

Village Kiai Leadership in Internalizing Character Education Values within Rural Muslim Communities

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the leadership role of village kiai as key actors in instilling character education values within rural communities. This research employed a qualitative method with a descriptive design using a phenomenological approach. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and direct observations to obtain comprehensive and relevant findings. The results reveal that village kiai function not only as religious leaders and educators but also as central figures and mediators in resolving social issues within the community. Their leadership is characterized by religious charisma, spiritual influence, democratic deliberation, and participatory approaches. The primary character values cultivated by village kiai include religiosity, honesty, discipline, independence, responsibility, and consistency in learning. The strategies implemented to instill these values involve habituation, role modeling, motivation, advice, storytelling, and disciplinary measures. Furthermore, the study identifies several challenges faced by village kiai, including deeply rooted cultural traditions, resistance to social change, difficulties in transforming community behavior, the growing influence of digital exposure, and limited governmental support. This study highlights the significant contribution of village kiai leadership to strengthening character education and social cohesion in rural Muslim communities.

Keywords: Village Kiai Leadership, Character Education, Religious Leadership, Rural Muslim Communities

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INTRODUCTION

Many muslim communities continue to experience significant social transformations resulting from modernization, digital communication, urban migration, and changing patterns of religious authority. These transformations impact how religious values, social ethics, and communal identity are maintained in village life (Muhammad et al., 2021; Rohmah et al., 2023). Younger generations are increasingly exposed to modern lifestyles that often prioritize individualism over collective morality, creating challenges for the preservation of traditional Islamic values (Musaddad, 2023; Nisa' et al., 2024; Nursanty & Wulandari, 2023). At the same time, formal religious institutions are not always able to address everyday social conflicts and moral issues at the grassroots level. In this context, village kiai remain influential figures, providing spiritual guidance, moral direction, and social mediation directly within the community. However, contemporary social realities indicate that the role of village kiai is gradually shifting due to the expansion of the formal education system and digital religious authority (Marzuki, 2023; Nursetialloh, 2023; Sadiah, 2022). This situation creates tension between the theoretical assumption that traditional religious

leadership is declining and the empirical reality that local kiai still retain strong influence in many rural communities. Therefore, the sustainability of village kiai as moral leaders is a significant social phenomenon that requires further in-depth academic investigation.

Studies on Islamic leadership generally describe religious authority as an important element in shaping communal morality and social solidarity within Muslim societies. Classical sociological theories explain that religious leaders function not only as spiritual guides but also as social actors who maintain collective values and normative order within society (Aini et al., 2021; Baykal, 2020; Taufiq, 2021). Several scholars argue that charismatic religious leadership emerges through public trust, ethical consistency, and social engagement rather than institutional power alone (Akrim & Umiarso, 2023; Alam, 2020; Wahab et al., 2024). In the context of Islamic communities, kiai are frequently associated with pesantren leadership, religious teaching, and community empowerment activities. Previous studies also emphasize that religious leaders contribute significantly to conflict resolution, moral education, and the preservation of cultural traditions in rural settings (Fatimah et al., 2020; Illah et al., 2022). However, much of the existing literature focuses predominantly on formal Islamic institutions such as pesantren, Islamic schools, or large religious organizations. As a result, limited attention has been given to village kiai who operate informally within local community structures.

Unlike urban religious environments characterized by institutional complexity and digital influence, rural communities continue to rely heavily on direct interpersonal relationships and localized moral authority (Jami & Muharam, 2022; Kim, 2023). The kiai are not merely religious instructors but also advisors, mediators, and cultural guardians whose presence influences everyday communal practices. Religious teachings are often transmitted through informal gatherings, routine prayers, and oral communication that integrate spiritual values into daily social interaction (Lestari et al., 2023; Sumbulah et al., 2022; Yuliasih, 2023). This context creates a unique social environment in which religious leadership is deeply embedded within local cultural traditions and communal relationships. At the same time, rural communities are increasingly exposed to external social influences through migration, social media, and modernization, which may challenge traditional patterns of authority and value transmission. The coexistence between traditional religious practices and contemporary social changes therefore creates a dynamic field for examining the persistence of village kiai leadership.

