

The Timeless Pedagogy: *Kitab Kuning* and Character Resilience in Indonesian Islamic Boarding Schools

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Abstract. *In Indonesian Islamic boarding schools (pesantren), kitab kuning represents more than a source of classical Islamic knowledge; it constitutes a longstanding pedagogical tradition through which religious knowledge, moral values, and character dispositions are transmitted and internalized. This study examines the continuing relevance of kitab kuning pedagogy and its contribution to character resilience among santri in the contemporary pesantren context. Employing a qualitative descriptive design, the study was conducted at Kempek Islamic Boarding School in Cirebon, Indonesia. Data were collected during 2025–2026 through semi-structured interviews with selected kyai, teachers, and santri, complemented by documentary analysis of curricula, learning materials, schedules, institutional regulations, educational programs, and documentation of learning and character-building activities. The data were analyzed thematically through the stages of familiarization, coding, categorization, and thematic interpretation, with source triangulation used to enhance the credibility of the findings. The findings indicate that kitab kuning functions not only as a medium for transmitting religious knowledge but also as a pedagogical mechanism for cultivating character resilience. Its progressive and continuous learning process, beginning with foundational Arabic sciences such as Nahwu and Sharaf and extending to more advanced classical texts, requires discipline, patience, perseverance, responsibility, respect, and sustained commitment. These dispositions are reinforced through teacher guidance, habituation, continuous practice, teacher–student relationships, and the transmission of scholarly sanad. The study further reveals that the persistence of kitab kuning pedagogy does not depend on maintaining an unchanged traditional system. Rather, Kempek demonstrates an adaptive form of traditional pedagogy in which classical textual learning continues alongside contemporary educational structures and changing patterns of student learning. Based on these findings, the study conceptualizes kitab kuning as a form of “timeless pedagogy”: an enduring educational tradition that preserves core religious and moral values while adapting its pedagogical practices to changing educational and social contexts. The study contributes to contemporary Islamic education scholarship by demonstrating how classical textual learning can sustain character resilience while remaining responsive to educational change.*

Abstrak. Dalam konteks pendidikan pesantren di Indonesia, *kitab kuning* tidak hanya merepresentasikan sumber pengetahuan keislaman

klasik, tetapi juga merupakan tradisi pedagogis yang telah berlangsung lama, melalui proses transmisi dan internalisasi pengetahuan agama, nilai-nilai moral, dan karakter. Penelitian ini bertujuan mengkaji keberlanjutan relevansi pedagogi *kitab kuning* dan kontribusinya terhadap karakter resilien pada *santri* dalam konteks pesantren kontemporer. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain kualitatif deskriptif dan dilaksanakan di Pondok Pesantren Kempek, Cirebon, Indonesia. Data dikumpulkan selama 2025–2026 melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur dengan *kyai*, guru, dan *santri* yang dipilih secara purposif, serta dilengkapi dengan analisis dokumen berupa kurikulum, bahan pembelajaran, jadwal kegiatan, peraturan kelembagaan, program pendidikan, dan dokumentasi kegiatan pembelajaran serta pembinaan karakter. Data dianalisis secara tematik melalui tahapan familiarisasi, pengodean, kategorisasi, dan interpretasi tematik, sedangkan triangulasi sumber digunakan untuk meningkatkan kredibilitas temuan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa *kitab kuning* tidak hanya berfungsi sebagai media transmisi pengetahuan keislaman, tetapi juga sebagai mekanisme pedagogis untuk mengembangkan karakter resilien. Proses pembelajarannya yang bertahap dan berkelanjutan, dimulai dari ilmu-ilmu dasar bahasa Arab seperti *Nahwu* dan *Sharaf* hingga teks-teks klasik yang lebih kompleks, menuntut disiplin, kesabaran, ketekunan, tanggung jawab, penghormatan, dan komitmen yang berkelanjutan. Disposisi tersebut diperkuat melalui bimbingan guru, pembiasaan, latihan yang berkelanjutan, relasi guru–santri, dan transmisi *sanad* keilmuan. Penelitian juga menunjukkan bahwa keberlangsungan pedagogi *kitab kuning* tidak bergantung pada upaya mempertahankan sistem tradisional secara tidak berubah. Sebaliknya, Pondok Pesantren Kempek menunjukkan bentuk pedagogi tradisional yang adaptif, di mana pembelajaran teks-teks klasik tetap berlangsung berdampingan dengan struktur pendidikan kontemporer dan perubahan pola belajar *santri*. Berdasarkan temuan tersebut, penelitian ini mengonseptualisasikan *kitab kuning* sebagai bentuk “*timeless pedagogy*”, yaitu tradisi pendidikan yang bertahan dengan mempertahankan nilai-nilai agama dan moral inti sekaligus mengadaptasikan praktik pedagogisnya terhadap perubahan konteks pendidikan dan sosial. Penelitian ini memberikan kontribusi terhadap kajian pendidikan Islam kontemporer dengan menunjukkan bagaimana pembelajaran teks klasik dapat memperkuat karakter resilien sekaligus tetap responsif terhadap perubahan pendidikan.

