



The Role of Kyai Leadership in Enhancing Religious Values Among Millennials

Inayatul Maula^{1*}, Moh Rofiki²

^{1,2}Universitas Nurul Jadid, East Java, Indonesia

Email : maulainayah567@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

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*Corresponding Author

This study explores the role of Kiai in shaping the religious and social behaviors of the millennial generation within the community. As religious leaders adapt to modern challenges, the millennial generation's engagement with spirituality has evolved, requiring innovative approaches in religious leadership. The research aims to investigate how Kiai leadership fosters religious devotion, social responsibility, and unity among his followers. Employing a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation. The findings reveal that Kiai serves as an exemplary figure (*uswah hasanah*), whose personal devotion and humility positively influence the members' religious practices and behaviors. His role as a socio-religious advisor has helped balance personal piety with social engagement, encouraging members to actively participate in charitable activities. Additionally, Kiai acts as a unifier of the community, fostering solidarity and inclusivity among members from diverse backgrounds. This research contributes to the understanding of contemporary Islamic leadership by demonstrating how Kiai multifaceted approach creates a transformative impact on millennial followers. It also recommends further research into similar non-formal religious communities to explore broader trends in modern Islamic leadership.

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INTRODUCTION

Globalization and the rapid advancement of information technology in today's fast-paced world have triggered profound shifts in the cultural and social behaviors of individuals worldwide. This is particularly evident in Indonesia, where the millennial generation is navigating the complexities of maintaining a balance between spiritual life and the demands of the modern world (Alazmi, 2023; Thoha, 2024). The openness to information, greater freedom of expression, and the instant gratification promoted by a consumer-oriented culture have

significantly impacted the way young people engage with religion (Lahmar, 2024). As they seek a more contemporary way to practice spirituality, the traditional frameworks of religious practice, such as formal religious teachings and institutions, sometimes seem disconnected from their everyday lives (Marzuki, 2023; Purwanto & Wafa, 2023). These cultural transformations have given rise to a spiritual crisis that requires immediate attention from religious leaders, especially those who act as role models within society, such as *kiai*, or religious leaders in the Indonesian Muslim context. This issue has generated increasing concern, especially regarding how to reengage this generation in meaningful religious practice.

The millennial generation in Indonesia, characterized by its digital nativity, faces unique challenges in reconciling their religious beliefs with their modern lifestyles. Previous studies highlight that this generation is particularly prone to spiritual disconnection, primarily due to the overwhelming presence of secular values and digital distractions (Futaqi & Mashuri, 2022; Muali et al., 2021). Many studies argue that traditional religious approaches may no longer resonate with younger generations, who seek more relatable, flexible, and engaging forms of spiritual engagement (Altinyelken, 2021; Irawan et al., 2024; Mujahid, 2021). Millennials often struggle to find spiritual fulfillment in conventional religious contexts. As a response, new forms of religious organizations and movements have emerged, notably those that combine modern elements with spiritual practices, such as the use of social media, music, and creative events to deliver religious messages (Ariawan et al., 2024; Pariyanti et al., 2022; Saharani & Diana, 2024). The adaptation of traditional religious practices to modern platforms allows for a more seamless integration of faith and daily life, potentially addressing the crisis of spiritual alienation that many young people face.

One of the most notable developments in the contemporary Islamic landscape of Indonesia is the emergence of informal religious communities that cater specifically to the millennial demographic. DNS Situbondo, a modern religious movement led by KHR. Moh. Kholil As'ad Syamsul Arifin, represents a prime example of such a community. Located in Situbondo, East Java, DNS focuses on the practice of *sholawat* (salutation to the Prophet Muhammad) as a central activity, and this religious practice is framed in a way that is highly relatable to young people. The community's activities, such as social gatherings, religious lessons, and charity events, have attracted thousands of young people, including students and professionals. Unlike formal religious settings such as *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools), DNS offers a more flexible, non-institutionalized platform for religious engagement that is grounded in contemporary cultural expressions. This unique positioning enables DNS to

foster deep religious devotion among millennials, while also engaging them in social activities that are aligned with Islamic values. The community thus functions not only as a spiritual space but also as a social and cultural gathering that resonates with modern youth.