Exemplary moral leadership refers to the ethical behavior and practical actions demonstrated by kiai (Islamic scholars) as role models for community members. Informal religious education emphasizes non-institutional learning processes conducted through oral traditions, regular religious gatherings, and interpersonal guidance (Soenjoto, 2022; Sulistyono et al., 2023; Zayadi, 2023). Religious mediation focuses on the role of village kiai in resolving social tensions, fostering reconciliation, and maintaining social harmony within the village environment (Ali & Fachrizal Halim, 2023; Dinanti & Ismiyana, 2023). This study does not examine formal pesantren management or political religious authority, but rather concentrates on the informal social influence of kiai in community-based interactions. The study also limits its analysis to rural Muslim communities because patterns of social relations and religious authority in villages differ significantly from urban contexts. By narrowing the scope to these dimensions, this study aims to generate a deeper understanding of how informal religious leadership operates within local cultural structures.

Pesantren kiai play an important role in shaping students' moral discipline through exemplary behavior and spiritual guidance (Futaqi & Mashuri, 2022; Sulaiman et al., 2024). Maryati (2023) demonstrated that informal religious gatherings contribute significantly to preserving Islamic traditions in rural communities. Alam (2020) explained that charismatic religious authority emerges

from ethical consistency and close interaction with society. The role of religious leaders in maintaining social harmony through mediation and persuasive communication (Fatimah et al., 2020; Kim, 2023). Rusyana et al. (2023) examined community-based Islamic education and concluded that oral traditions remain effective in transmitting religious values across generations. Utama and Akbar (2023) argued that local religious leaders strengthen communal solidarity through inclusive social participation. Kurniawan and Nurdin (2023) emphasized that rural Islamic leadership remains influential because it is rooted in cultural legitimacy and emotional trust. Although these studies provide valuable insights, most research focuses on formal pesantren leadership, Islamic educational institutions, or general religious authority. Limited studies specifically analyze village kiai as informal social actors who simultaneously function as moral exemplars, educators, and mediators within rural communities.

The research gap in this study emerges from the limited scholarly attention toward the informal and multidimensional roles of village kiai within contemporary rural Muslim communities. Existing studies generally examine religious leadership through institutional perspectives, emphasizing pesantren management, formal Islamic education, or organizational religious authority. Consequently, the everyday social functions of village kiai as moral exemplars, informal educators, and conflict mediators remain underexplored. Furthermore, contemporary theories often predict the weakening of traditional religious authority due to modernization and digitalization, yet empirical realities in many villages indicate the continuing influence of local kiai. This contradiction between theoretical assumptions and social realities highlights the need for contextual investigation. The novelty of this study therefore lies in its integrated analysis of exemplary moral leadership, informal religious education, and religious mediation as interconnected forms of informal Islamic leadership.

This study aims to investigate the multidimensional role of village kiai within rural Muslim communities in Bajuran and Tlogosari. The research specifically seeks to understand how village kiai internalize character values through exemplary moral leadership, how they transmit Islamic teachings through informal religious education, and how they maintain social cohesion through religious mediation. These objectives are questions how do village kiai practice exemplary moral leadership in shaping communal character values within rural Muslim communities? These questions are designed to explore the relationship between religious authority, social interaction, and communal stability in rural contexts. The study also seeks to identify the underlying social structures that sustain the legitimacy and influence of village kiai amid contemporary social change. Therefore, the research focuses on understanding informal Islamic leadership as a socially embedded process closely connected to local culture and everyday communal experience.