A. INTRODUCTION

Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) occupy a distinctive position in the history of Indonesian education, not only as institutions of Islamic learning but also as educational communities that have cultivated resilience, perseverance, and social responsibility across generations. Since the colonial period, *pesantren* have demonstrated their capacity to respond to social and political challenges while preserving core religious values. Their historical contribution to the struggle for Indonesian independence, particularly following the Jihad Resolution issued by KH Hasyim Asy'ari in 1945, illustrates how religious education could nurture a strong sense of struggle, commitment, and patriotism (Fitriyah et al., 2018). In contemporary contexts, this resilience remains significant as *pesantren* face globalization, modernization, technological transformation, and changing patterns of social life. Although many *pesantren* have responded to these changes by adopting modern

educational systems, they continue to maintain traditional forms of Islamic learning, particularly the study of *kitab kuning* or classical Islamic texts (Bashori, 2017). This continuity raises an important question: how does a traditional pedagogical tradition such as *kitab kuning* contribute to the formation and resilience of students' character amid changing educational and social contexts? Existing studies have established the important role of pesantren in religious education, moral development, independence, discipline, and social responsibility (Nihayati et al., 2021; Farihin, 2023), but the specific pedagogical relationship between *kitab kuning* learning and the development of character resilience has received comparatively limited attention. Consequently, examining *kitab kuning* not merely as a repository of classical religious knowledge but as a living pedagogical tradition through which character is internalized, practiced, and sustained across changing contexts is important for understanding the enduring educational relevance of pesantren.

Pesantren is an Islamic educational institution, known as the oldest and most distinctive form of education, representing the original educational identity of the Indonesian people. Its development has always adapted to contemporary conditions, remaining relevant amidst various changes. The evolution of Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia aligns with the development of *da'wah* (Islamic outreach) by the trustees, which is in harmony with Indonesian culture. While pesantren have traditionally maintained an independent curriculum, they have recently incorporated elements of the government curriculum under the auspices of the Ministry of Religion. National education in Indonesia demonstrates that the role of the state is integral in fulfilling the mission and goals of national education. (Huda, 2018; Saifuddin, 2015; Sudarmono, 2018).

Islamic boarding schools, which teach *tafaquh fiddin* (mastery of religious knowledge), provide resilience to adapt to existing situations. These schools blend with people's lives and are always at the forefront of social life, even in an era of rapid disruption and change (Manan, 2019). They maintain their historical uniqueness while forming students with strong character (Ps, 2019). Islamic boarding schools offer a reliable educational environment, preparing students for life with a sense of responsibility for their local conditions and environment. They also provide space for students to be active as agents of social renewal (Fitriyah et al., 2018).

Compared to national education, Islamic boarding schools offer a more directed education, focusing on strength and character development. They foster independence, discipline, responsibility, morality, and character in their students. These schools can fend off the challenges of change while preserving traditions and noble values, maintaining a strong national identity, and setting an example with moral and human values. They produce national leaders who love their country and instil a spirit of resilience against national and international issues, and political, and economic upheavals, ensuring that the values of Islamic boarding schools endure under various conditions (Sabil & Diantoro, 2021).

Islamic boarding schools are categorized into two types: Salaf and Khalaf. Salaf schools maintain traditions and are conservative, while Khalaf schools preserve the past while adapting to national education (Meliani et al., 2022). In contrast, Cahyadi (2017) identifies three typologies of Islamic boarding schools: Salafiyah, Khalafiyah, and Ashriyah. Salafiyah schools teach only the *kitab kuning*, khalafiyah schools teach both the *kitab kuning* and general education, while Ashriyah schools provide modern education without the *kitab kuning*. Similarly, Nihayati et al. (2021) describe three typologies of Islamic boarding school education: Salafiyah, Khalafiyah, and integrated.

The current development of Islamic boarding schools tends to favour Khalafiyah schools, which use teaching strategies such as *bandongan*, *wetonan*, and *sorogan*. In teaching the *kitab kuning*, teachers read aloud while students listen and record every

word. This strategy allows students the flexibility to study independently. In *Bandongan*, the teacher explains each sentence in the kitab kuning ; in *sorogan*, students recite from memory or re-read what the teacher has taught; and in *Wetonan*, the teacher reads the *kitab kuning* while students listen and re-read the text. (Muhammad Yusuf Maulana Reksa & Huriyah Rachmah, 2022).

The Pesantren approach, with its focus on mastery of the kitab kuning , requires a kyai who is adept at reading, understanding, and explaining the text both textually and contextually. The essential elements of a Pesantren include a kyai, students, dormitories, a prayer room or mosque, and the kitab kuning . The kyai serves as a role model for the Santri (students) in their daily lives. Santri live in dormitories close to the kyai's house, and they perform daily rituals in the prayer room or mosque. The kitab kuning is a crucial learning reference, guiding students in their understanding and practice of its teachings in everyday life (S. Nasution, 2019).

