

Transformational Leadership of the Kyai in Developing Santri with Integrity at Miftahul Ulum Islamic Boarding School, Ngantang, Malang Regency

Abi Khairudin¹, Ahmad Barizi²,

¹ Universitas Islam Negeri Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang, kaa33001@gmail.com

² Universitas Islam Negeri Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang, abarizimdr@uin-malang.ac.id

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Leadership of the kyai, Traditional values, Modern knowledge, Digital era

Article history:

Received 2025-08-08

Revised 2025-09-06

Accepted 2025-10-07

ABSTRACT

The digital era presents new challenges for Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) in shaping the character of their students (santri). As both spiritual and intellectual leaders, kyai are required to integrate traditional pesantren values with modern knowledge. This article aims to examine the leadership strategies of kyai in transforming the character of santri so that they remain rooted in Islamic values while being adaptive to contemporary developments. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, data were collected through observations, in-depth interviews, and document studies at pesantren that have adopted collaborative approaches. The findings reveal that visionary, communicative, and participatory leadership by kyai is key to shaping santri who are ethical, critical, and technologically literate. The integration of traditional values with modern knowledge is carried out through curriculum enhancement, habituation of adab (Islamic etiquette), and the use of technology as a medium for preaching and education. This study recommends strengthening the kyai's capacity in digital literacy and developing adaptive leadership models within the pesantren environment.

This is an open access article under the [CC BY-NC-SA](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/) license.



Corresponding Author:

Abi Khairuddin

Universitas Islam Negeri Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang, kaa33001@gmail.com

1. INTRODUCTION

Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) are the oldest and most distinctive Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia. They not only serve as centers for religious learning but also function as moral fortresses and places for character development among the younger generation of Muslims (Zarkasyi, 2018). For centuries, pesantren have played a vital role in instilling moderate, tolerant Islamic values deeply rooted in a strong tradition of scholarship (Nasution, 2019). Within the pesantren structure, the kyai occupies a highly strategic and respected position—not only as an educator but also as a spiritual guide, moral leader, and a central figure in the social life of the

surrounding community. The kyai's exemplary conduct, charisma, and integrity make him the primary role model for santri in shaping their personality and character.

The kyai does not only lead in academic or religious matters but also plays a critical role in shaping the mindsets, attitudes, and behaviors of the students. In this context, the kyai serves as a moral and cultural leader whose presence cannot be replaced by any formal institution (Syamsuddin, 2018). However, with the advent of the digital era, characterized by the rapid advancement of information technology, the globalization of values, and the flood of cross-cultural communication, the role and responsibilities of the kyai have become significantly more complex. Today, santri are no longer confined to the pesantren environment; rather, they are directly connected to the outside world through digital devices they access daily (Rahmat, 2023).

The education sector, including pesantren, now faces new realities marked by the rapid development of information technology, value globalization, and shifting mindsets and lifestyles among the younger generation. Unlimited access to information, massive use of social media, and the strong influence of foreign cultures have transformed the ways santri think, interact, and learn (Wahyudi, 2023). In such a context, character education methods that rely solely on traditional approaches have become insufficient. A more dynamic and contextual approach is required—one that responds to the demands of the times without compromising the core values of pesantren (Fauzi, 2020).

Nevertheless, foundational values long upheld in pesantren traditions—such as sincerity in learning and practicing, humility in attitude, discipline in worship, and honesty in behavior—remain relevant and are even more needed amid the moral crisis afflicting modern society (Mujiburrahman, 2020). The challenge lies in how to effectively transform and internalize these values within santri whose lives are now deeply intertwined with the digital world. This is where the leadership role of the kyai becomes crucial (Rosyadi, 2021).

The kyai is required not only to serve as a guardian of tradition but also as an agent of change capable of bridging traditional values with modern knowledge and technology (Syaifulloh, 2021). Open, participatory, and transformational leadership by the kyai is key to ensuring pesantren remain relevant and able to thrive in this disruptive era. A visionary kyai does not merely preserve classical scholarly legacies but is also able to formulate creative and adaptive educational strategies. These include managing the curriculum, utilizing digital technology as a learning medium, and fostering a learning culture that remains grounded in Islamic values (Bahri, 2022).