This study argues that the enduring influence of village kiai within rural Muslim communities is sustained through the integration of moral exemplarity, informal religious education, and culturally rooted mediation practices. The study further assumes that informal religious leadership remains socially relevant because it directly addresses the moral, spiritual, and relational needs of rural society. Practically, the findings are expected to provide insights for strengthening community-based religious leadership as a resource for social harmony and moral development in rural areas. The originality of this study lies in its focus on village kiai as multidimensional social actors who simultaneously function as educators, moral exemplars, and mediators within local community life. Consequently, this research expands existing discussions on Islamic leadership by emphasizing the dynamic and socially embedded character of informal religious authority in contemporary rural Muslim communities.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study focuses on the multidimensional role of village kiai within rural Muslim communities in Bajuran and Tlogosari. The unit of analysis in this research consists of social interactions, religious activities, moral practices, and mediation processes carried out by village kiai within everyday communal life. The study specifically examines how village kiai function as exemplary moral leaders, informal religious educators, and mediators in resolving social conflicts among villagers. The research locations were selected because both villages maintain strong Islamic cultural traditions while simultaneously experiencing contemporary social changes influenced by modernization and digital communication. The main social activities observed in this study include congregational prayers, routine religious learning after Maghrib prayer, informal discussions between kiai and villagers, and mediation sessions involving social disputes among community members. In addition, the study also analyzes oral traditions, community gatherings, and persuasive religious communication as cultural artifacts that reflect the social influence of village kiai.

This research employs a qualitative approach using a case study design to explore deeply the social and religious roles of village kiai within their natural community setting. The qualitative approach was selected because the study aims to understand meanings, experiences, values, and social interactions related to informal Islamic leadership in rural communities (Stanley, 2023). The case study design allows the researcher to investigate the phenomenon comprehensively within its real-life context, particularly regarding the interaction between religious authority, social cohesion, and community culture. The study also applies a sociological and religious perspective to analyze how village kiai construct moral legitimacy and maintain social influence through daily interaction with villagers. The qualitative design provides flexibility for exploring complex social realities, including symbolic communication, communal trust, and local cultural practices. Furthermore, the research adopts a naturalistic inquiry process in which data are collected directly from field settings without manipulating social conditions. The case study design is therefore considered appropriate because it enables detailed exploration of specific social phenomena occurring in Bajuran and Tlogosari communities.

The sources of information in this study consist of primary and secondary data obtained from various participants and textual materials related to village religious life. Primary information was collected from village kiai, community leaders, parents, youth members, and local residents who actively participate in religious and social activities within the villages. Informants were selected purposively based on their involvement, experience, and understanding of the role of village kiai within communal life. Secondary data were obtained from village documents, religious activity records, field notes, and relevant literature discussing Islamic leadership and rural Muslim communities. Data collection techniques included desk review, participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation analysis. Observations were conducted during congregational prayers, religious learning activities, and community discussions to examine patterns of interaction and moral practices directly. Interviews were guided using flexible interview protocols to allow informants to explain their experiences and perspectives openly. Documentation techniques were also employed to support the validity of observational and interview findings. The following matrix summarizes the data collection process used in this study (see Table 1).

Table 1. Matrix Data Collection

Data Source	Technique	Instrument	Focus of Data
Village Kiai	Interview	Interview guideline	Moral leadership and mediation
Community Members	Observation	Observation sheet	Social interaction and religious practices
Youth and Parents	Interview	Semi-structured questions	Informal religious education
Village Documents	Desk Review	Documentation checklist	Religious activities and social programs

The data analysis process in this study follows the interactive model developed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana, consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion verification (Furidha, 2024). Data reduction was conducted by selecting, categorizing, and simplifying field information related to exemplary moral leadership, informal religious education, and religious mediation. During this stage, the researcher identified important themes, recurring patterns, and significant social interactions relevant to the research objectives. The second stage involved data display, in which findings from observations, interviews, and documentation were organized systematically through narrative descriptions, thematic classifications, and matrices to facilitate interpretation. The final stage consisted of conclusion drawing and verification, where interpretations were continuously evaluated by comparing different data sources and validating findings through triangulation techniques.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Exemplary Moral Leadership in the Internalization of Character Values

The first finding of this study reveals that village kiai demonstrate exemplary moral leadership in the internalization of character values within rural Muslim communities. Their leadership is not merely constructed through formal authority, but rather through everyday moral practices that are consistently observed by community members. In Bajuran and Tlogosari, the kiai become moral references because they embody Islamic ethical principles in practical social interactions. The community perceives them as figures whose actions align with religious teachings, thereby strengthening public trust and social influence. Their consistency in attending congregational prayers, maintaining humility, and interacting respectfully with villagers reflects a model of leadership grounded in sincerity and simplicity. This form of leadership influences community behavior because villagers learn moral values not through coercion but through direct observation of exemplary conduct. The kiai's moral authority also transcends age and social class, allowing them to become role models for children, youth, and elderly residents alike.

