

RE-EXAMINING THE AUTHORITY OF ISLAMIC BOARDING SCHOOL EDUCATION: THE DIALECTIC OF TRADITION, MORALITY, AND DIGITAL DOMINANCE

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Abstract. As the oldest Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia, Islamic boarding schools (Pesantren) have historically held moral authority in shaping the character and spirituality of their communities. However, in the context of modernization and information transparency, this authority is experiencing a legitimacy crisis due to the emergence of value deviations and the protection of power by some pesantren leaders. This situation raises questions about the relevance of the traditional pesantren authority model amidst demands for transparency and public accountability. This research employed a qualitative approach with descriptive-analytical and socio-cultural phenomenological methods. Data were collected through literature review, digital content analysis, and in-depth interviews with students, alumni, and pesantren leaders. The results indicate that cultural feudalism, which once underpinned the structure of respect for kiai (Islamic scholars), is now being discussed for its relevance in a modern context that demands transparency and equality. Digitalization has also reframed public perceptions of pesantren, making the reconstruction of moral authority urgent due to the poor role of pesantren in modern society. This situation makes the reconstruction of moral authority a pressing need to address the aspirations of pesantren in modern society.

Keywords: *Pesantren, Moral Authority, Cultural Feudalism, Digital Representation.*

INTRODUCTION

Pesantren are traditional Islamic educational institutions that have made a significant contribution to shaping the character and civilization of Muslim communities in Indonesia. They serve not only as places for the transmission of religious knowledge, but also as social institutions that instill moral, spiritual, and national values in their students (Astuti et al., 2023). Historically, Islamic boarding schools are believed to have emerged in the 13th century, coinciding with the spread of Islam in the archipelago by traders and scholars from India and the Middle East. In the early days, Islamic boarding schools were established as simple huts in the middle of communities as centers for religious teaching and moral guidance (Mimbar, 2024). The main objective is to spread Islamic teachings while forming a community based on the values of faith and piety. In addition, education in Islamic boarding schools needs to be examined through teaching methods that are characteristic of salaf boarding schools.

Education in salaf pesantren generally uses the sorogan, bandungan, and wetonan methods. The sorogan system is an individual learning process, in which students are required to demonstrate patience, diligence, obedience, and self-discipline in seeking knowledge. Often, students do not realize that they should mature at this sorogan level before moving on to the next learning system (Amaliah, 2018). A student who has mastered sorogan is key to mastering religious knowledge and becoming a scholar. Meanwhile, the bandungan system, also known as wetonan, is a group learning system under the guidance and supervision of a kyai, consisting of between 5 and 500 students (Zahroh & Fahmi, 2025). They listened to a teacher or cleric who read, translated, explained, and reviewed books in Arabic, while each student paid attention to their own book and took notes on passages they found difficult or important. This group system is called halaqah. If the cleric was unable to teach, he would usually appoint a senior student to represent him, known as an ustadz (Miftahudin & Husni, 2024). In this system, there are also deliberations or discussions about classical Islamic studies with clear sources from the scriptures. The topics of discussion and the

results of the discussions are always presented to the kyai for correction and reinforcement if the results of the discussions do not deviate and are in accordance with the classical scriptures. This method is used to train and test the mental maturity of students, so that they will later become people who are strong in their faith or become scholars who are *warasatul anbiya*. These methods not only shape knowledge, but also strengthen the relationship between students and teachers within the institutional structure of Islamic boarding schools (Tabroni et al., 2021).

The relationship between santri and kiai at that time was very close, where santri lived in a boarding house resembling a monastery until a certain period. They earned their meals by working in the rice fields owned by kiai or other prominent Muslims in the community, or by working as fabric dyers, cigarette rollers, seamstresses, and some received rice and money from their families at home (Siswanto & Yulita, 2019). The kiai are not paid, and the students do not pay tuition fees. All of the institution's costs are borne by pious members of the community as part of their obligation to pay zakat. Within the institutional structure of the pesantren, the position of kiai is very important and determines the direction of the institution (Fuadi, 2023). Kiai are central figures who are respected not only for their profound knowledge, but also for their roles as spiritual leaders, teachers, and social activists in Islamic boarding schools and wider communities. The title "Kiai" itself is a form of respect for scholars who have high scientific and moral authority (Siswanto & Yulita, 2019). In the context of pesantren leadership, the kiai acts as the main administrator responsible for all aspects of education, from teaching classical Islamic texts and guiding students to establishing Islamic values within the pesantren environment. This role extends to social and cultural dimensions, making the kiai a primary role model (Falakhina, 2025).

