



Toward an Integrative Prophetic Leadership Model in Education: Evidence from an Extended Ethnographic Study

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ABSTRACT

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This study aims to examine how prophetic leadership is constructed and practiced within the socio-cultural dynamics of Islamic boarding schools and to develop an integrative conceptual framework based on empirical evidence. A qualitative research design with an extended ethnographic approach was employed, with data collected through participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis involving leaders, teachers, senior students, and administrative staff, and analyzed using thematic coding. The findings reveal that prophetic leadership is manifested through four interrelated dimensions: spiritual legitimacy, exemplary behavior, transformational negotiation, and cultural reproduction. Spiritual legitimacy is constructed through collective religious validation, while exemplary behavior functions as a medium of moral socialization within the institutional community. In addition, leaders continuously negotiate between traditional religious values and organizational transformation demands. This study proposes an integrative framework in which spirituality is positioned not merely as a moral foundation but as an active instrument of leadership practice. Theoretically, the study contributes to leadership scholarship by offering a context-sensitive model of spiritual leadership, while practically it provides insights for strengthening leadership strategies in faith-based educational institutions.

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INTRODUCTION

In contemporary society, education is widely recognized as a central mechanism for shaping human character, social order, and ethical responsibility. Leadership within educational institutions plays a decisive role in determining whether these goals are achieved effectively and sustainably (Mutalib et al., 2022). This issue becomes increasingly important in Islamic education, where leadership is not only administrative but also moral and spiritual (Azzuhri et al.,

2024; Ibrahim et al., 2025). The reason is that modern societies are facing a crisis of values, characterized by declining ethical standards, weak moral authority, and increasing materialism in organizational life. Evidence from global educational discourse indicates that leadership models focusing solely on efficiency often fail to address ethical and spiritual dimensions (Bush, 2020). Therefore, leadership that integrates moral and spiritual values is urgently needed. In conclusion, educational leadership must be rethought to ensure that institutions are not only effective but also ethically grounded and socially responsible in shaping future generations.

Despite the importance of ethical and spiritual leadership, many educational institutions today are increasingly influenced by managerial rationality that prioritizes efficiency, accountability, and measurable outcomes. This development creates a significant problem, particularly in faith-based education systems, where spiritual and moral values are central. The dominance of technocratic leadership models often leads to the marginalization of ethical considerations and spiritual authority in decision-making processes. As a result, leadership becomes detached from cultural and religious foundations that traditionally guide educational practices. In Islamic education contexts, this problem is more pronounced because leadership is expected to integrate both administrative competence and spiritual legitimacy. However, in practice, there is a growing tension between modern institutional demands and traditional value systems. Consequently, many educational leaders struggle to balance performance-based expectations with moral responsibilities, creating a gap between ideal leadership principles and real-world implementation in educational governance.

In the context of Islamic boarding schools, leadership is deeply embedded in socio-cultural and religious traditions that shape daily institutional life. Pesantren function not only as educational institutions but also as cultural systems that reproduce values, norms, and leadership models across generations. Leadership is strongly associated with the *kiai*, whose authority is derived from religious knowledge, moral behavior, and spiritual legitimacy (Mukhlis, 2025). However, field observations indicate that pesantren are also increasingly exposed to modernization pressures, including curriculum reform, digital transformation, and institutional professionalism. These changes require leaders to adopt more adaptive and managerial approaches while maintaining spiritual authority. In many cases, leadership practices involve continuous negotiation between tradition and modernization. This phenomenon demonstrates that prophetic leadership is not static but dynamically constructed through everyday interactions. Therefore, pesantren leadership reflects a complex interplay between religious authority, cultural continuity, and institutional adaptation in response to contemporary educational challenges.

Previous studies on prophetic leadership have largely emphasized normative and conceptual frameworks, focusing on moral values derived from Islamic teachings such as *ṣidq*, *amānah*, *faṭānah*, and *tablīgh* (Ikhwan et al., 2025).

These studies highlight prophetic leadership as an ideal model rooted in the prophetic tradition and emphasize its positive influence on organizational ethics and character development (Muslihah et al., 2025). However, most of this literature remains theoretical and lacks empirical exploration of how prophetic leadership is actually practiced in institutional settings. As a result, there is limited understanding of the social processes through which spiritual values are translated into everyday leadership practices (Kamilah, 2026; Soim et al., 2026). Furthermore, existing research tends to overlook the lived experiences of actors within educational institutions, particularly in complex socio-cultural environments such as pesantren. This indicates a significant gap between normative leadership theory and empirical reality, which requires further investigation through context-sensitive and qualitative approaches such as ethnography.