Observational data collected during the research process showed that the moral leadership of village kiai was reflected through routine and spontaneous social behavior. In Bajuran, the kiai consistently attended all five daily prayers in the mosque and often arrived earlier than other congregants. This behavior indirectly encouraged villagers to participate more actively in communal worship. Researchers also observed that the kiai personally cleaned the mushollah environment without delegating the task to others, demonstrating humility and responsibility in daily life. In Tlogosari, the kiai frequently interacted with young people in informal discussions after evening prayers, creating a friendly and inclusive atmosphere that minimized social distance between religious leaders and villagers. During community gatherings, the kiai listened attentively to residents' concerns without displaying judgmental attitudes, which strengthened emotional closeness and social trust. Observations further indicated that the kiai adapted their communication style according to the audience, especially when engaging younger generations through more communicative language and accessible religious explanations.

The findings regarding exemplary moral leadership can be summarized in the following table to illustrate the dimensions of character values demonstrated by village kiai in Bajuran and Tlogosari communities. The table shows that moral leadership is manifested through practical actions closely connected to religious devotion and social interaction. Consistency is reflected through regular attendance at congregational prayers and disciplined religious teaching schedules. Humility appears through simple acts such as cleaning worship places independently and listening to community members without prejudice. Social inclusiveness is demonstrated through equal

treatment toward all villagers regardless of age or social background, while adaptive leadership is reflected in the preservation of oral traditions combined with communicative approaches suitable for contemporary society. Responsibility is also evident through the kiai's role in promoting cleanliness and delivering persuasive moral advice rather than authoritarian instructions. Moreover, inclusiveness is strengthened through their openness toward all community groups and their ability to establish close relationships with young people. The Table 2 indicates that moral leadership among village kiai is multidimensional because it combines spiritual devotion, ethical behavior, social engagement, and adaptive communication strategies.

Table 2. Character Values in Leadership

Character Values	Bajuran and Tlogosari Practices
Consistency	Attending five daily prayers regularly
Humility	Cleaning the mushollah independently
Social Awareness	Treating all villagers equally
Adaptiveness	Combining oral traditions with communicative methods
Responsibility	Promoting cleanliness and persuasive advice
Inclusiveness	Becoming companions for younger generations

The findings reaffirm that exemplary moral leadership constitutes the central foundation of character education in rural Muslim communities. Unlike formal educational institutions that rely on structured curricula, the village kiai cultivate character values through lived experiences and visible ethical behavior. The interpretation of this finding suggests that moral influence becomes more effective when values are demonstrated through habitual practices rather than verbal instruction alone. Community members in Bajuran and Tlogosari perceive the kiai as authentic religious figures because their personal conduct reflects the principles they preach publicly. This congruence between words and actions strengthens moral legitimacy and encourages voluntary imitation among villagers. The findings also indicate that the effectiveness of moral leadership is closely related to social proximity. Since the kiai interact directly with villagers in everyday settings, their behavior becomes continuously observable and socially influential. In addition, the adaptive communication patterns employed by the kiai reveal that moral leadership in rural areas is dynamic rather than rigidly traditional.

The village kiai function not merely as religious teachers but as living representations of Islamic ethics whose daily conduct becomes a practical reference for society. Their consistency, humility, inclusiveness, and social responsibility create a moral environment that encourages villagers to adopt similar values in communal life. The study also generalizes that character formation in rural contexts is more effectively achieved through relational and experiential processes rather than through formal instruction alone. The close interaction between kiai and community members allows moral values to be transmitted naturally across generations. Furthermore, the ability of the kiai to adapt communication methods without losing religious authenticity demonstrates the flexibility of local Islamic leadership in responding to social change. This finding suggests that moral authority in rural communities is strongly dependent on integrity and social engagement rather than institutional power.