As spiritual and ethical leaders, kiai serve as prime role models for santri in terms of behavior, worship, and daily attitudes. They not only convey religious teachings theoretically, but also embody Islamic values in concrete actions that can be emulated. The kiai instills discipline, sincerity, simplicity, and responsibility as the foundation of the santri's personality. Through the spiritual closeness between the kiai and the santri, a deep relationship is formed between teacher and student based on manners, trust, and respect (Lutfi et al., 2024). In this case, Islamic boarding schools become educational spaces that foster moral awareness and religiosity, not merely places for transferring religious knowledge. More than just teachers, kiai also play an important role in social and cultural fields. They often become references for the community in various religious, moral, and social issues (Shaleh & Saputra, 2025). Through his leadership, the kiai made the pesantren a center for active da'wah in spreading moderate, tolerant, and inclusive Islamic values.

Pesantren are not only places for training future scholars, but also produce community leaders who care about the welfare of the people. In many cases, pesantren have transformed into community empowerment centers that play an active role in social, economic, and educational activities. The kiai also plays a role as the driving force behind the revitalization of Islam in Indonesia through efforts to preserve classical scholarly traditions while remaining open to renewal (Ridwan et al., 2023). challenges of modernity, ensuring that Islamic boarding schools remain relevant amid the changing times. In this regard, Islamic boarding schools function not only as conservative institutions that preserve tradition, but also as progressive institutions that promote the advancement of Islamic education based on moral and humanitarian values. Students are guided to develop critical thinking skills, high moral integrity, and practical skills that can be applied in social life. However, Islamic boarding schools also face criticism that has existed since the pre-independence era (Falaah et al., 2025).

However, Islamic boarding schools were not immune to criticism, especially during the pre-independence period, when they had reached a critical point as closed and static traditional educational institutions. The Islam taught by Islamic boarding schools was ritualistic and Sufistic, even leaning towards feudalism (Misbah & Rozi, 2022). Ritualism in the context of Islamic boarding schools refers to an excessive emphasis on ritualistic practices such as prayer, fasting, and recitation of prayers without deep integration with intellectual or social aspects, so that education tends to be limited to the repetition of religious routines. Sufism relates to a mystical orientation that emphasizes personal spiritual experience and a direct relationship with God through Sufi orders, which sometimes neglects the rational and scientific aspects of Islamic teachings (Mustaqim, 1805). Meanwhile, feudalism in Islamic boarding schools depicts a rigid hierarchical structure, where the

kiai has absolute power like a feudal landlord, with students as subordinates who are submissive without room for criticism or active participation, thus hindering innovation and renewal.

In modern thought, Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas asserts that the essence of Islamic education is to instill manners of recognition and placing things in their proper place. Pesantren values such as respect for teachers, discipline, and spirituality reflect this essence (Ristianah, 2025). KH. Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur) believes that Islamic boarding schools play a strategic role as a “subculture” capable of balancing tradition and modernity. He sees the values of Islamic boarding schools, such as tolerance, simplicity, and freedom of thought, as the moral strength of the nation in the midst of globalization. This criticism leads us to reflect on the true nature of Islamic boarding schools today (Sugiyantoro, 2021).

The current nature of Islamic boarding schools shows a complex dynamic between efforts to preserve the pure values of Islamic law and external challenges that threaten their integrity. Basically, the values and culture in Islamic boarding schools still strive to remain within the corridor of Islamic law, which emphasizes the formation of noble character, understanding of classical Islamic texts, and the practice of the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad through traditional methods oriented towards morality and spirituality (Harifah & Sofa, 2025). However, in practice, several recent cases show deviations that actually contradict the principles of Sharia law, such as the exploitation of authority and violence that undermine the values of justice and compassion in Islam. For example, the incident at an Islamic boarding school in Aceh where the leader's wife doused students with chili water as punishment, or physical violence by leaders (www.detik.com, accessed on October 30, 2025). In addition, in Palopo, a student was slapped for not greeting someone (www.DetikSulsel, accessed on October 30, 2025), as well as a case of sexual violence in West Lombok involving false promises of “blessings,” indicate that the boarding school culture in some places has shifted from the corridor of Sharia law to practices that emphasize absolute authority and abuse of power, which contradicts Islamic teachings on the protection of the weak and respect for human dignity (Ombudsman.Go.Id, accessed on October 30, 2025). This phenomenon is influenced by the tide of modernization and the infiltration of the digital era, which exacerbates public perception through negative framing on social media without adequate clarification. Therefore, it is important to examine the challenges of modernization faced by Islamic boarding schools.