Empirical studies on Islamic educational leadership have often relied on quantitative and descriptive methodologies, which are insufficient for capturing the complexity of pesantren culture and social interactions (Rofiqi et al., 2026). Leadership in pesantren is shaped by symbolic authority, communal obedience, religious legitimacy, and deeply embedded cultural values that cannot be fully explained through statistical analysis alone. Additionally, scholars have identified an ongoing tension between traditional spiritual authority and modern organizational transformation (Sofi et al., 2025). While modernization is sometimes perceived as a threat to spiritual identity, other studies suggest that pesantren leadership is capable of integrating modern practices without losing its spiritual core (Musaddad, 2024). Nevertheless, there is still a lack of integrative frameworks that connect traditional Islamic leadership concepts with contemporary leadership theories. This theoretical fragmentation creates a conceptual vacuum in understanding leadership in Islamic educational institutions, highlighting the need for more holistic and interdisciplinary approaches (Li & Wang, 2026).

Responding to these gaps, this study positions prophetic leadership as a socially constructed and culturally embedded process rather than a fixed normative model. Unlike previous research that treats leadership as an individual attribute or managerial function, this study conceptualizes leadership as a dynamic process shaped by interaction, meaning-making, and spiritual recognition within daily institutional life. Through an extended ethnographic approach, this research seeks to provide an in-depth understanding of how prophetic leadership is constructed, practiced, negotiated, and sustained in pesantren contexts. The novelty of this study lies in its integrative perspective, which connects spiritual legitimacy, organizational practice, and cultural reproduction into a unified analytical framework. By doing so, this research

contributes to bridging the gap between traditional Islamic leadership thought and contemporary leadership theory. It also offers a more comprehensive understanding of leadership as both a spiritual and socio-organizational phenomenon in Islamic education.

This study is guided by four main research objectives: (1) to analyze how prophetic leadership is socially constructed within pesantren socio-cultural environments; (2) to examine the internalization of classical Islamic spiritual values in everyday leadership practices; (3) to explore how leaders negotiate the tension between tradition and modernization; and (4) to formulate an integrative model of prophetic leadership in contemporary Islamic education. The central argument of this research is that prophetic leadership is not merely a normative moral concept but an evolving social practice grounded in interaction, spirituality, and institutional culture. It is argued that leadership legitimacy in pesantren is constructed through a continuous process of spiritual validation, exemplary behavior, and cultural reinforcement. Therefore, this study contributes to leadership theory by proposing that spirituality functions not only as ethical guidance but also as an active mechanism of authority, adaptation, and institutional continuity in Islamic educational settings.

RESEARCH METHODS

The research employed a qualitative case study design to examine the nature of prophetic leadership as experienced within the context of Islamic boarding schools. A qualitative approach was selected because leadership in pesantren cannot be adequately explained through numerical indicators or standardized organizational metrics. Instead, it is socially constructed through interaction, symbolism, ritual practices, and shared meanings within the institutional community. The case study design enables an in-depth exploration of this complex phenomenon within its real-life context, allowing the researcher to capture the dynamic relationship between culture, spirituality, and leadership practice. Alternatively, extended ethnographic principles were also incorporated to support deep immersion in the field, enabling the analysis of how local cultural processes intersect with broader social transformations (Schritt, 2022).

The study was conducted at Darullughah Wada'wah 3 Islamic Boarding School, Indonesia. This site was selected purposively because it represents a pesantren that maintains strong traditional Islamic values while simultaneously engaging with processes of educational and organizational modernization. The centrality of the kiai as both spiritual and institutional leader further makes this setting relevant for examining prophetic leadership in practice. Data collection involved prolonged field engagement to ensure deep contextual understanding of leadership practices as they naturally occur in daily institutional life. Data

were gathered through participatory observation, in-depth semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. Observations were conducted across religious activities, teaching-learning processes, leadership deliberations, and social interactions. Interviews were conducted with the kiai, teachers, senior students, and administrative staff, while institutional documents were used to complement and triangulate field data (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