Informal Religious Education in the Transmission

The informal religious education plays an important role in the transmission of Islamic values and cultural traditions within rural Muslim communities. In Bajuran and Tlogosari, religious learning is conducted through flexible and community-based approaches rather than formal institutional systems. The village kiai act as central educators who provide religious instruction

through oral communication, direct interaction, and routine communal gatherings. This educational process emphasizes moral cultivation and spiritual habituation rather than academic achievement or certification. Religious teachings are commonly delivered after Maghrib prayer using traditional talaqqi methods, where students listen carefully to explanations, memorize prayers, and imitate the recitation demonstrated by the kiai. The learning atmosphere is informal and familial, allowing participants of different ages to engage comfortably in religious activities. Parents are also indirectly involved because they receive advice regarding children’s behavior and religious upbringing from the kiai.

The findings concerning informal religious education can be summarized in the following table, which illustrates the educational characteristics practiced by village kiai in Bajuran and Tlogosari. The educational process relies heavily on oral communication and direct interaction between the kiai and community members. Traditional talaqqi methods remain dominant because they are considered effective for transmitting religious understanding and spiritual discipline. Learning activities are conducted routinely every evening after Maghrib prayer, creating continuity and habitual participation among villagers. Religious values are conveyed through sermons, moral stories, and persuasive verbal reinforcement that emphasize ethical behavior in daily life. Children primarily participate as listeners and memorizers of prayers, while parents become involved informally through personal guidance and moral reminders from the kiai. The educational setting is not restricted by rigid administrative structures, allowing flexibility in participation and interaction. Table 3 indicates that informal religious education functions simultaneously as spiritual learning, social bonding, and cultural preservation. The educational practices developed by village kiai strengthen communal identity while ensuring that Islamic values continue to be transmitted organically across generations within rural Muslim societies.

Table 3. Educational Aspect

Educational Aspect	Bajuran and Tlogosari Practices
Teaching Method	Oral and traditional talaqqi method
Learning Schedule	Conducted routinely after Maghrib prayer
Value Approach	Sermons, moral stories, verbal reinforcement
Children’s Role	Listening and memorizing prayers
Parents’ Involvement	Informal guidance and advice

The findings restate that informal religious education remains a dominant mechanism for transmitting Islamic values within rural Muslim communities. Although formal schools are increasingly accessible, villagers in Bajuran and Tlogosari continue to rely on community-based religious learning as an essential source of moral and spiritual formation. The village kiai become influential educators because they teach religion through direct social interaction and practical guidance rather than standardized institutional methods. Religious learning is embedded within daily communal activities, making it closely connected to the lived experiences of villagers. The findings also reaffirm that oral traditions continue to hold strong relevance because they facilitate emotional closeness between educators and learners. Through repetitive recitation, storytelling, and moral advice, Islamic teachings become easier to internalize and practice in everyday life. Furthermore, the routine nature of religious gatherings creates a collective atmosphere that strengthens communal participation and spiritual discipline. The informal involvement of parents also indicates that religious education is viewed as a shared social responsibility rather than solely an institutional obligation. Therefore, the study restates that informal religious education contributes significantly to sustaining religious continuity, moral awareness, and cultural cohesion within rural Muslim communities.