However, in the context of rapid modernization and the infiltration of the digital era, Islamic boarding schools are faced with substantial challenges related to their moral authority and social legitimacy. Contemporary phenomena indicate a transformation of fundamental values, accompanied by the emergence of practices of authority exploitation by a number of pesantren leaders, which ultimately undermine the integrity of noble values in the Islamic intellectual tradition.

Unlike previous studies, this study offers a new perspective on the relationship between kiai authority and the transformation of moral values in pesantren in the digital era. For example, the research by Tabroni et al., (2021) focuses more on the role of kiai as agents of tradition preservation and guardians of pesantren morality without critically reviewing aspects of authority deviation and its impact on the social legitimacy of the institution. Meanwhile, the research by Ridwan et al., (2023) focuses on the adaptation of Islamic boarding schools to the digitization of learning, but has not yet examined the dialectic between tradition, morality, and religious power in the context of digital modernity.

The novelty of this study lies in its re-examination of pesantren educational authority through a dialectical approach that links three main dimensions: tradition, morality, and digital dominance. This approach not only reveals ethical problems in the leadership practices of kiai but also offers a model for revitalizing civilized Islamic spiritual values amid rapid social change. Thus, this research provides theoretical and practical contributions in strengthening the moral authority of Islamic boarding schools based on the principles of accountability, exemplary behavior, and public openness without eliminating the essence of Islamic scientific traditions that have taken root.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a literature review research method (*library research*), namely a scientific approach that focuses on in-depth study of various literature sources to obtain data, information, and theoretical foundations relevant to the object of study (Mahendra, 2021). The literature sources used include books, scientific journals, academic articles, research reports, and various other documents that are substantively related to the research topic. The research process begins with establishing the focus and formulating the problem, followed by identifying, collecting, and selecting relevant literature sources. The next stage involves critical analysis, interpretation, and synthesis of these sources to build a conceptual framework and gain a comprehensive understanding of the issues under review (Verdianto & Muspawati, 2025).

This research was conducted through several structured stages. First, the researcher determined the research topic clearly and purposefully in accordance with the objectives of the study. Second, the researcher searched for various relevant sources, both through libraries and online databases (*online database*), as well as through consultation with experts in related fields. Third, researchers select relevant and credible sources to serve as primary references. Next, researchers read and evaluate the selected sources to ensure their quality and suitability for the research focus. After that, researchers compile and extract important information from these sources. The next stage is to analyze the data obtained to gain a deeper understanding of the topic being studied. Finally, researchers compile a research report containing the results, discussion, and conclusions of the entire literature research process.

RESULT AND ANALYSIS

The *kiai* is a central figure in the *pesantren* structure and is also the main element that marks the existence of the institution. The existence of the *pesantren* cannot be separated from the role of the *kiai*, because the leadership and policy direction of the *pesantren* are entirely under his authority (Kutsiyah & Tianah, 2025). *Kiai* have overall responsibility for the administration of education in Islamic boarding schools, including spiritual guidance, teaching classical texts, and managing various other aspects of boarding school life. *Santri* are students who study in an Islamic boarding school environment, living in dormitories or lodgings that are generally located near a mosque. They study various classical Islamic texts directly under the guidance of *kiai* (Muhajir et al., 2025). These classical texts are the intellectual legacy of earlier scholars, possessing high scientific value, and it is the responsibility of Islamic boarding schools to preserve them.

The continuity and development of Islamic boarding schools are highly dependent on the figure and capacity of the *kiai*. When a *kiai* passes away, the leadership of the Islamic boarding school is generally continued by his descendants or closest family, so that the continuity of the scientific and spiritual traditions of the Islamic boarding school is maintained. The *kiai* has a very strategic position in the leadership structure of the Islamic boarding school as the main controller of all activities of the institution. All decisions and policies related to the management of the *pesantren* are under the authority and consideration of the *kiai*. The management pattern of the *pesantren* is basically a reflection of the ideas and thoughts of the *kiai*, who in the context of *pesantren* life is known as the caretaker, mentor, guide, and director for all elements within it (Mustofa et al., 2024).