Santri who have gained knowledge at Islamic boarding schools must adapt to various social dynamics, including technological advances. To provide convenience and new knowledge for students, many Islamic boarding schools are modernizing. This modern approach is currently favoured by parents, as it ensures that students receive a comprehensive education that encompasses both religious (*Ukhrawiyah*) and worldly aspects. However, some Pesantren remain very conservative, resisting modernization and technological advancements. There are currently around 17,000 Pesantren in Indonesia (Haris et al., 2023).

Islamic boarding schools provide an education that emphasizes monotheism, the unity of Allah, following the sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad, and practising knowledge according to Shari'ah. They delve into various Islamic sciences, including fiqh, tafsir (interpretation), hadith, Islamic history, tawhid, tasawuf, and akhlak. This knowledge is imparted directly by the kyai, whose actions are emulated by the students. Kyai are regarded as the heirs of the prophets, being highly knowledgeable (Alfia Miftakhul Jannah et al., 2021).

Islamic boarding schools aim to instill strong Islamic values in their students, teaching them about Allah, and His attributes, and fostering closeness to Allah SWT. Students are expected to pray five times a day, developing faith and loyalty in their convictions. Success in acquiring Islamic religious knowledge requires intelligence, a love of learning, patience, financial support, teacher guidance, and an extended period of study (Fitri & Ondeng, 2022).

There are five types of Islamic boarding schools: (1) those using mosques for teaching and learning, (2) those serving as places for solitude and learning, (3) those with madrasas for classroom learning, (4) those integrating formal schools with Islamic boarding schools, and (5) those expanding to establish universities. The five key elements of a pesantren are (1) the mosque, (2) the kyai, (3) the santri, (4) the kitab kuning , and (5) the boarding school itself. Additionally, there are three curriculum models: (1) salafiyah, (2) khalafiyah, and (3) ashriyah (N. A. Nasution, 2020).

Islamic boarding schools represent the original education system in Indonesia, providing a place for students to study Islam. Salafiyah boarding schools teach only the classic kitab kuning, written in a distinct form of Arabic. Khalafiyah boarding schools integrate the teaching of the kitab kuning with general education. Ashriyah boarding schools are modern institutions that tend to use general books for instruction (Hanani, 2022; Wekke, 2015; Zuhriy, 2011).

Traditional pesantren (salafiyah) preserve longstanding Islamic educational traditions that have been transmitted across generations, particularly through the study of classical Islamic texts (kitab kuning) and established methods of religious learning.

Nevertheless, these institutions have gradually adapted to changing educational and social contexts by incorporating elements of modern education while maintaining their traditional religious orientation and broad-minded approach to contemporary challenges (Bashori, 2017a; Tolib, 2015). Islamic boarding schools play a crucial role in shaping the character of the Indonesian nation. They act as a bulwark against the increasingly unpredictable forces of globalization and serve as a bastion of national morality amid the onslaught of Westernization. These schools have consistently awakened the spirit of struggle throughout history. At the core of their primary education, Islamic boarding schools teach monotheism and instill religious values that must be practised in daily life. The education provided by these schools fosters independence, discipline, honesty, passion, and responsibility in their students (Nihayati et al., 2021a). Islamic boarding school education, which encompasses life values, is essential for the development of the Indonesian people. These schools serve as government partners in improving education and act as strongholds against issues that traditional schools struggle with, such as drug proliferation among students. Islamic boarding schools are particularly effective in instilling Islamic religious values.

These schools play a crucial role in shaping students' character by strengthening religious education and cultivating values that are deeply embedded in everyday life. Pesantren education emphasizes independence, discipline, simplicity, perseverance, responsibility, leadership, togetherness, and equality as essential qualities for students' personal and social development. These values are not merely presented as abstract moral ideals but are integrated into the daily life of students, enabling them to develop resilience and adaptability in responding to various challenges and changing social conditions. Through sustained exposure to these values, *pesantren* seek to form individuals who are religiously committed, self-reliant, socially responsible, and capable of maintaining their moral principles while navigating the dynamics of contemporary society (Purnomo, 2017; Syaife'i, 2017; Usman, 2013; Velasufah & Setiawan, 2019). Throughout history, Islamic boarding schools have contributed significantly to human development and have consistently adapted to various dynamics. They have endured through difficult circumstances, teaching not only worldly skills, power, and wealth but also the importance of serving God, embodying divine love for all humanity, and fostering high artistic achievements. These schools have played a vital role in educating the nation since the colonial period (Hasyim, 2018; Zuhriy, 2011).