The interpretation of this finding suggests that informal religious education possesses unique strengths that cannot be fully replaced by formal educational institutions. The absence of rigid bureaucratic structures allows the learning process to remain flexible, contextual, and culturally responsive to community needs. In Bajuran and Tlogosari, the educational relationship between the kiai and villagers is characterized by emotional intimacy and mutual trust, which enhances the effectiveness of value transmission. Unlike formal classrooms that often emphasize cognitive achievement, informal religious education prioritizes moral habituation and spiritual discipline through continuous interaction. The use of oral traditions and storytelling also reflects the persistence of local cultural patterns in preserving Islamic teachings. This finding further indicates that the educational authority of village kiai is rooted in social legitimacy derived from personal integrity and communal engagement. Children and adults alike perceive the kiai not merely as teachers but as moral guardians whose guidance influences daily behavior. Moreover, the participation of parents demonstrates that religious learning extends beyond individual understanding toward collective social responsibility. Therefore, the study interprets informal religious education as a holistic cultural process that integrates spirituality, ethics, family involvement, and community solidarity in shaping religious identity within rural Muslim societies.

The village kiai play a central role in preserving religious traditions through oral teaching methods, routine communal learning, and close interpersonal relationships with villagers. This educational model strengthens moral awareness because learning occurs continuously within everyday social interactions rather than being confined to formal institutions. The findings also suggest that the effectiveness of informal education is closely related to its communal and relational nature. Through repeated participation in religious gatherings, villagers gradually internalize ethical values and spiritual habits that shape collective identity. Furthermore, the involvement of parents and children within the same educational environment reinforces intergenerational continuity and social cohesion. The adaptability of the kiai in communicating religious teachings also ensures that traditional values remain relevant amid changing social conditions.

Religious Mediation and Social Cohesion in Rural Muslim Communities

The kiai are frequently consulted when social tensions emerge among villagers, including neighborhood disputes, family conflicts, organizational disagreements, and land-related issues. Their role as mediators is based on moral authority, spiritual wisdom, and public trust rather than formal legal power. The kiai generally approach conflicts through persuasive dialogue, religious advice, and emotional calming strategies aimed at restoring harmony between disputing parties. Community members perceive them as neutral figures capable of providing fair solutions rooted in Islamic ethical principles. Their mediation process emphasizes reconciliation, forgiveness, and collective peace instead of punishment or confrontation. The findings also indicate that the presence of village kiai contributes significantly to preventing prolonged social division because villagers are more willing to accept resolutions delivered by respected religious figures. Furthermore, the kiai's involvement in conflict mediation reinforces communal solidarity by encouraging mutual understanding and shared responsibility among residents. Therefore, this finding highlights that religious mediation becomes an important social mechanism for maintaining harmony and strengthening social cohesion within rural Muslim societies.

Observational findings revealed that the mediation role of village kiai was actively practiced in everyday social situations within Bajuran and Tlogosari communities. Researchers observed several occasions where villagers visited the kiai's residence after evening prayers to seek advice regarding personal and communal conflicts. During these interactions, the kiai typically listened

carefully to both sides before offering religious guidance and moral reflections. In one observed case involving a dispute between neighboring families, the kiai encouraged both parties to prioritize kinship and avoid prolonged hostility because social harmony was considered more valuable than individual pride. The atmosphere of mediation was calm and informal, often conducted while sharing tea or sitting together in the mosque courtyard, which reduced emotional tension among participants. Researchers also observed that the kiai avoided authoritarian language and instead emphasized empathy, patience, and mutual forgiveness. In community meetings, the kiai frequently reminded residents about the Islamic principles of *ukhuwah* and collective responsibility in maintaining peaceful social relations. These observations indicate that mediation practices are deeply integrated into the social and spiritual life of rural communities.

Interview data further strengthened the findings regarding the mediation role of village kiai in maintaining social cohesion. One resident from Bajuran explained, "When conflicts happen between neighbors, people usually come to the kiai first because his advice is calming and accepted by everyone." Another informant from Tlogosari stated, "The kiai never immediately blames anyone. He listens carefully and reminds us about patience and forgiveness according to Islamic teachings." A youth community member also mentioned, "Young people feel comfortable discussing problems with the kiai because he speaks gently and understands our situation." These interview results indicate that the mediation authority of village kiai is closely connected to emotional trust and moral credibility within society. Informants consistently emphasized the kiai's calm communication style, fairness, and ability to reduce tension without creating humiliation for either party. The interviews also reveal that villagers perceive religious mediation as more culturally acceptable and socially effective compared to formal legal mechanisms, especially for resolving interpersonal conflicts. Furthermore, the kiai's role in advising younger generations demonstrates that religious mediation contributes not only to conflict resolution but also to moral education and social integration. Therefore, interview findings confirm that village kiai serve as important agents of peacebuilding and communal cohesion within rural Muslim communities.