Figure 1.1 The Tradition of Greeting the Kiai

The kiai occupies a central position that makes him the core of pesantren life. He acts as the founder, manager, caretaker, leader, and in some cases even the owner of the pesantren. To be recognized as a kiai and gain leadership legitimacy, a person must possess profound religious knowledge, steadfastness in struggle, sincerity in service, exemplary social conduct, devotion in worship, and the ability to lead and guide the community (Aminuddin & Suklani, 2024).

The Functions and Roles of Kiai Leadership in the Development of Darussalam Kunir Islamic Boarding School. Initially, the leadership pattern of the boarding school was simple, with the kiai acting as the sole leader who held full control, while the implementation of daily tasks was often delegated to the ustaz (Aminuddin & Suklani, 2024). However, as the complexity of managing Islamic boarding schools increased, the leadership structure evolved with the division of tasks through a board of administrators, each with their own responsibilities.

Nevertheless, the highest control and authority remain in the hands of the kiai. He acts as a charismatic figure who is not only a spiritual leader in the pesantren, but also has a great influence in the community. The personality, intellectual capacity, and moral integrity of a kiai are determining factors in the authority and level of development of the pesantren he leads (Makmun, 2021). With his authority, the kiai is able to direct all activities at the pesantren through his own leadership style and policies.

As the founder and leader of the pesantren, the kiai plays a very strategic role in the continuity of this educational institution. In addition to his deep religious knowledge, the kiai is also known as a person of noble character and a role model. Therefore, both the santri and the community view the kiai as a role model and a reference point in resolving various religious and social issues.

As a charismatic leader, the kiai is a determining factor in the position, reputation, and development of a pesantren. Through his role, the pesantren functions not only as an institution for training future kiai, but also as a place for developing Muslim experts and intellectuals. In the process of managing and developing the institution, the kiai acts as the main mentor and highest policy maker who directs all aspects of the pesantren (Putri et al., 2024). With strong and visionary leadership, Islamic boarding schools have the potential to develop alongside modern educational institutions and contribute significantly to community development.

In the context of educational development, the quality of pesantren education is a key indicator of an institution's success in providing quality educational services and outcomes to its students. To achieve good quality standards, pesantren need to fulfill a number of important and interrelated aspects. First, pesantren must have clear quality standards that are agreed upon by all components of the institution (Taufiq & Abdullah, 2023). These standards cover various elements, such as curriculum, facilities and infrastructure, quality of teaching staff, and education management systems. Well-formulated standards serve as key guidelines in the process of developing and improving the quality of Islamic boarding schools (Sahroni et al., 2024).

In addition, the orientation of educational quality also plays an important role in determining the quality of education in Islamic boarding schools. This orientation covers three main dimensions, namely input, process, and output (Sofiah et al., 2024). Input aspects include the quality of human resources, curriculum, facilities, and other supporting resources. Process aspects relate to the implementation of teaching and learning activities, character building, and other supporting activities that support the achievement of educational goals (Mardhiyah et al., 2024). Meanwhile, the output aspect includes learning outcomes and the development of students' personalities as a reflection of the success of the educational process.

The *kiai* holds a very central position in the *pesantren* education system. He is not merely the founder or caretaker of the institution, but also a spiritual, intellectual, and managerial leader who is the linchpin of the entire dynamic of *pesantren* life. In this capacity, the *kiai* holds the highest authority in determining the direction, policies, and objectives of education (Sari et al., 2025). The decisions made by a *kiai* often become the benchmark for the success of Islamic boarding schools in maintaining a balance between preserving Islamic traditions and the demands of modernity. The leadership of a *kiai* is not only administrative, but also moral and epistemological, because it is rooted in the principles of exemplary behavior, sincerity, and responsibility for the welfare of the people. The *kiai*'s steadfastness in upholding pure Islamic values while remaining open to educational innovation is the key to shaping the quality of sustainable Islamic boarding school education (Hasnida, 2019).