The importance of kiai in instilling ethical values within pesantren environments, noting that their leadership style is largely based on the example they set for their students (Aisyah et al., 2022; Wajdi et al., 2022). Arifin et al. (2024) examine how kiai enforce discipline and provide guidance in religious practice, especially in traditional Islamic educational settings. The role of religious leaders in contemporary Islamic movements is evolving, requiring them to adapt to new mediums of communication and engage with younger generations more directly (Ridwan et al., 2023; Sadiyah, 2022). That's highlight the significance of social media as a tool for religious dissemination, with platforms like YouTube and TikTok becoming increasingly popular for sharing religious content (Agus et al., 2021; Chee & Salamzadeh, 2021; Shaikh & Alam Kazmi, 2022). While much research has focused on formal institutions, the unique dynamics of non-formal religious communities remain underexplored, particularly regarding how kiai adapt their leadership styles in these contexts.

Although substantial literature exists on the role of kiai in formal religious contexts, there is a noticeable gap in the study of their influence in informal, contemporary religious communities. Research on DNS Situbondo presents a promising avenue for exploring this new frontier of religious leadership. While previous studies have investigated the leadership styles of kiai in pesantren settings, DNS represents a new form of religious leadership where traditional practices are intertwined with modern, flexible approaches that appeal to the millennial generation. The novelty of this research lies in its exploration of how KHR. Moh. Kholil As'ad Syamsul Arifin adapts traditional Islamic teachings to a non-formal setting, leveraging media and music as tools for spiritual engagement. This study also offers new insights into the evolving role of religious leaders in addressing the spiritual needs of urban and semi-urban youth who do not necessarily adhere to traditional religious institutions. By examining how the leadership of DNS contributes to the spiritual transformation of its members, this research fills a critical gap in understanding the broader landscape of religious leadership in contemporary Indonesia.

This study aims to investigate the leadership dynamics of KHR. Moh. Kholil As'ad Syamsul Arifin in the context of DNS Situbondo and its impact on the religious practices of millennial youth. The primary objective is to understand how his leadership style fosters a meaningful spiritual transformation among young people. This research will focus on the methods and strategies employed by DNS to attract and retain youth, particularly through the integration of

modern communication tools and social media. It will also explore the role of sholawat as a cultural and spiritual medium in fostering a sense of community and devotion. In addition, the study will examine how DNS addresses the unique spiritual needs of millennials by balancing traditional Islamic teachings with contemporary cultural expressions. Through this, the research seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the evolving role of religious leadership in non-formal contexts, highlighting the potential for similar movements to contribute to the spiritual development of young people in Indonesia.

The originality of this research lies in its focus on DNS Situbondo as a model of contemporary religious leadership that bridges the gap between traditional Islamic teachings and the demands of modern society. By analyzing the leadership of KHR. Moh. Kholil As'ad Syamsul Arifin, the research will provide valuable insights into how religious leaders can adapt to modern challenges while maintaining the integrity of Islamic teachings. The argument that DNS offers a model for a transformative, inclusive, and engaging form of dakwah (Islamic preaching) for millennials is central to this study. This research, therefore, contributes to the broader discourse on religious leadership in contemporary Indonesia and offers practical implications for religious movements worldwide.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research focuses on the role of Kiai Kholil in shaping the religious and social behaviors of millennial members within the DNS Situbondo community. The material object of this study is the community itself, specifically its leadership dynamics and the personal and social transformations experienced by its members. The research adopts a qualitative approach, as it aims to explore the depth and complexity of religious leadership and its impact on the millennial generation (Maxwell, 2020). This approach is suited for understanding the intricate relationships between the religious leader, the community members, and the values they uphold. The research employs a case study design, concentrating on DNS Situbondo as a unique example of contemporary Islamic leadership outside of formal religious institutions. The case study methodology enables a comprehensive exploration of individual and collective changes within the community, facilitating a detailed understanding of the dynamics at play in the context of modern Islamic leadership.

Data for this research were collected through a combination of in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation. The primary data source consisted of semi-structured interviews with active members of the DNS Situbondo community, including both long-time members and newcomers, to gain insights into their experiences and perspectives. These interviews allowed

for a flexible exploration of how Kiai Kholil's leadership has influenced their religious practices and social behaviors. Additionally, participant observation was employed to observe the daily activities, community events, and religious sessions organized by DNS, providing a deeper understanding of how the leadership dynamics play out in practice. During these observations, attention was paid to the interactions between the kiai and the members, as well as the engagement of members in religious and social activities. Finally, secondary data were gathered through documentation, including records of community events, religious teachings, and other relevant materials produced by DNS. These combined data collection techniques ensured a comprehensive understanding of the leadership practices and their impact on the millennial generation within the community.