Data analysis followed a qualitative thematic approach inspired by constructivist grounded theory. The process began with data condensation, in which raw field data from interviews, observations, and documents were selected, simplified, and focused according to relevance to the research objectives. This was followed by data display, where organized categories were systematically arranged to identify relationships among emerging themes such as spiritual legitimacy, exemplary behavior, cultural reproduction, and organizational adaptation. Finally, verification and conclusion drawing were conducted through iterative comparison of findings across data sources to ensure consistency and conceptual accuracy (Clarke et al., 2023). To ensure trustworthiness, triangulation of methods and sources, member checking, peer debriefing, and reflexive field notes were applied throughout the research process (Ahmed, 2024).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

These research results indicate that prophetic leadership in the pesantren environment is more than a normative ideology; instead, it is an ideology practiced and constructed through social interactions, religion, and organizational activities. As the researcher spent considerable time conducting fieldwork, he found out that the leadership in the pesantren environment depended less on bureaucratic means and more on the recognition by individuals that the leaders had qualities such as spiritual depth, integrity, and exemplary behaviour. The ethnographic data reveal that society continues to reproduce prophetic leadership through social relationships, symbolic processes, and organizational adaptability. Four interrelated themes emerged during thematic analysis of prophetic leadership, namely, spiritual legitimacy, exemplary praxis, transformational negotiation, and cultural reproduction.

Spiritual Legitimacy as the Foundation of Leadership Authority

One of the strongest findings of this research concerns the role of spiritual legitimacy in shaping leadership authority within the pesantren. Participants consistently described the kiai not only as an institutional leader, but also as a moral and spiritual reference whose authority originated from religious

devotion, humility, consistency in worship, and service to the community. Leadership legitimacy was therefore not viewed as formally assigned power, but as a socially recognized moral trust.

A senior teacher explained:

“The students obey the kiai not because of institutional rules alone, but because they believe the kiai represents religious sincerity and moral example in daily life.”

Field observations also showed that the kiai maintained close interaction with students through communal prayer, informal discussions, and participation in routine religious activities. These interactions strengthened emotional attachment and reinforced collective perceptions regarding the spiritual credibility of leadership. In this context, authority emerged relationally through repeated social recognition rather than through administrative control.

In addition, the results show that spirituality served as a mechanism for stabilizing the organization. Any institutional decision became easier to accept if it had been seen as in line with ethical standards that were practiced in the pesantren community. This is why the effective performance of a leader was directly linked to his/her adherence to ethics and morality in public and private life.

Exemplary Praxis as a Mechanism of Moral Learning

One other important finding related to the importance of exemplary conduct as the means through which prophetic leadership operated. As opposed to depending largely on training and supervision, leadership attributes in the pesantren context were taught by example. This is because participants continually underscored the fact that teachings were more powerful if imparted through conduct than speech alone.

One senior student stated:

“We learn discipline, sincerity, and responsibility by watching how the kiai lives and treats other people every day.”

Observational data revealed that simple daily behaviors—such as punctuality in congregational prayer, modest lifestyle, respectful communication, and personal involvement in communal activities—became powerful educational instruments within the pesantren environment. Leadership was therefore embodied through visible social action that continuously shaped collective behavior.

Importantly, the findings suggest that exemplary leadership operated not solely at the individual level, but also as a communal process of moral learning. The teachers, senior students, and administrative staff repeatedly exhibited the same actions towards others, resulting in an environment where the values

associated with leadership were shared throughout. Hence, we may say that the prophetic type of leadership represents a form of moral activity performed collectively.

Negotiating Spiritual Tradition and Institutional Transformation

Prophetic leadership in the pesantren was also noted to involve negotiations between upholding traditional religion and meeting modern organizational requirements. Organizational change was not necessarily opposed since it was adapted on an as-needed basis based on the context of the pesantren's spirituality and culture. The adaptation process could be seen in the management of education, curriculum creation, technology, and organization.

A managerial staff member explained:

"Modern systems are accepted as long as they strengthen the pesantren and do not eliminate its religious identity."

Field observations indicated that several administrative and educational innovations had been introduced, including digital administration systems, formalized managerial structures, and expanded academic programs. Nevertheless, these changes remained carefully controlled to ensure that modernization did not weaken traditional religious authority or communal values. The kiai was often a bridge between the two.