Based on this background, this study aims to provide an in-depth description of the kyai's leadership strategies in transforming the character of santri through an approach that integrates the strengths of pesantren tradition with modern knowledge. This study is significant not only as a scholarly contribution to the development of Islamic educational leadership theory but also as a practical foundation for pesantren administrators in formulating strategic steps to ensure that pesantren remain sustainable, adaptive, and highly competitive amid the currents of globalization and digitalization—without losing their identity and core values that have stood the test of time (Asmuni, 2021).

2. METHODS

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach using a case study method. The researcher adopted a qualitative approach with descriptive methods. The research was conducted at Miftahul Ulum Islamic Boarding School (Ponpes), Ngantang, Malang Regency, East Java. Data collection techniques included interviews, report notes, documents, and other relevant sources. To ensure data validity, credibility testing was carried out. Credibility was tested through source triangulation, in which the researcher compared data obtained from one informant with that from other informants. The subjects of this study included the caregivers and individuals involved in Miftahul Ulum Islamic Boarding School, Ngantang, Malang Regency.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 *The Central Role of the Kyai in Traditional Islamic Boarding Schools*

In Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*), the *kyai* serves not only as a teacher but also as a spiritual, moral, and social leader. This role gives the *kyai* full authority in shaping the culture of the *pesantren*, including in guiding the character development of the *santri* (students). In the context of character transformation, the *kyai* plays a key role as a role model, exemplifying values in areas such as morality, worship, and social behavior. In a qualitative study conducted through in-depth interviews with the *pesantren* caregiver, Mr. Imam Asy'ari, it was revealed that *santri* character is formed through direct habituation, moral reinforcement, and daily spiritual interactions embedded in *pesantren* life.

3.2 *Kyai's Leadership Strategy: Collaborative and Transformational*

The *kyai* practices transformational leadership by inspiring *santri* through personal example and by providing a forward-looking vision emphasizing the importance of knowledge and moral character. In addition, the *kyai* also implements collaborative leadership by creating space for dialogue with teachers (*ustadz*) to improve the quality of *pesantren* education. The identified strategies include:

- a. Internalizing Islamic values through the study of classical religious texts (*kitab kuning*).
- b. Empowering *santri* through programs of collective responsibility, such as community service (*khidmat*) and Qur'an memorization (*tahfidz*).
- c. Updating learning methods by incorporating a modern curriculum, including technology-based digital learning.

Mr. Imam Asy'ari, as the caregiver at the traditional *pesantren*, demonstrated collaborative leadership when designing a community service program—specifically, a Qur'an literacy training for nearby villagers. In the planning process, he did not make decisions unilaterally, but rather invited *ustadz* and *ustadzah* (male and female teachers) to hold a joint discussion. He listened to various suggestions and ideas, including those from the teachers. After discussing all aspects, the *kyai* made decisions that reflected collective consensus. He then assigned roles fairly and continued to monitor implementation without being domineering. Through this approach, the *kyai* provided a clear example that good leadership prioritizes cooperation, mutual respect for opinions, and shared responsibility.

Mr. Imam Asy'ari also exhibited transformational leadership when observing a decline in senior *santri*'s interest in studying the *kitab kuning* and the Qur'an. Instead of scolding them directly, he offered encouraging advice about the importance of classical Islamic texts as a scholarly heritage. To reignite motivation, he shared stories of past scholars who diligently pursued knowledge.

3.3 *Collaboration Between Traditional Values and Modern Knowledge*

Character transformation is not achieved solely through traditional approaches. The *kyai* strategically combines classical Islamic values such as *ta'dzim* (respect), *tawadhu'* (humility), and *ukhuwah* (brotherhood) with modern knowledge through:

- a. The use of digital technology in the learning process, such as utilizing social media for *dakwah* (Islamic outreach).
- b. Kegiatan diskusi ilmiah yang Scientific discussions addressing contemporary issues within the framework of Islamic values.
- c. The promotion of digital literacy without neglecting *pesantren* etiquette (*adab*).

This collaboration creates a balance between preserving the noble values of the *pesantren* and preparing *santri* to face modern challenges. *Santri* are not only taught to understand Islamic teachings

textually but also contextually. They become more adaptable to modern society while continuing to uphold strong ethical and moral principles.