Data analysis for this research followed the framework developed by Miles and Huberman (1994), which involves three key stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification (Truman, 2023). The first stage, data reduction, involved selecting and organizing the raw data to focus on the most relevant information. This process included transcribing the interviews, categorizing observations, and identifying key themes related to the role of Kiai Kholil in shaping religious and social behaviors. In the second stage, data display, the findings were organized into clear and coherent patterns that allowed for an easier comparison and analysis. This stage included creating matrices and diagrams to visualize the relationships between Kiai Kholil's leadership practices and the members' responses. The final stage, conclusion drawing and verification, involved interpreting the data by drawing conclusions about how Kiai Kholil's leadership has impacted the community, ensuring that these conclusions were consistent with the evidence. Throughout the analysis, patterns and themes were continuously revisited and verified through member checks and peer reviews to ensure reliability and validity, ultimately leading to the formulation of conclusions that reflect the lived experiences of the DNS community members.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

Kiai as an Exemplary Figure (*Uswah Hasanah*)

The role of KHR. Moh. Kholil As'ad Syamsul Arifin as an exemplary figure or *uswah hasanah* is central to the transformation of the DNS Situbondo community. The concept of *uswah hasanah* emphasizes that religious leaders should serve as models, demonstrating ethical behavior, devotion, and moral integrity that others can emulate. As the leader of DNS, Kiai Kholil is known for his simplicity, consistency in worship, and humility in social interactions. These

qualities make him a powerful role model for the millennial generation, guiding them toward more religiously aligned behaviors. This role is not just based on theoretical teachings but on real-life examples that members of the community can observe and imitate. His behavior sets the standard for young people, showing them how to lead a balanced life, where they integrate religious practices with social engagement.

Kiai Kholil's influence is palpable in the everyday actions of DNS members. Many of the young members, who initially struggled with their spiritual lives, found a sense of direction through his personal example. For instance, a number of participants mentioned in interviews that their interest in joining DNS stemmed from the simple yet powerful example set by Kiai Kholil. His regular presence in DNS events, where he leads by example in worship, community engagement, and charitable acts, provided a solid foundation for their own religious transformation (see Table 1). The direct impact of Kiai's example is seen in the increased commitment of members to daily prayers, voluntary acts of charity, and their active participation in community-building activities.

Table 1. Impact on Millennial Generation

Aspect	Observation Results	Member Behavior	Impact on Millennial Generation
Worship Practices	Kiai's consistent worship habits are well-observed.	Members adopt regular prayer routines and increase acts of worship.	Encourages spiritual consistency and discipline.
Social Interaction	Kiai's humility and kindness in social interactions.	Members begin to exhibit more humility and respect in their interactions.	Cultivates a sense of community and social harmony.
Religious Engagement	Kiai's active participation in events and activities.	Members become more involved in community events, especially religious ones.	Creates a deeper sense of belonging and purpose in religious life.

Kiai Kholil's personal example is instrumental in shaping the behavior of the DNS members. His role as an *uswah hasanah* extends beyond verbal teachings and into everyday practices that members can easily identify with. This form of leadership is highly effective, as it engages the members on a personal level and encourages them to mirror the positive traits displayed by their leader. This form of leadership is not only motivational but deeply transformative, fostering a sense of belonging and encouraging individuals to adopt a balanced approach to their spiritual and social lives. It can be concluded that Kiai Kholil's role as an exemplary figure is central to the spiritual growth of DNS members.

His ability to live out the principles of Islam in a manner that is accessible and relatable to the millennial generation is a key driver in their transformation. This finding underscores the importance of role models in religious communities, particularly for young people who are navigating the complexities of modern life.

Kiai as a Socio-Religious Advisor

KHR. Moh. Kholil As'ad Syamsul Arifin also plays a critical role as a socio-religious advisor within the DNS community. Beyond providing guidance on personal worship, he helps members navigate the complexities of their social lives. The ideal kiai in this context is not only a spiritual guide but also a moral compass, advising the youth on how to balance their piety with social responsibility. This role of socio-religious advisor is based on the concept that true Islamic teachings extend beyond the individual's relationship with Allah and should also guide their relationships with others in the community. The importance of this role is especially evident in the practical activities of DNS, where Kiai Kholil's guidance shapes both the spiritual and social actions of the members.

Interviews with members of the DNS community revealed that the advice and teachings of Kiai Kholil go far beyond traditional religious lectures. He emphasizes the importance of applying Islamic values to everyday situations, such as work, social relations, and community service. Several participants noted how Kiai Kholil encouraged them to engage in social work, such as charity and helping the less fortunate, as a way of living out their faith. Through his counsel, many members report becoming more socially responsible, showing greater concern for the well-being of others, and taking part in collective activities aimed at improving their communities.