From this study, we can conclude that there was adaptation rather than stagnation associated with prophetic leadership in the pesantren setting. Adaptation resulted from the process of negotiation, whereby modernity was viewed from religious and cultural perspectives. This enabled the changes to be gradual and contextual without causing conflict between tradition and institution-building.

Cultural Reproduction and Leadership Sustainability

Processes of cultural reproduction present in pesantren culture played a major role in sustaining the prophetic mode of leadership. The values of leadership were conveyed not only through formal instruction but also through ritual practices, traditions, modes of communication, and daily socialization processes. Such practices as recitations together, serving together, prayer meetings, and mentoring acted as means through which organizational values became internalized.

One teacher remarked:

"What keeps the pesantren alive is not only the system, but the traditions that shape people's character over time."

The ethnographic findings revealed that symbolic practices played a significant role in maintaining institutional continuity. Respect toward teachers, disciplined communal routines, and ritual participation gradually cultivated shared understandings regarding authority, morality, and responsibility. This helped instill leadership values not only in one person but also in the pesantren community at large.

Moreover, it was revealed that the reproduction of leadership happened spontaneously via social participation. The senior students who had embraced the values of pesantren often took up the mantle of guiding the junior students. This was how the cycle of moral reproduction was sustained. In other words, prophetic leadership was a system of culture that was continually reproduced socially.

Integrative Construction of Prophetic Leadership

From a cross-thematic perspective, there was evidence to suggest that these four dimensions had a strong interconnectedness and altogether represented an integrated framework of prophetic leadership. Spiritual legitimacy provided the moral basis for leadership, while exemplary praxis emerged as the process of value transfer. Organizational adaptation was achieved through transformational negotiation, while cultural reproduction provided sustainability.

These results suggest that prophetic leadership in the pesantren cannot be explained solely through management approaches. Rather, leadership was viewed as a relational approach where spiritual dimensions were integrated alongside culture, social interaction, and negotiations within the organization. In this case, spirituality did not serve only as an addition to leadership practices but formed its core, acting as a key dimension of organization and adaptation.

In conclusion, the findings indicate that prophetic leadership in pesantren is a leadership approach that has been contextualized in such a way that religion can be reconciled with organizational change without disrupting culture. This approach serves as an alternative paradigm that views spirituality and social legitimacy in tandem with organizational practices.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that prophetic leadership in pesantren should be understood not merely as a normative or theological construct but as a socially embedded leadership practice shaped by everyday interactions, collective recognition, and cultural reproduction. This finding extends previous studies that primarily conceptualized prophetic leadership through the moral values of *ṣidq*, *amānah*, *faṭānah*, and *tabligh* without sufficiently examining how these values are enacted within organizational settings (Ghamrawi et al., 2025). Leadership legitimacy in pesantren emerges from the community's recognition of the leader's spiritual authority, moral integrity, and religious commitment (Ikhwan et al., 2025). However, the present study goes beyond existing scholarship by revealing that legitimacy is not a fixed

attribute possessed by leaders but a socially constructed process continuously reproduced through daily interactions and collective spiritual validation. This finding contributes to leadership studies by emphasizing the relational and cultural dimensions of authority in faith-based educational institutions.

Another important finding concerns the central role of spiritual legitimacy as the foundation of leadership effectiveness. While transformational leadership theory emphasizes vision, inspiration, and motivational influence as the primary drivers of organizational change, the findings suggest that these dimensions become effective within pesantren only when supported by recognized spiritual authority (Rofiqi et al., 2026). This result partially supports transformational leadership theory but also highlights an important limitation of its universal applicability. In the pesantren context, followers respond to leadership initiatives not solely because of managerial competence or charismatic influence but because leaders are perceived as embodying religious values and moral authenticity. Therefore, spirituality functions not as a supplementary element but as the primary source of legitimacy that enables transformational processes. Theoretically, this finding enriches contemporary leadership discourse by proposing that transformational influence is culturally contingent and may be rooted in spiritual rather than managerial authority (Zulhadi & Afdal, 2025).