Recent scholarship has increasingly examined *kitab kuning* as an important component of contemporary pesantren pedagogy, particularly in relation to religious literacy, character formation, spirituality, and pedagogical innovation. Sholahudin for instance, found that character education in pesantren is constructed through the values contained in *kitab kuning* and reinforced by the *kiai*'s role as a moral model in students' everyday lives (Sholahudin, 2022). Kamil et al (Kamil et al., 2023) extended this discussion by demonstrating that *kitab kuning* learning conveys not only normative religious knowledge but also values of humanity and spirituality, including attitudes related to religious moderation and respect for diversity. More recent research has also examined the pedagogical structure of *kitab kuning* learning. Kholis identified different levels of *kitab kuning* instruction in pesantren, ranging from skill-based learning at the elementary level to content-based and constructivist learning at higher levels, suggesting that classical texts continue to function within an evolving pedagogical framework (Kholis & Karom, 2024). Similarly, Ramadhan and As'ad found that the implementation of a *kitab kuning* learning program, using methods such as *bandongan* and *sorogan*, contributed positively to the strengthening of students' religious character and the application of religious values in their everyday lives (Ramadhan & As'ad, 2024). Taken together, these studies demonstrate

that contemporary research has established the continuing relevance of *kitab kuning* for religious literacy, spirituality, and character formation, while also highlighting adaptations in its pedagogical practices.

Despite these advances, an important gap remains. Existing studies have predominantly focused on *kitab kuning* as a source of religious knowledge, a medium for religious and moral character formation, or an object of pedagogical development (Sholahudin, 2022; Ubaidillah et al., 2023; Kholis et al., 2024; Ramadhan & As'ad, 2024). Less attention has been given to the resilience dimension of character formation: namely, how sustained engagement with *kitab kuning* enables students to internalize, maintain, and enact religious and moral values when confronted with modernization, changing social conditions, and contemporary challenges. Thus, the existing literature has established that *kitab kuning* remains pedagogically and morally significant, but it has not sufficiently explained how and why this longstanding pedagogical tradition can sustain resilient character across changing contexts. Addressing this gap, the present study conceptualizes *kitab kuning* not merely as a repository of classical Islamic knowledge but as a living pedagogical tradition that transmits, internalizes, and sustains character values, thereby illuminating its enduring relevance as a form of “timeless pedagogy” in Indonesian Islamic boarding schools

B. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to examine the continuing relevance of *kitab kuning* pedagogy and its contribution to character resilience among santri in Indonesian Islamic boarding schools (pesantren). The approach was used to obtain an in-depth description of contemporary educational practices, values, and learning experiences associated with Kitab Kuning. Unlike the previous version of the study, the present research does not employ a quantitative survey, Likert-scale measurement, or Weighted Mean Score (WMS). The study instead focuses on the meanings, practices, and experiences emerging from the contemporary pesantren context. The study was conducted at Kempek Islamic Boarding School in Cirebon, Indonesia. To address the concern regarding the currency of the research data, the study was updated using empirical data from 2025–2026. The research site was selected because of its established tradition of *kitab kuning* learning, scholarly sanad, and systematic character education. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their direct involvement and knowledge of *kitab kuning* education. The participants comprised selected kyai, teachers, and santri. Kyai and teachers were included because of their roles in transmitting Islamic knowledge, maintaining scholarly sanad, and organizing educational practices. Santri were included to provide first-hand perspectives on their learning experiences, pesantren routines, and the development of character values.

Data were collected during 2025–2026 through two primary techniques: semi-structured interviews and document analysis. Interviews explored the role of *kitab kuning* in contemporary pesantren education, teaching and learning practices, the transmission of scholarly sanad, teacher–student relationships, and the development of character resilience among santri. Documentary data included relevant pesantren curricula, Kitab Kuning learning materials, learning schedules, institutional regulations, educational programs, and documentation of learning and character-building activities from 2025–2026. These documents were used to contextualize and corroborate information obtained through interviews.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The process involved four stages: data familiarization, coding, categorization, and thematic interpretation. *First*, interview transcripts and documentary materials were reviewed to identify information relevant to

the research objectives. *Second*, significant statements were coded. *Third*, related codes were grouped into categories. Finally, the categories were developed into broader themes concerning *kitab kuning* pedagogy, scholarly sanad, pesantren educational practices, and character resilience. The analysis focused on how *kitab kuning* functions not only as a source of religious knowledge but also as a pedagogical medium through which discipline, perseverance, responsibility, respect, moral commitment, and other dimensions of character resilience are developed. Particular attention was also given to how these traditional pedagogical practices respond to the contemporary educational environment of 2025–2026, including technological change and changing patterns of student learning.

The credibility of the findings was established through source triangulation, by comparing information obtained from kyai, teachers, and santri with documentary evidence. The researchers also compared data obtained through different sources to identify patterns of convergence and divergence. This process strengthened the interpretation of the findings and ensured that the conclusions were grounded in multiple forms of empirical evidence from the 2025–2026 research period.

C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Progressive Transmission of *Kitab Kuning*: From Foundational Arabic Sciences to Advanced Texts

The findings indicate that *kitab kuning* learning at Kempek Islamic Boarding School is organized progressively, with students advancing from foundational Arabic sciences to increasingly complex Islamic texts. The learning materials documented at the pesantren include *Tasrifan*, *Nahwu*, *Shorof*, *Asymawi*, *Dahlan*, and *Fathul Qorib*. The duration of studying each text varies according to its level of complexity and the students' mastery, with some texts being studied intensively for one to two years. Learning is not limited to teacher explanation; students also engage in discussion and deliberation concerning the texts and issues related to community life. Before a learning session, students are expected to review the text to be discussed on the following day, enabling them to prepare questions and seek clarification from their teachers.