The paradigm of *kiai* leadership in development *character building* Santri are grounded in the concept of *holistic* Islamic education, which involves the integrated development of the soul, mind, and character. Character education in Islamic boarding schools is not only oriented towards the formation of personal morals, but also towards instilling social values such as responsibility, discipline, honesty, independence, and concern for others (Muzaffar, 2025). Through this approach, the educational process in Islamic boarding schools is directed at producing individuals who are strong in faith, noble in character, and able to contribute positively to society. This pattern of guidance is reinforced by daily practices in the dormitories that emphasize time discipline, togetherness, simplicity, and collective responsibility. The *kiai* (religious teacher) serves as the primary role model in the internalization of these values through their behavior, speech, and daily attitudes, which are directly observed by the santri (students). The relationship between teachers and students in Islamic boarding schools is not only a transfer of knowledge, but also a transfer of values and personality, where the blessing of knowledge (*barakah al-'ilm*) is believed to be born from proper manners towards teachers (Efendi, 2023).

Improving the quality of Islamic boarding school education also requires the active role of religious leaders in developing a curriculum that is relevant and adaptive to the needs of the times (Solich, 2025). Although Islamic boarding schools are known for their classical learning systems such as *halaqah*, *sorogan*, and *bandongan*, the essence of these methods can still be contextualized with a more participatory modern educational approach. Visionary clerics are able to integrate Islamic scholarly traditions with 21st-century competencies, such as digital literacy, critical thinking, and social skills. Thus, santri not only master religious knowledge, but also have the adaptive skills needed to face the dynamics of modern society. The quality orientation of *pesantren* education cannot be limited to academic aspects alone, but also to the development of santri's potential, character, and independence so that they are empowered and productive amid complex social changes.

In addition, *kiai* also play a role in building a structured and sustainable character building system. Character education in Islamic boarding schools does not stop at teaching moral theory, but is realized in the form of habits, role models, and continuous supervision (Ghofururrohm, 2025). Through daily activities such as congregational prayers, book studies, mutual cooperation, and social activities, students learn to internalize Islamic values in their behavior. In terms of enforcing discipline, well-managed Islamic boarding schools avoid repressive approaches or physical violence, emphasizing instead educational and restorative approaches that aim to nurture rather than punish. The *kiai* plays a major role in building an institutional culture that upholds the values of compassion, justice, and moral responsibility, so that the authority they possess does not turn into an abuse of power (Makmun, 2021).

In an institutional context, the quality of pesantren education will improve if the leadership of the kiai is able to foster a culture of collaboration. Collaboration between pesantren and families, the government, non-governmental organizations, and industry is essential to strengthen the education system and empower santri (Iin & Sany, 2025). External support can assist Islamic boarding schools in developing applied curricula, training teachers, providing learning facilities, and implementing community service programs. However, such collaboration must remain grounded in Islamic values so that the identity of Islamic boarding schools is not diminished by pragmatic or commercial interests. Kiai who have adaptive skills and extensive social networks are usually able to navigate these relationships wisely, keeping Islamic boarding schools independent but open to progress (Syahputra, 2025).

The strength of the pesantren education system lies in its learning spirit based on *ta'allum*, which is a learning process that integrates cognitive, affective, and spiritual aspects in a holistic manner. In *ta'allum*, students not only learn to acquire knowledge, but also to become individuals who are knowledgeable, civilized, and committed to the truth. Through direct interaction with the kiai, students undergo a transformative educational process, where knowledge is not only understood rationally, but also internalized as a path of devotion to Allah (Gumelar, 2025). Thus, pesantren education not only produces intellectually intelligent individuals, but also morally and spiritually mature ones. If this system continues to be developed professionally and with a focus on humanity, pesantren will remain a moral bastion and center for character building in the midst of globalization, which increasingly erodes spiritual and humanitarian values.

In the context of globalization, the holistic approach of pesantren education has become increasingly urgent. The tide of globalization, marked by advances in information technology, cultural openness, and shifting social values, has had a significant impact on the way young people think and behave. Globalization not only accelerates the exchange of knowledge and technology, but also poses challenges in the form of cultural identity erosion and weakening moral values due to the penetration of foreign cultures that are not in line with Islamic values.

In facing these conditions, Islamic boarding schools have a strategic position as moral bastions and guardians of national cultural values. Values such as sincerity, simplicity, independence, and togetherness, which have become part of the pesantren culture, serve as a filter against the negative influences of globalization. Through the internalization of these values, santri are shaped to not only be intellectually intelligent, but also to have moral and spiritual resilience in facing the changes of the times (Ramadhani, 2025).