The study further reveals that exemplary behavior operates as the principal mechanism through which leadership values are transmitted and internalized within the pesantren community. Previous studies have generally treated exemplary leadership as an individual characteristic reflecting personal morality (Sulpakar et al., 2022). In contrast, the present findings indicate that exemplary praxis is a collective and interactive process involving observation, imitation, participation, and social learning. This finding strongly supports Social Learning Theory, which argues that individuals acquire behavioral patterns and values through observing significant role models within their environment (Liao, 2025). Moreover, the findings extend servant leadership theory by demonstrating that moral leadership is sustained not only through service and ethical behavior but also through institutional mechanisms of cultural transmission and collective participation (Lemoine et al., 2024). Consequently, leadership in pesantren is reproduced across generations through shared practices rather than depending solely on the charisma of a single leader.

The findings also highlight the adaptive capacity of prophetic leadership in negotiating the relationship between tradition and modernization. Existing literature often portrays pesantren as institutions facing tensions between preserving religious traditions and responding to contemporary organizational demands (Halimah et al., 2024; Sofi et al., 2025). The present study confirms this tension but challenges assumptions that modernization necessarily threatens

religious authority. Consistent with Musaddad (2024), pesantren leaders selectively adopt managerial innovations while preserving spiritual and cultural values. This adaptive process aligns with the concept of hybrid leadership proposed by Ebojoh and Högberg (2024), where traditional and modern leadership elements coexist within a single organizational framework. However, this study advances the discussion by demonstrating that modernization is accepted only when it is interpreted through the lens of spiritual legitimacy and communal moral values. Thus, innovation becomes a culturally negotiated process rather than a purely technical organizational strategy (Nurhaida & Asdiqoh, 2026).

Another significant contribution concerns the role of cultural reproduction in sustaining prophetic leadership over time. The findings support Bourdieu's notion of habitus by showing that leadership values are embedded within daily rituals, communication patterns, institutional traditions, and social practices. Through repeated participation in these cultural processes, members internalize values such as sincerity, humility, discipline, and obedience, which subsequently become part of their leadership dispositions. Unlike dominant educational leadership perspectives that prioritize organizational structures, decision-making systems, and performance outcomes (Bush, 2020), the findings indicate that leadership sustainability depends on the continuous reproduction of moral culture. This insight broadens existing leadership theories by emphasizing that effective leadership within religious educational institutions is inseparable from the cultural environments that nurture and maintain shared values across generations.

The principal novelty of this study lies in the development of an integrative framework of prophetic leadership consisting of four interconnected dimensions: spiritual legitimacy, exemplary praxis, transformational negotiation, and cultural reproduction. While previous studies have tended to examine spiritual leadership, transformational leadership, or servant leadership separately (Iqbal et al., 2022), this research demonstrates how these dimensions interact within a unified socio-cultural system. Theoretically, the study contributes to leadership scholarship by positioning spirituality as the central mechanism through which authority, adaptation, learning, and institutional continuity are achieved. Practically, the findings provide educational leaders and policymakers with a contextual model for strengthening leadership in faith-based institutions through the integration of spiritual values and organizational innovation. As a state-of-the-art contribution, this study also demonstrates the value of ethnographic inquiry in uncovering the symbolic, relational, and cultural dimensions of leadership that are often overlooked by quantitative approaches (Firmansyah et al., 2024), thereby offering a more comprehensive understanding of leadership in contemporary Islamic education.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that prophetic leadership in Islamic educational institutions is best understood as a socially constructed and culturally embedded process in which spiritual legitimacy serves as the primary source of authority, organizational adaptation, and institutional continuity. The most important lesson derived from this research is that effective leadership in faith-based educational settings is sustained not merely through managerial competence but through the integration of spirituality, moral exemplarity, collective trust, and cultural reproduction. By identifying four interrelated dimensions spiritual legitimacy, exemplary praxis, transformational negotiation, and cultural reproduction this study makes a significant theoretical contribution to the field of educational leadership by proposing an empirically grounded integrative model of prophetic leadership that bridges classical Islamic leadership values with contemporary leadership theory. The study also highlights the value of ethnographic inquiry in uncovering the relational, symbolic, and cultural dimensions of leadership that are often overlooked in conventional leadership research. Nevertheless, this research is limited by its focus on a single institutional setting, which may restrict the transferability of findings to other contexts. Future studies are therefore encouraged to employ comparative and multi-site ethnographic approaches across diverse Islamic educational institutions to further examine the applicability, variation, and development of prophetic leadership in different socio-cultural and organizational environments.

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