Mr. Imam Asy'ari, a *kyai* at the *pesantren*, integrates traditional values with modern knowledge in educating his students. Every morning, he instills the habit of reading classical Islamic texts (*kitab kuning*) to cultivate humility and respect for knowledge. Afterward, he facilitates discussions on current issues such as ethics in social media and the Islamic rulings related to online commerce.

3.4 Transformation Outcomes: Excellent and Modern Character

Based on observations and interviews, it was found that santri who underwent education under the *kyai*'s leadership strategy demonstrated the following characteristics:

- a. A high level of discipline and independence in their daily lives.
- b. Critical thinking paired with courteous behavior, resulting from the integration of scientific reasoning and noble character (*akhlakul karimah*).
- c. Moderation (*tawasuth*) in responding to differences, which serves as a key trait of santri shaped through the collaboration of traditional and modern values.

3.5 Challenges and Efforts of the Kyai in the Transformation Process

Character transformation does not come without challenges. Among them are:

- a. Sociocultural shifts among santri, particularly those from urban backgrounds.
- b. A lack of teaching staff who are adaptive to the development of educational technology.
- c. Limited external funding (financial assistance) for the *pesantren*.

However, the *kyai* has managed to overcome these challenges through:

- a. Strengthening *uswah hasanah* (exemplary behavior and role modeling).
- b. Enhancing the capacity of *ustadz* through digital literacy training.
- c. Enforcing discipline and noble values through a humanistic approach.

CONCLUSION

The leadership of the *kyai* in Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) plays a central role in shaping and transforming the character of santri. Amid the currents of globalization, digitalization, and shifting sociocultural values, the *kyai* functions not only as a spiritual leader and religious educator but also as a strategic agent of change. Through a transformational and collaborative leadership approach, the *kyai* successfully integrates values such as sincerity, discipline, and humility (*tawadhu'*) with modern education approaches based on technology and digital literacy. This strategy has proven effective in developing santri who are not only religious and morally upright but also adaptive, critical, and moderate in responding to contemporary challenges.

The *kyai*'s role as a primary role model in the daily lives of santri is a key factor in the success of this process. Thus, the *kyai*'s leadership strategy—synergizing the strengths of *pesantren* traditions with modern knowledge—not only reinforces the existence and relevance of the *pesantren* institution but also ensures the emergence of a generation of Muslims who are of strong character, knowledgeable, and ready to contribute positively to society, the nation, and the state.

REFERENCES

- Asmuni. (2021). *Islamic Educational Leadership: Models and Practices in Traditional Pesantren*. Jakarta: Prenadamedia Group.
- Bahri, S. (2022). "Character Education Based on Pesantren Traditions and the Challenges of Digitalization." *Jurnal Islamika Indonesia*, 13(2), 87–102.
- Fauzi, I. (2020). "Revitalizing Pesantren Values in Facing the Challenges of Globalization." *Journal of Islamic Education*, 9(1), 51–67.

- Mujiburrahman, A. (2020). "The Transformation of Kyai Leadership in Salaf Pesantren in the Digital Era." *Journal of Islamic Religious Education*, 15(2), 123–140.
- Nasution, H. (2019). "The Role of the Kyai in Shaping Santri Character: An Islamic Education Perspective." *Tarbawi: Journal of Educational Sciences*, 6(1), 33–49.
- Rahmat, M. (2023). *Islamic Education in the Digital Era: Opportunities and Challenges*. Bandung: CV Widina Bhakti Persada.
- Rosyadi, S. (2021). "Islamic Education Strategies in Facing Digital Disruption in Pesantren Institutions." *Journal of Islamic Da'wah and Communication*, 5(2), 91–107.
- Syamsuddin, A. (2018). "The Kyai as an Agent of Change in Social and Educational Transformation." *Journal of Religious Social Studies*, 10(1), 15–30.
- Syaifulloh, M. (2021). *Kyai Leadership in Building Santri Character in the Era of the Industrial Revolution 4.0*. Semarang: CV Pilar Nusantara.
- Wahyudi, A. (2023). "The Collaboration of Traditional Values and Technology in Pesantren Education." *Journal of Islamic Education of the Archipelago*, 7(1), 66–79.
- Zarkasyi, H. F. (2018). *Kyai Leadership and Pesantren in the Era of Modernization*. Yogyakarta: UII Press.