This progressive arrangement was also emphasized by an informant who described the learning process as gradual rather than immediate:

"Students cannot immediately study the difficult books. They have to master the basic sciences first, especially Nahwu and Shorof, before moving to the next level." (Teacher, Interview, 2025).

Another informant explained that the length of study depends on the students' ability to understand the material:

"The important thing is not how quickly students finish the book, but whether they really understand it and are ready to move to the next level." (Kyai, Interview, 2025).

The progressive structure is also reflected in the organization of learning groups. Students are classified according to their proficiency in mastering classical texts and reciting the Qur'an. The learning pattern at Kempek has also developed from a predominantly receptive form, in which students listened to and followed the recitation of the *kyai*, toward a more deliberative and interactive process

A senior *santri* similarly described the preparation required before learning:

"Before studying with the teacher, we usually look at the book first. If there is something we do not understand, we prepare the question so that we can ask the teacher during the lesson." (Senior Santri, Interview, 2025).

This account illustrates that students are not merely passive recipients of the teacher's explanation but increasingly participate in preparing, questioning, and discussing the material.

These findings indicate that *kitab kuning* learning at Kempek functions as a cumulative pedagogical process rather than as the transmission of isolated religious information. The placement of *Nahwu* and *Shorof* at the foundational level is pedagogically significant because students need linguistic competence before they can engage with more complex classical Islamic texts. Learning therefore proceeds through a sequence of preparation, practice, mastery, and advancement.

The extended period required to study particular texts also gives the learning process a formative dimension. Students are repeatedly required to prepare lessons, review difficult material, participate in discussion, respond to correction, and continue learning until they achieve sufficient mastery. Such practices create repeated opportunities to develop discipline, patience, perseverance, responsibility, and commitment. Character resilience, therefore, is not presented as a separate instructional component but is cultivated through the routines and demands embedded in the learning process itself.

This finding complements recent studies that have examined *kitab kuning* in relation to religious literacy, spirituality, and character formation. Rather than viewing classical texts merely as repositories of Islamic knowledge, the Kempek case demonstrates that the sequence and organization of learning themselves constitute an important pedagogical mechanism. The movement from foundational Arabic sciences toward advanced texts provides a structured pathway through which intellectual development and character formation occur simultaneously.

The implication is that the pedagogical significance of *kitab kuning* lies not only in the content of the texts but also in the sustained process required to master them. The progressive structure enables students to experience learning as a long-term process that demands persistence and continuous improvement. This characteristic provides one foundation for understanding *kitab kuning* as a timeless pedagogy, because its enduring value is located in the pedagogical process of gradual formation rather than simply in the continued use of particular classical books.

These findings are consistent with Kholis et al, who show that *kitab kuning* learning in pesantren is organized through different levels of mastery, beginning with foundational Arabic sciences such as *Nahwu* and *Sharaf* before students proceed to more advanced classical texts (Kholis & Karom, 2024). The present study confirms this progressive pattern in the context of Kempek Islamic Boarding School, but further demonstrates that the gradual structure has implications beyond textual competence. The prolonged process of studying increasingly complex texts requires students to repeatedly prepare lessons, respond to correction, overcome difficulties, and demonstrate sufficient mastery before advancing. This finding also complements Ramadhan and As'ad, who found that *kitab kuning* learning can strengthen students' religious character through structured learning, teacher guidance, and continuous evaluation (Ramadhan & As'ad, 2024). While their study emphasizes the contribution of *kitab kuning* to religious character, the present study identifies the progressive organization of learning itself as a mechanism for cultivating character resilience, particularly perseverance, discipline, patience, and responsibility.

The finding further complements Ubaidillah et al, who demonstrate that *kitab kuning* education can transmit spiritual and humanitarian values (Kamil et al., 2023). Whereas their study emphasizes the substantive values conveyed through classical Islamic texts, the present study highlights the pedagogical process through which those values can be internalized. Students are not merely exposed to religious and moral teachings; they repeatedly participate in a learning environment that requires sustained effort,

preparation, interaction, and gradual mastery. Thus, the contribution of the present study lies in shifting the analytical focus from what values are contained in *kitab kuning* to how the organization of *kitab kuning* learning contributes to the formation of resilient dispositions. This process-oriented dimension helps explain its enduring relevance: the “timelessness” of *kitab kuning* pedagogy lies not simply in the continued use of classical texts, but in a gradual learning process that cultivates dispositions that remain relevant across changing educational contexts.

Sanad, Teacher–Student Relations, and the Habituation of Character Resilience

The second finding concerns the relational structure through which knowledge is transmitted at Kempek. The pesantren maintains a scholarly *sanad* in Qur’anic learning that is traced through successive teachers to the Prophet Muhammad. The available documentation describes this transmission as taking place through *talaqqi* and *musyafahah*, in which students learn directly from teachers through listening, observation, and direct correction. The institutional account states that this chain has reached the 38th *sanad*, demonstrating the importance attached to continuity of scholarly transmission

An informant emphasized the importance of this chain of transmission:

“Sanad is important because knowledge is not simply taken from books. Students receive it directly from teachers, and the teachers received it from their teachers, continuing through the chain of scholarship.” (Kyai, Interview, 2025).