The role of Kiai Kholil as a socio-religious advisor is highlighted by his ability to guide DNS members in both their spiritual and social lives. His teachings emphasize the integration of Islamic values into social practices, thereby promoting not only individual religious growth but also collective social welfare. This multifaceted approach to guidance has been crucial in the formation of a well-rounded and socially responsible generation within the DNS community.

Kiai Kholil's role as a socio-religious advisor is key to shaping a generation that is both spiritually devout and socially responsible. This dual focus on personal piety and social engagement is vital in today's world, where individualism often conflicts with collective well-being. By encouraging DNS members to apply Islamic principles in their daily interactions and community activities, Kiai Kholil ensures that their religiosity has a tangible impact on

society, creating a ripple effect that extends beyond individual spirituality.

Kiai Kholil’s dual role as a spiritual and social guide underscores the holistic nature of his leadership. By integrating religious guidance with social responsibility, he fosters a generation of young people who are not only spiritually enriched but also actively contribute to the betterment of society. This finding reinforces the notion that religious leadership in contemporary settings must embrace both vertical and horizontal dimensions, addressing not only the individual’s relationship with the divine but also their role within the broader community.

Kiai as a Unifier of the Community

Another essential role of Kiai Kholil in the DNS community is his function as a unifier. In a community where members come from various backgrounds—ranging from different educational levels, social classes, and regions—Kiai Kholil’s leadership ensures harmony and solidarity. His ability to bridge gaps and foster unity is a testament to his leadership skills. By emphasizing the value of *ukhuwah Islamiyah* (Islamic brotherhood), he encourages members to look beyond their differences and work together toward common spiritual and social goals. His role as a unifier is critical in maintaining the cohesion of the community, ensuring that all members, regardless of background, feel a sense of belonging.

Documentation of DNS events and activities reveals that Kiai Kholil places a strong emphasis on the spirit of unity during gatherings. Whether through joint prayer sessions, community service events, or group discussions, he continually reinforces the importance of unity within the diverse group. His leadership fosters an environment where members, regardless of their backgrounds, are made to feel equal and valued. This unifying role is especially important as the DNS community has grown to include members from various regions beyond Situbondo, including Jember, Banyuwangi, and Madura. Kiai Kholil’s efforts to maintain unity across these diverse groups demonstrate his leadership’s effectiveness in fostering a cohesive community (see Table 2).

Table 2. Impact on Unity

Aspect	Observation Results	Community Dynamics	Impact on Unity in DNS Community
Diverse Backgrounds	Members come from various regions and educational backgrounds.	Kiai Kholil fosters unity through shared Islamic values.	Builds a strong sense of community and belonging.
Cohesion in Activities	Joint activities such as group prayers and social events.	Encourages cooperation and collective participation.	Strengthens interpersonal relationships and community solidarity.

Islamic Brotherhood	Strong emphasis on ukhuwah Islamiyah.	Members exhibit greater mutual respect and support.	Promotes an inclusive, supportive environment.
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The unifying role of Kiai Kholil is fundamental to the success of the DNS community. By continually emphasizing the importance of unity and shared purpose, Kiai Kholil creates a space where young people from diverse backgrounds can come together, united by their faith and commitment to social good. His leadership ensures that all members, despite their differences, feel equal and integral to the community.

Kiai Kholil's ability to unify the diverse members of DNS Situbondo is a crucial aspect of his leadership. His focus on ukhuwah Islamiyah fosters a sense of solidarity and belonging among young people, contributing to the overall success of the community. This finding highlights the importance of inclusive leadership in maintaining the cohesion of religious communities, particularly those that attract members from a wide range of social and cultural backgrounds.

Discussion

The role of Kiai Kholil as an exemplary figure aligns with the findings of several other studies on religious leadership. Role models are critical in shaping the behavior of young people, especially in religious contexts (Nazar et al., 2024; Sholeh, 2021). Luthfi et al. (2024) argue that effective religious leaders inspire by example, fostering a deep connection between the leader's actions and the followers' attitudes. Both studies support the findings of this research, emphasizing that Kiai Kholil's personal example of worship and humility has a profound impact on the religious transformation of the DNS community.