The effectiveness of conflict resolution in rural contexts depends greatly on moral legitimacy and interpersonal trust. Unlike formal legal institutions that emphasize procedural justice, the mediation process conducted by the kiai prioritizes emotional reconciliation and communal stability. Villagers accept the kiai's decisions because they perceive him as a spiritually credible figure who understands both religious principles and local cultural values. The findings also indicate that mediation practices are deeply intertwined with Islamic ethical teachings such as forgiveness, brotherhood, and mutual respect. Through persuasive communication and empathetic dialogue, the kiai successfully transforms potential social tensions into opportunities for strengthening communal relationships. Furthermore, the informal nature of mediation creates a more accessible and less intimidating environment for villagers to express grievances openly. The study interprets this role as evidence that religious leadership in rural communities extends beyond spiritual guidance into broader social functions related to peacebuilding and social integration. Consequently, religious mediation emerges as a culturally rooted strategy for sustaining collective harmony in rural Muslim societies.

The kiai function as trusted mediators whose moral authority enables them to resolve conflicts peacefully through dialogue, religious advice, and emotional reconciliation. Their role is not dependent on formal institutional power but on public respect derived from ethical conduct, spiritual knowledge, and close social relationships with villagers. The study further generalizes that conflict resolution in rural societies is more sustainable when it incorporates cultural values, communal participation, and spiritual considerations. Through mediation practices grounded in Islamic teachings, the kiai strengthen social solidarity while preventing prolonged disputes that

could damage communal harmony. The findings also suggest that religious mediation remains highly relevant in contemporary rural contexts because it provides an accessible, culturally accepted, and emotionally sensitive approach to resolving social tensions.

Discussion

The consistent moral behavior shown by the kiai functions as an informal mechanism of value internalization because community members imitate ethical conduct that is repeatedly observed in daily life. This condition contributes positively to the development of communal discipline, humility, and mutual respect among villagers. The findings indicate that moral leadership rooted in lived experience is more effective than purely formal instruction because villagers perceive the kiai as authentic role models whose behavior aligns with Islamic teachings. Similar studies have shown that exemplary leadership within religious communities strengthens moral awareness and collective responsibility among society members (Nuriyah, 2024; van Lunteren, 2024). In addition, the social closeness between religious leaders and the community increases emotional attachment and trust, enabling moral values to spread more organically through everyday interaction. The function of exemplary leadership is therefore not limited to spiritual guidance but also includes the reinforcement of ethical culture and social cohesion.

The authority of village kiai emerges not merely from religious knowledge but from the visible consistency between their teachings and personal conduct. This alignment creates symbolic trust that strengthens their influence over community behavior. The findings suggest that villagers are more likely to internalize moral values when they observe direct manifestations of humility, discipline, and social responsibility in the actions of respected religious figures. Previous studies also explain that charismatic religious leadership becomes socially influential when leaders demonstrate congruence between normative teachings and practical behavior (Baykal, 2020; Taufiq, 2021). Furthermore, the communal structure of rural society supports continuous observation and interpersonal interaction, allowing the kiai's moral conduct to become embedded within collective social consciousness. The correlation between social proximity and moral authority explains why the influence of village kiai remains strong despite the expansion of modern communication and formal education systems.

The educational activities conducted by village kiai through routine religious gatherings function as a social mechanism that maintains communal spirituality and moral awareness. Through oral teaching methods, storytelling, and direct guidance, villagers receive religious knowledge in ways that are culturally familiar and emotionally engaging. The findings reveal that informal learning environments create stronger interpersonal relationships between educators and learners, thereby encouraging active participation and long-term value internalization. Similar research explains that informal religious education contributes significantly to the preservation of local Islamic traditions and communal identity, especially in rural areas where social interaction remains highly collective (Ellis et al., 2021; Said et al., 2023). Community-based education fosters moral habituation because religious teachings are integrated into everyday practices rather than restricted to formal classroom settings. The function of informal religious education therefore extends beyond cognitive learning toward the formation of ethical behavior and social solidarity.