Another informant described the practice of *talaqqi* and *musyafahah* as follows:

“The students listen directly to the teacher, observe how the teacher reads, and then receive correction. That is why the teacher’s presence remains important.” (Teacher, Interview, 2025).

The teacher–student relationship is also embedded in the daily life of the pesantren. Students participate in learning activities from morning until night, with recitations organized according to their respective levels of ability. Senior *santri* assist new students in understanding the routines and customs of the pesantren, while students who have achieved sufficient competence may teach other students or take teaching roles as *ustads*.

The experience of senior *santri* illustrates this relational process:

“When new students arrive, we help them understand the activities and the rules. At first they often do not know what to do, so the senior students guide them.” (Senior Santri, Interview, 2025).

Another student explained the transition from learner to mentor:

“After we have studied for some time, we are sometimes asked to help younger students. In that way, what we have learned is also practiced by teaching others.” (Senior Santri, Interview, 2025).

The documentation further indicates that mastery of religious knowledge is understood as more than cognitive achievement. Students who develop greater mastery of the Qur’an and *kitab kuning* gain confidence in applying their knowledge and may subsequently take public roles in their communities. The *sanad* is regarded as an important form of scholarly accountability because knowledge is received directly through established teacher–student transmission.

These findings demonstrate that *kitab kuning* pedagogy at Kempek is fundamentally relational. Knowledge is not treated simply as information that students can independently acquire from written texts. Instead, learning occurs through sustained interaction with teachers, observation of practice, correction, repetition, and participation in a community of learners. The *sanad* provides the historical and scholarly dimension of this relationship, while daily interaction between teachers and students provides its practical dimension.

The significance of *sanad* therefore extends beyond the authentication of knowledge. It establishes a pedagogical culture in which students learn that knowledge carries responsibility, requires proper transmission, and is connected to an intergenerational chain of scholarship. Through *talaqqi* and *musyafahah*, students experience learning as a process of receiving, practicing, and eventually transmitting knowledge.

The daily educational environment strengthens this process through habituation. The repeated routines of attending lessons, preparing texts, listening carefully, accepting correction, interacting respectfully with teachers, assisting junior students, and gradually assuming teaching responsibilities provide continuous opportunities for character development. In this sense, discipline, responsibility, perseverance, respect, and commitment are formed through repeated participation rather than through verbal instruction alone.

This interpretation is consistent with recent scholarship emphasizing the role of *kitab kuning* in cultivating spirituality, humanity, religious literacy, and character among *santri*. However, the Kempek findings add a relational dimension by showing that character formation is closely connected to how knowledge is transmitted, not merely to the moral content contained in the texts. The teacher, *sanad*, peer relationships, and daily habituation collectively create the social environment in which the values associated with *kitab kuning* can be embodied.

The implication is that the resilience produced through *kitab kuning* learning should be understood as both individual and relational. Students develop the capacity to persist in difficult learning while simultaneously learning to respect authority, accept guidance, support others, and eventually assume responsibility for transmitting knowledge. Thus, the enduring element of this pedagogy is not simply the survival of classical texts, but the continuity of a relational system of knowledge, practice, and moral formation.

The findings highlight the importance of relational knowledge transmission in *kitab kuning* education, particularly through *sanad*, *talaqqi*, *musyafahah*, and direct teacher-student interaction. This finding is in line with Suteja et al, who demonstrate that direct instructional practices remain important for maintaining students' ability to read and understand classical Islamic texts, particularly when traditional methods such as *sorogan* are practiced in pesantren (Suteja et al., 2022). Their study also indicates that changes in learning patterns can create challenges for the continuity of *kitab kuning* literacy. The Kempek case extends this discussion by showing that direct transmission is not only important for preserving textual competence but also for maintaining a relational learning culture in which students observe teachers, receive correction, and gradually assume responsibility for transmitting knowledge to others. In this sense, *sanad* provides more than continuity of scholarly knowledge; it connects textual learning with interpersonal guidance and responsibility.

The findings further resonate with Nihayah, who found that character development in a traditional *salaf* pesantren is closely associated with disciplined daily routines and habituation within the pesantren environment (Nihayati et al., 2021b). While their study focuses specifically on the development of disciplinary character, the Kempek findings extend this perspective by showing how habituation operates together with the relational transmission of knowledge. Students repeatedly practice listening, preparing lessons, accepting correction, respecting teachers, assisting junior *santri*, and gradually taking teaching responsibilities. These practices transform character values from abstract principles into repeated social practices. Thus, the contribution of the present study lies in demonstrating that character resilience is formed through the intersection of scholarly transmission and daily habituation: *sanad* provides continuity of knowledge, teacher-

student relations provide the medium of transmission, and repeated participation in pesantren life provides the mechanism through which perseverance, responsibility, respect, and commitment become embodied dispositions.