In the modern context, Islamic boarding schools face a dialectical challenge between preserving tradition and demands for more egalitarian Islamic moral reform (Fajriani et al., 2024). The authority of the kiai as a central figure who has long been a source of scientific, moral, and spiritual legitimacy is now in an increasingly complex position. The paternalistic tradition of leadership often places the kiai as the sole source of truth in all aspects of pesantren life. However, from an Islamic perspective, ideal leadership should be based on the principles of *syura* (consultation), *'adl* (justice), and *amanah* (responsibility), which emphasize transparency and participation (Zahroh & Fahmi, 2025). When the authority of religious leaders is exercised absolutely without room for dialogue, there is potential for deviation from Islamic values themselves, namely when authority turns into domination, and respect shifts to a cult of personality.

This condition is evident in a number of cases that show abuse of authority in pesantren-based educational environments. This phenomenon is not merely an individual moral problem, but rather indicates the existence of an authority structure that is not fully in line with Islamic values that emphasize justice and protection of human dignity (Muhson, 2023). Cases such as the one that occurred in Bandung, involving the abuse of power by a boarding school leader, paint a picture of a crisis of ethics and oversight in institutions that are supposed to serve as moral bastions for society. This case has raised public awareness that traditional charisma-based systems without accountability mechanisms can give rise to a form of "pathological authority," in which the position of kiai, who should be a moral role model, is instead abused for personal gain. This serves as a warning that the tradition of pesantren authority needs to be reformulated so that it remains rooted in Islamic teachings, but is also adaptive to the values of social justice and human rights.

Contemporary phenomena show a shift in fundamental values in the pesantren world, accompanied by the emergence of authority abuse by a small number of pesantren leaders. This condition reflects the paradox between the noble values of Islamic education based on morals, compassion, and exemplary behavior, and authoritarian behavior that actually contradicts Islamic moral principles. In this context, the tradition of santri's respect for kiai as central figures in pesantren is often misinterpreted, developing into a form of absolute obedience that negates critical space and moral accountability.

Several actual cases reinforce this reality. For example, a report from RRI.co.id (2023) revealed an incident in Aceh where the wife of a boarding school leader with the initials *NN* committed an act of violence against a santri by pouring chili water on the victim's body as a form of disciplinary punishment. This act caused serious physical injury and drew public criticism because it was not in line with the value of *ta'dib* (moral education) which is the spirit of Islamic boarding schools. A similar case was also reported by Detik.com (2023) in Palopo, South Sulawesi, when a boarding school leader with the initials *Prof. S* slapped a student in the mosque after dawn prayers simply because the student did not greet him. This action demonstrates an excessive power dynamic and reflects a distortion of the concept of respect in the tradition of *ta'dzim al-'alim* (respect for teachers).

Even more concerning, a report from RRI.co.id (2024) in West Lombok revealed a case of sexual violence committed by the head of an Islamic boarding school foundation against more than 20 female students, under the pretext of "giving blessings" so that they would give birth to pious children and guardians. Cases such as these demonstrate a very serious form of abuse of authority, in which the spiritual and symbolic legitimacy of a kiai is used to justify actions that clearly contradict the principles of Islamic law and universal human values. These phenomena indicate a crisis of moral authority in some Islamic boarding schools. The tradition of respect, which should serve as a means of transmitting knowledge and shaping character, has the potential to become a tool of domination that suppresses freedom of thought and undermines the integrity of Islamic educational institutions. Therefore, it is necessary to re-examine the educational authority of Islamic boarding schools, namely by reviewing the position, role, and limits of the kiai's authority so that the scientific and moral traditions of Islamic boarding schools are maintained amid the challenges of digital domination and the tide of modernity that demands transparency, accountability, and humanization in Islamic educational practices.

From a philosophical perspective, the relationship between kiai and santri is actually built on the principles of *ta'dzim* and *ukhuwah ilmiyyah*, not a relationship of domination or moral feudalism. Nurcholish Madjid (1997) emphasizes that religious authority in Islam is moral, not structural, because every individual has the same position before Allah, as stated in QS. *Al-Hujurat* [49]:13 that human dignity is determined by piety, not by social status or religious position. In this context, Islamic boarding schools should be spaces for spiritual and intellectual liberation, not institutions that reinforce power hierarchies in the name of sacredness.

