10.1051/e3sconf/202131703008>
- Abubakar, I. (2020). Pesantren Resilience: The Path to Prevent Radicalism and Violent Extremism. *Studia Islamika*, 2, 397-404.

<https://doi.org/10.36712/sdi.v27i2.16766>

- Achmadin, B. Z. (2023). Studi Islam Konteks Materi Dakwah Islam Perspektif Bahasa Al- Qur'an. *Muta'Allim: Jurnal Pendidikan Agama Islam*, 2(1), 29–47. <https://doi.org/10.18860/mjpai.v1i2.1125>
- Achmadin, B. Z., & Fattah, A. (2023). Effectiveness of Kitab Kuning Based Learning in The Development of Qur'an Hadith Material for PAI Study Program Students. In *Annual International Conference on Islamic Education for Students*, 2(1), 135–144. <https://doi.org/10.18326/aicoies.v2i1.550>
- Achmadin, B. Z., Kawakip, A. N., Nafis, M. M., Rahman, A., Sayed, E., & Ghaffar, A. (2024). Reorienting Pesantren Education in East Java: A Critical Analysis of the Thought of Zamakhsyari Dhofier and Abdurrahman Mas'ud. *AL-Fikru: Jurnal Ilmiah*, 18(1), 41–63. <https://doi.org/10.51672/alfikru.v18i1.415>
- Aulia, R. N. (2018). Pesantren-based environmental management in equatorial areas. In *AIP Conference Proceedings* (Vol. 2019). <https://doi.org/10.1063/1.5061868>
- Derrida, J. (1994). The deconstruction of actuality: an interview with Jacques Derrida. *Radical Philosophy* 68, No. Autumn.
- Dhofier, Z. (1990). Traditional islamic education in the malay archipelago: Its contribution to the integration of the malay world. *Indonesia Circle. School of Oriental & African Studies. Newsletter*, 19(53), 19–34. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03062849008729746>
- Dhofier, Z. (2011). *Tradisi Pesantren : Studi Tentang Pandangan Hidup Kiai dan Visinya Mengenal Masa Depan Indonesia* (Ed. Rev.,). LP3ES.
- Faisal, A., Pabbajah, M., Abdullah, I., Muhammad, N. E., & Rusli, M. (2022). Strengthening religious moderatism through the traditional authority of kiai in Indonesia. *Cogent Social Sciences*, 8(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2022.2150450>
- Fauzi, A. (2018). E-Learning in Pesantren: Learning Transformation based on the Value of Pesantren. In *Journal of Physics: Conference Series* (Vol. 1114, Issue 1). <https://doi.org/10.1088/1742-6596/1114/1/012062>

- Fauzi, M. L. (2012). Traditional islam in Javanese society: The roles of kyai and pesantren in preserving islamic tradition and negotiating modernity. *Journal of Indonesian Islam*, 6(1), 125–144. <https://doi.org/10.15642/JIIS.2012.6.1.125-144>
- Hamdi, S. (2015). The recovery of a non-violent identity for an Islamist pesantren in an age of terror. *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 69(6), 692–710. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2015.1058339>
- Humaisi, M. S. (2019). Pesantren education and charismatic leadership: A qualitative analysis study on quality improvement of islamic education in pondok pesantren nurul jadid paiton, probolinggo. *Universal Journal of Educational Research*, 7(7), 1509–1516. <https://doi.org/10.13189/ujer.2019.070704>
- Idris, S. (2015). Pembaruan Pendidikan Islam di Indonesia. *Kreatif: Jurnal Studi Pemikiran Pendidikan Agama Islam*, 13(2), 148–165. <http://ejournal.iaimbima.ac.id/index.php/kreatif/article/view/90>
- Irawan, B. (2022). Islamic boarding schools (pesantren), Sufism and environmental conservation practices in Indonesia. *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies*, 78(4). <https://doi.org/10.4102/HTS.V78I4.7073>
- Isbah, M. F. (2020). Pesantren in the Changing Indonesian Context: History and Current Developments. *QIJIS (Qudus International Journal of Islamic Studies)*, 8(1), 65. <https://doi.org/10.21043/qijis.v8i1.5629>
- Ismail, F. (2011). The nahdlatul ulama: Its early history and contribution to the establishment of Indonesian State. *Journal of Indonesian Islam*, 5(2), 247–282. <https://doi.org/10.15642/JIIS.2011.5.2.247-282>
- Jailani, I. A. (2012). Pendidikan Pesantren sebagai Potret Konsistensi Budaya di Tengah Himpitan Modernitas. *Karsa*, 20(1), 76–87.
- James, S. (n.d.). The Erosion of Patron-Client Bonds and Social Change in Rural Southeast Asia. *Journal of Asian Studies*, 32(1). <https://doi.org/10.2307/2053176>
- Kawakip, A. N., & Sulanam. (2023). The Practice of Shared Values and Islamic Educational Identity Evidence from a Pesantren in East Java, Indonesia. *Journal of Indonesian Islam*, 17(1), 27–53.