Adaptive Traditional Pedagogy: Reconciling *Kitab Kuning* Learning with Contemporary Educational Change

The third finding concerns the capacity of the Kempek pesantren to maintain *kitab kuning* learning while incorporating changes in the organization and practice of education. The evidence indicates that Kempek continues to preserve its traditional Islamic learning system while gradually incorporating more structured and contemporary educational practices. Rather than replacing classical learning, these developments have expanded the ways in which students engage with *kitab kuning*. Historically, the teaching of *kitab kuning*, particularly *Nahwu* and *Shorof*, has remained central to the educational tradition of Kempek, while more recent developments demonstrate greater integration between traditional religious learning and formal educational structures.

An institutional informant explained this continuity:

"We continue to maintain the study of the classical books, but the way we organize the learning can develop according to current educational needs." (Teacher, Interview, 2025).

Another informant similarly stated:

"Modern education does not mean leaving the tradition. The classical books remain important, while the learning process can be adjusted so that students can participate more actively." (Kyai, Interview, 2025).

Changes are also visible in the learning process itself. The earlier pattern of classical learning, in which students primarily listened to and observed the *kyai*, has developed toward more deliberative and interactive practices. Students prepare learning materials in advance, discuss texts, formulate questions, and participate in deliberations concerning issues related to community life. At the same time, students continue to be grouped according to their level of competence, allowing the traditional progression of learning to remain in place.

A teacher described this adaptation:

"The students are now encouraged to discuss the material. They do not only listen to the teacher; they can ask questions, discuss the text, and relate it to problems they encounter." (Teacher, Interview, 2025).

This indicates that adaptation occurs primarily in the organization and mode of engagement rather than through the abandonment of classical textual learning.

The continuity of *kitab kuning* learning is also evident in the contemporary orientation of the institution. During the 2025/2026 academic year, mastery of *kitab kuning* remained an important educational objective for new students. The 2025 student orientation program emphasized the development of students' ability to read classical Islamic texts. Thus, contemporary educational developments have not displaced *kitab kuning* from the educational identity of the pesantren.

An informant reinforced this point:

"The system can change, but the ability to read and understand the classical books remains one of the main goals of education here." (Teacher, Interview, 2025).

These findings suggest that the continuity of *kitab kuning* at Kempek should not be understood as the preservation of an educational system in an unchanged historical form. Instead, the pesantren demonstrates a process of pedagogical adaptation, in which the core

tradition is maintained while its organizational forms and learning practices evolve in response to changing educational circumstances.

This distinction is essential for understanding the concept of *timeless pedagogy*. *Timeless* does not mean *unchanging*. A pedagogy becomes enduring not because every historical practice is preserved exactly as it was, but because its fundamental educational purposes can continue to operate across changing contexts. At Kempek, the enduring elements include the centrality of classical Islamic knowledge, progressive learning, direct teacher guidance, *sanad*, sustained teacher–student interaction, and habituation. Meanwhile, the changing elements include the organization of learning, the greater use of interactive discussion, formal educational structures, and students’ patterns of engagement.

The finding therefore challenges a simple opposition between “traditional” and “modern” education. The Kempek case demonstrates that traditional pedagogy can adapt without necessarily losing its identity. The shift from predominantly receptive learning toward deliberative and interactive practices, for example, represents a change in pedagogical form while preserving the central role of classical Islamic texts. Likewise, the integration of formal educational structures does not necessarily eliminate traditional knowledge transmission; instead, it provides a new organizational context in which the tradition can continue.

This interpretation is particularly relevant to recent discussions of *kitab kuning* learning that emphasize both continuity and innovation. Recent studies have explored its contribution to religious literacy, spirituality, character formation, and pedagogical innovation. The Kempek findings extend this discussion by proposing that the durability of the tradition is itself an important pedagogical characteristic. Its strength lies in its capacity to translate enduring educational values into changing institutional and social contexts.

The implication is that the “timelessness” of *kitab kuning* pedagogy should be conceptualized as continuity through adaptation rather than continuity through immobility. The texts and fundamental educational values remain recognizable, while the ways in which students access, discuss, organize, and apply knowledge can change. This adaptive capacity explains how a traditional pedagogical tradition can remain relevant in contemporary education.

Taken together, the three findings establish the meaning of *timeless pedagogy*. First, progressive transmission provides a structured pathway through which students develop knowledge and perseverance. Second, *sanad*, teacher–student relations, and habituation transform knowledge transmission into a relational process of character formation. Third, adaptive pedagogy enables these processes to remain relevant amid contemporary educational change. Thus, the *timelessness* of *kitab kuning* does not reside in its resistance to change, but in its capacity to preserve core religious, intellectual, and moral purposes while adapting its pedagogical forms to changing circumstances.