Azyumardi Azra (2002) adding that the legitimacy of a kiai stems from *knowledge*, *moral exemplarity*, and *service to the people*, not from symbolism or individual cults. When the authority of the kiai shifts to a form of absolute power that demands uncritical obedience, then the pesantren loses its main essence as an institution for the formation of Islamic *manners* and civilization. This is in line with the view of Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur), who assessed that Islamic boarding schools are a representation of an autonomous Islamic *civil society* rooted in egalitarian values, so that any form of abuse of authority is actually a betrayal of the spirit of the pesantren itself.

From a normative perspective, the Prophet Muhammad emphasized that leadership is a trust, not a privilege. In a hadith narrated by Muslim, it is stated, "*Each of you is a leader, and every leader will be held accountable for his leadership.*" This principle forms the moral basis that the spiritual authority of a kiai is not unlimited power, but rather a responsibility to uphold justice, compassion, and exemplary behavior (*uswah hasanah*). When this trust is abused, it is not only the dignity of the individual that is damaged, but also the credibility of the religious institution that shelters them. In the context of the digital age, this challenge has become increasingly complex. Social media has opened up a space for public transparency, where the behavior of clerics and Islamic boarding schools can now be widely accessed and monitored. This situation demands a repositioning of moral authority from a closed and traditional form to one that is more accountable, dialogical, and oriented

towards universal Islamic values. As emphasized Fazlurrahman, (2018) Religious authority in Islam must be constantly revitalized through moral *ijtihad* that is relevant to the dynamics of the times without losing the roots of revelatory tradition.

In a broader context, globalization and digital domination have accelerated changes in the structure of religious authority in Muslim societies. The digital space presents new forms of religious legitimacy that are more open and participatory. The emergence of “digital scholars,” “media kiai,” and online da'wah platforms allows access to a variety of scholarly authorities outside the traditional pesantren authority. This phenomenon shows a paradigm shift: religious authority is no longer monopolized by a single figure, but is the result of horizontal and open social interaction. On the other hand, this also poses new challenges, such as a flood of religious information without clear epistemic authority, the emergence of instant ustadz, and digital radicalization. Thus, Islamic boarding schools need to *re-examine* their authority systems, not by abolishing traditions, but by revitalizing the Islamic values that form their foundation. The tradition of kiai leadership needs to be reinterpreted within the framework of Islamic morality that is contextual, humanistic, and participatory. The principle of *shura* can be used as a basis for creating accountable collective leadership, while the value of *amanah* can be translated into a more transparent internal monitoring and regulatory system for Islamic boarding schools. Islamic boarding schools can also utilize digital space to strengthen their moral role, not merely as an authority on knowledge, but as a center for ethical guidance in an era marked by information disruption.

By reconstructing the relationship between tradition, morality, and digitality, Islamic boarding schools can maintain the authenticity of their role as guardians of classical Islamic heritage while also becoming educational institutions that are relevant to the challenges of the times. The dialectic between traditional authority and digital modernity is not a contradiction, but rather an opportunity to strengthen the integrity and vitality of Islamic boarding schools amid the globalization of values and information.

CONCLUSION

Pesantren are Islamic educational institutions with strong roots in scholarly tradition and spiritual values. The culture of *ta'dzim lil 'alim* (respect for scholars), the *ta'allum* system (learning system), and a lifestyle based on morality are characteristics that distinguish them from other educational institutions. These values shape the character of santri (students) to be moral, knowledgeable, and socially responsible. In recent developments, modernization and digital domination have posed serious challenges to the moral authority and social legitimacy of pesantren. Several abuses of power that have occurred in some pesantren indicate the need for reform in governance and leadership patterns in order to remain in line with the principles of justice and Islamic ethics. Authority cannot be based solely on charisma, but must be based on integrity, trustworthiness, and moral accountability as taught by the Prophet Muhammad.

On the other hand, digital transformation opens up new opportunities for the development of adaptive technology-based education systems without eroding the noble values of Islamic boarding schools. Revitalizing the culture of learning, exemplary behavior, and leadership based on morals is key to ensuring that Islamic boarding schools remain trusted by the public and capable of producing knowledgeable, moral generations who are ready to face global challenges. Therefore, Islamic boarding schools need to solidify their position as institutions that balance tradition, morality, and digital innovation, so that they remain an important pillar in building a dignified and progressive Islamic civilization.

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