The structural factors underlying informal religious education are associated with the flexibility, accessibility, and relational nature of community-based learning systems. Unlike formal educational institutions that rely on administrative structures and standardized curricula, informal religious learning emphasizes emotional intimacy and practical moral guidance. The findings suggest that villagers prefer this educational model because it accommodates local cultural traditions and allows direct interaction with respected religious figures. Oral teaching methods such

as talaqqi continue to survive because they reinforce memorization, spiritual discipline, and emotional connection between teachers and learners. Traditional Islamic learning systems remain effective due to their adaptability and strong communal orientation (Sani & Anwar, 2020). Moreover, the involvement of parents within informal learning environments strengthens collective responsibility in religious education and creates continuity between family values and communal teachings. The correlation between communal participation and educational effectiveness explains why informal religious education remains influential despite the modernization of formal schooling systems.

Religious mediation conducted by village kiai has important implications for maintaining social cohesion and preventing prolonged conflict within rural Muslim communities. The mediation process functions as a culturally accepted conflict-resolution mechanism that prioritizes reconciliation, emotional healing, and communal harmony. Villagers perceive the kiai as neutral and trustworthy mediators whose advice is morally authoritative and spiritually meaningful. The findings indicate that religious mediation reduces social tension because disputing parties are encouraged to focus on forgiveness and collective peace rather than personal hostility. Similar studies have found that religious leaders often become effective peacebuilders in rural communities due to their moral legitimacy and close relationships with local residents (Utami et al., 2021; Widana & Wirata, 2023). The function of religious mediation therefore extends beyond resolving disputes toward reinforcing communal stability and preserving harmonious social interaction.

The villagers accept mediation outcomes because the kiai are viewed as spiritually credible figures who understand both Islamic ethics and local social realities. This trust emerges through long-term interaction and the consistent demonstration of fairness, patience, and empathy in everyday social life. Previous studies also explain that mediation conducted by respected religious leaders tends to be more socially accepted because it incorporates emotional and spiritual dimensions often absent in formal legal mechanisms (Athoillah et al., 2024). Furthermore, rural social structures emphasize kinship and collective harmony, making persuasive dialogue and reconciliation more culturally appropriate than confrontational approaches.

This study provides both practical and theoretical implications for understanding the role of village kiai in rural Muslim societies. Practically, the findings highlight the importance of strengthening community-based religious leadership as a strategy for preserving moral values, enhancing social cohesion, and supporting peaceful conflict resolution. Policymakers and educational institutions may consider integrating local religious figures into social development programs because their influence extends beyond spiritual guidance into broader communal functions. Theoretically, this research contributes to the development of studies on religious leadership by demonstrating that the authority of village kiai is constructed through exemplary conduct, relational trust, and cultural legitimacy rather than institutional power alone. The study further enriches sociological perspectives on rural Islam by showing how moral leadership, informal education, and religious mediation interact in maintaining communal stability.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the most important finding lies in the enduring role of village kiai as exemplary moral leaders, informal religious educators, and mediators of social harmony in rural Muslim communities. The influence of village kiai is maintained not through formal institutional authority, but through ethical consistency, communal trust, and culturally embedded interactions in daily village life. The key lesson learned from this study is that informal Islamic leadership remains highly relevant in preserving moral values, strengthening social cohesion, and resolving communal

conflicts amidst contemporary social transformations. This research is still limited to specific rural cases and does not comprehensively accommodate variations related to gender, age group, broader geographic context, and quantitative social patterns. Therefore, further studies involving more diverse participants, comparative regional settings, and mixed-methods or survey approaches are needed to produce more comprehensive findings that can serve as a stronger basis for culturally responsive community development policies and religious empowerment programs.

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