<https://doi.org/10.15642/JIIS.2023.17.1.27-53>

- Khasan, M. (2010). Pesantren, sufisme dan tantangan modernitas. *Dimas: Jurnal Pemikiran Agama untuk Pemberdayaan*, 10(1), 111–132.
- Khulusinniyah, K., & Wassalwa, A. (2017). Reorientasi Nilai-nilai Kepesantrenan Pada “Santri Kalong” Pondok Pesantren Salafiyah Syafi’iyah Sukorejo. *Jurnal Pendidikan Islam Indonesia*, 1(2), 237–249. <https://doi.org/10.35316/jpii.v1i2.52>
- Majid, N. (1997). *Bilik-Bilik Pesantren*. Paramadina. <https://doi.org/10.1088/1751-8113/44/8/085201>
- Manshur, F. M. (2020). Typical literary works of pesantren on righteousness teaching within cultural transformation. *Journal of Social Studies Education Research*, 11(4), 114–148. https://api.elsevier.com/content/abstract/scopus_id/85098731476
- Mappiasse, S., & Hayadin, H. (2022). Students’ Religious Tolerance: Comparing Muslim Students at Public Schools and Pesantren. *Journal of Indonesian Islam*, 16(2), 326. <https://doi.org/10.15642/JIIS.2022.16.2.326-351>
- Marzuki, M., Miftahuddin, M., & Murdiono, M. (2020). Multicultural Education in Salaf Pesantren of Religious Radicalism in Indonesia. *Jurnal Cakrawala Pendidikan*, 39(1), 12–25. <https://doi.org/10.21831/cp.v39i1.22900>
- Mas’ud, A. (2004). *Intelektual Pesantren Perhelatan Agama dan Tradisi* (1st ed). Yogyakarta : LKiS Yogyakarta.
- Mavlyutova, G. S. (2023). The social portrait of the Muslim clergy in the Tobolsk Governate in the 19th – early 20th century. *Vestnik Archeologii, Antropologii i Etnografii*, 4(63), 230–237. <https://doi.org/10.20874/2071-0437-2023-63-4-19>
- Mujahid, I. (2021). Islamic orthodoxy-based character education: creating moderate Muslim in a modern pesantren in Indonesia. *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies*, 11(2), 185–212. <https://doi.org/10.18326/ijims.v11i2.185-212>
- Naas, M. (2003). *Taking on the tradition: Jacques Derrida and the legacies of*

deconstruction. Stanford University Press.

- Naim, N., & Qomar, M. (2021). The Actualization of Liberal Indonesian Multicultural Thought in Developing Community Harmonization. *QIIS (Qudus International Journal of Islamic Studies)*, 9(1), 141. <https://doi.org/10.21043/qijis.v9i1.7908>
- Nata, A. (2018). Pendidikan Islam Di Era Milenial. *Conciencia*, 18(1), 10–28. <https://doi.org/10.19109/conciencia.v18i1.2436>
- Nilan, P. (2009). The ‘spirit of education’ in Indonesian Pesantren. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 30(2), 219–232. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425690802700321>
- Patriadi, H. (2017). Surviving in the globalized world through local perspectives: Pesantrens and sustainable development. In *Sustainable Future for Human Security: Society, Cities and Governance* (pp. 29–47). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-5433-4_3
- Pribadi, Y. (2013). Religious Networks in Madura: Pesantren, Nahdlatul Ulama, and Kiai as the Core of Santri Culture. *AlJami’ah: Journal of Islamic Studies*, 51(1), 1. <https://doi.org/10.14421/ajis.2013.511.1-32>
- Setiyani, W. (2020). The Exerted Authority of Kiai Kampung in The Social Construction of Local Islam. *Journal of Indonesian Islam*, 14(1), 51. <https://doi.org/10.15642/JIIS.2020.14.1.51-76>
- Sudrajat, A. (2017). Pesantren sebagai Transformasi Pendidikan Islam di Indonesia. *Vicratina: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam*, 2(2), 64–88.
- Sukowati, P. (2019). Kiai leadership model in the development strategy of the participants. *International Journal of Recent Technology and Engineering*, 8(2), 579–586. <https://www.scopus.com/inward/record.uri?partnerID=HzOxMe3b&scp=85070768825&origin=inward>
- Sulistiyati, M. (2023). Locality, Equality, and Piety: Pesantren Ecofeminism Movement in Indonesia. *Studia Islamika*, 30(2), 319–348. <https://doi.org/10.36712/sdi.v30i2.25175>
- Sutomo, S., Musnandar, A., Alzitawi, D. U. D. M., & Sutrisno, S. (2024). Religious-Sociocultural Networks and Social Capital Enhancement in

- Pesantren. *Jurnal Pendidikan Islam*, 10(1), 137-148. <https://doi.org/10.15575/jpi.v10i1.19997>
- Trinlae, B. L. (2021). Ethical Considerations and Methods for Diversifying Representations of Cultural Heritage: A Case Example of the Swayambhu UNESCO World Heritage Site in Nepal. In *Communications in Computer and Information Science* (Vol. 1432, pp. 331-346). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-83647-4_22
- Umar, U. (2016). Eksistensi Pendidikan Islam di Indonesia (Perspekstif Sejarah Pendidikan Nasional). *Lentera Pendidikan : Jurnal Ilmu Tarbiyah dan Keguruan*, 19(1), 16-29. <https://doi.org/10.24252/lp.2016v19n1a2>
- Yani, M. T., Mahfud, C., Rangga Sa'adillah, S. A. P., Bustami, M. R., Maskuri, & Taufiq, A. (2022). Advancing the discourse of Muslim politics in Indonesia: A study on political orientation of Kiai as religious elites in Nahdlatul Ulama. *Heliyon*, 8(12), e12218. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2022.e12218>
- Yasin, M., & Khasbulloh, M. N. (2022). Constructing Ethical Critical Thinking at Pesantren. *Jurnal Pendidikan Islam*, 8(2), 127-144. <https://doi.org/10.15575/jpi.v8i2.19028>
- Zuhri, S. (2023). Revitalization of the Salaf Islamic Boarding School: The Educational Identity of the Indonesian Nation. *Eurasian Journal of Educational Research*, 2023(107), 180-192. <https://doi.org/10.14689/ejer.2023.107.011>
- Zulmuqim. (2020). The characteristics of pesantren in the development of islamic education in west sumatra. *Ulumuna*, 24(1), 132-154. <https://doi.org/10.20414/ujs.v24i1.382>