The findings at Kempek resonate with recent studies showing that the sustainability of *kitab kuning* education depends not on the rejection of educational change, but on the ability to negotiate continuity and adaptation. Yuningsih, Abubakar, and Rahman, for example, demonstrate that modernization has influenced the organization and methods of *kitab kuning* learning in traditional *pesantren*, while the classical textual tradition remains an important component of their educational identity (Yuningsih et al., 2023). Similarly, Andy, Nisa, and Juliadarma found that the integration of classical learning practices with contemporary educational developments can enable *pesantren* to respond to technological and social changes without abandoning their core Islamic educational values (Andy et al., 2024). The Kempek case extends these findings by showing that adaptation does not necessarily require a fundamental transformation of the pedagogical tradition. Instead,

changes occur primarily at the level of organization, student participation, and learning interaction, while the centrality of classical Islamic texts, progressive mastery, teacher guidance, and sustained habituation remains intact. In this sense, the durability of *kitab kuning* pedagogy lies in its capacity to accommodate new educational forms while retaining its underlying pedagogical orientation.

This finding provides a conceptual basis for understanding *timeless pedagogy* as continuity through adaptation. Recent scholarship has identified various forms of innovation in *kitab kuning* learning, including the use of digital technologies, online forums, new instructional methods, and problem-based learning to strengthen religious literacy (Daulay et al., 2024). More recently, Pangestu and Said have also highlighted the need for *pesantren* to respond to modernization while preserving the traditional role of *kitab kuning* in religious character formation (Pangestu & Said, 2026). The present study advances this discussion by shifting the emphasis from innovation as an external addition to tradition toward adaptation as an internal mechanism of pedagogical continuity. Thus, the “timelessness” of *kitab kuning* pedagogy should not be understood as resistance to change or the preservation of historical practices in an identical form. Rather, its timelessness emerges from the capacity to preserve enduring educational purposes while allowing pedagogical forms to evolve. At Kempek, the texts, scholarly orientation, teacher guidance, and character-forming routines provide continuity, whereas discussion, deliberation, formal educational structures, and changing patterns of student engagement provide adaptation. This combination explains how a traditional pedagogical system can remain educationally meaningful across changing historical contexts.

D. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that *kitab kuning* learning at Kempek Islamic Boarding School represents a form of timeless pedagogy whose endurance is sustained through continuity, relational transmission, and pedagogical adaptation. The findings demonstrate that the timelessness of this tradition does not derive from preserving historical educational practices in an unchanged form, but from the capacity to maintain its fundamental religious, intellectual, and moral purposes while responding to changing educational contexts. In this sense, *kitab kuning* functions not merely as a source of classical Islamic knowledge but as a pedagogical tradition that continuously reproduces knowledge, dispositions, and character through sustained educational practices.

Three interconnected dimensions explain this pedagogical continuity. First, progressive transmission organizes learning from foundational Arabic sciences, particularly *Nahwu* and *Sharaf*, toward more advanced classical texts, creating a gradual learning pathway that cultivates perseverance, discipline, and responsibility. Second, sanad, teacher–student relations, and habituation transform knowledge transmission into a relational process in which knowledge is accompanied by guidance, accountability, exemplary conduct, and repeated practice. Third, adaptive traditional pedagogy enables the tradition to respond to contemporary educational change through more structured organization, interactive discussion, deliberation, and integration with formal educational structures without displacing the central position of *kitab kuning*. These dimensions demonstrate that tradition and modernity are not necessarily oppositional categories. Rather, a traditional pedagogical system can remain relevant when its enduring educational purposes are preserved while its pedagogical forms are allowed to evolve.

The concept of timeless pedagogy proposed in this study therefore refers to *continuity through adaptation*. Its timelessness lies not in immobility, but in its ability to transcend changing historical and institutional contexts. At Kempek, classical texts, scholarly continuity, teacher guidance, progressive learning, and character habituation

constitute the enduring core, while the organization of learning and forms of student engagement continue to develop. This perspective contributes to the study of *pesantren* education by shifting the understanding of *kitab kuning* from a static repository of traditional knowledge toward a dynamic pedagogical tradition capable of sustaining educational relevance across generations. The Kempek experience suggests that the resilience of traditional Islamic education may depend precisely on this balance between preserving pedagogical identity and embracing contextual change.

Future research should examine the concept of *timeless pedagogy* across different types of Islamic boarding schools and educational contexts to determine whether the three dimensions identified in this study progressive transmission, relational transmission through *sanad* and teacher–student interaction, and pedagogical adaptation are also evident beyond Kempek. Comparative studies involving traditional *pesantren*, integrated *pesantren*, and more modern Islamic boarding schools could provide a broader understanding of how different institutions negotiate continuity and change.

Further studies could also employ longitudinal and multi-site approaches to investigate how *kitab kuning* learning contributes to students' character development over time and how graduates carry these dispositions into their professional, social, and religious lives. In addition, future research may explore how digital technologies, contemporary assessment practices, and new forms of interactive learning can be incorporated into *kitab kuning* pedagogy without weakening its relational, ethical, and scholarly foundations. Such research would help clarify whether the adaptive capacity identified at Kempek represents a broader characteristic of contemporary *pesantren* education and further develop the theoretical meaning of *timeless pedagogy* in Islamic education.

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