Exemplary worship and humility are powerful influences in the internalization of religious values within the community. Leadership based on personal integrity and moral guidance like this has been proven to foster deep emotional bonds between leaders and followers, strengthening religious commitment and encouraging active participation in socio-religious activities (Akrim & Umiarso, 2023; Harismansyah et al., 2023). Kiai Kholil's ability to lead through example reinforces the argument that leadership based on personal integrity and moral guidance has a lasting impact on community members. The transformative effect of his leadership can be seen in the behavioral shifts of DNS members, who not only embrace religious values but also actively participate in social and community activities.

Both studies emphasize the importance of balancing personal worship with social responsibility in religious teachings. Kiai Kholil's approach to integrating both aspects in his guidance reflects a broader trend in contemporary Islamic leadership, where leaders are expected to nurture both spiritual growth

and social consciousness. This holistic approach enables members to live out their faith in meaningful ways, contributing positively to society (Nuriyah, 2024). By incorporating social responsibility into religious teachings, Kiai Kholil ensures that DNS members not only develop spiritually but also contribute to the welfare of others. This comprehensive approach to da'wah emphasizes the relevance of Islam in addressing social issues, ensuring that religious teachings are not just theoretical but also practical and applicable in everyday life.

Kiai Kholil's role as a socio-religious advisor reflects a contemporary Islamic leadership model that emphasizes a balance between spiritual development and social responsibility. Religious leaders serve not only as religious teachers but also as drivers of social change (Ataman et al., 2024; Budiharso et al., 2023; Irwanto et al., 2023). By integrating religious values into the context of social life, Kiai Kholil encourages members of the DNS Community to actualize their faith through concrete contributions to society. Through guidance that simultaneously touches on both spiritual and social aspects, Kiai Kholil has succeeded in making religion a relevant, applicable, and transformative force in addressing the challenges of everyday life.

Kiai Kholil's role as a unifier is supported by the concept of social integration highlight the importance of shared values in maintaining community unity. Kiai Kholil's leadership, based on the values of ukhuwah Islamiyah, fosters a sense of unity among DNS members, regardless of their diverse backgrounds. This unifying role is essential in maintaining the cohesion of the community and ensuring its continued growth and success. The importance of leadership in fostering social unity (Bashori et al., 2022). Kiai Kholil's emphasis on shared Islamic values has been instrumental in promoting a sense of belonging and solidarity within the diverse DNS community. This approach highlights the crucial role of religious leaders in maintaining unity and cohesion in religious groups.

Kiai Kholil's role as a unifying force within the DNS Community reflects the principle of social integration, which emphasizes the importance of shared values in maintaining community unity. By strengthening the value of Islamic brotherhood, Kiai Kholil successfully built a sense of togetherness and solidarity amidst the diverse backgrounds of his members. Such an approach not only strengthens relationships between individuals but also creates a stable and harmonious social structure within the community. Religious leaders play a strategic role in strengthening social unity (Ariawan et al., 2024; Aydemir & Türkel, 2022). By emphasizing inclusive Islamic values and prioritizing brotherhood, Kiai Kholil demonstrates that religious leadership oriented toward togetherness can serve as a primary foundation for building sustainable social cohesion.

The findings of this research have significant implications for the development of contemporary religious leadership. By combining personal example, socio-religious guidance, and efforts to unify the community, Kiai Kholil has demonstrated an effective model of leadership that resonates with the millennial generation. This research suggests that religious leaders can play a vital role in addressing the spiritual and social needs of young people by adopting a holistic, inclusive, and example-based approach to leadership. The success of DNS Situbondo offers valuable lessons for other religious communities seeking to engage younger generations in meaningful and impactful ways.

CONCLUSION

The pivotal role of Kiai Kholil as a transformative leader within the DNS Situbondo community, focusing on three key findings. First, as an exemplary figure (*uswah hasanah*), Kiai Kholil's personal conduct and devotion have significantly shaped the religious and social behaviors of the millennial generation, serving as a powerful model for them to emulate. Second, as a socio-religious advisor, he has effectively guided his followers to balance individual piety with social responsibility, ensuring that religious values are reflected in everyday actions. Third, as a unifier, Kiai Kholil has fostered a sense of unity among a diverse group of young people by emphasizing Islamic brotherhood and shared values, which has contributed to the community's cohesion and solidarity. Despite these compelling findings, this study is not without its limitations, such as the focus on a single community and the reliance on qualitative data, which may not fully capture the broader scope of such religious leadership practices across different contexts. Future research could expand on this study by examining other non-formal religious communities or comparing the leadership styles of different kiai in similar settings to provide a more comprehensive understanding of contemporary religious leadership.

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