



Kyai as Moral Authority: Negotiating Religious Discipline and Cultural Identity in Pesantren

Titi Sartini*

Institut Agama Islam Yasni Bungo, Indonesia

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***Correspondence Address:**

sartinititi15299@gmail.com

Abstract :

This study investigates the role of Kyai in shaping religious culture within Islamic boarding schools (pesantren). Specifically, it examines how Kyai's leadership influences the spiritual development of students, both through personal example and direct instructions. The research addresses the gap in existing literature regarding the broader impact of Kyai's leadership on fostering a religious environment, extending beyond administrative functions to encompass cultural and social aspects. The research employed a qualitative approach, using in-depth interviews, participant observations, and documentation to gather data from Kyai, teachers, and students at a pesantren in Indonesia. The study identifies key leadership practices, such as leading communal prayers and providing spiritual guidance, that contribute to developing a religious culture. Findings suggest that Kyai's example, combined with direct instructions on religious practices and social behavior, is crucial in instilling a deep sense of religious discipline among students. This research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of spiritual leadership in Islamic education and has implications for developing effective leadership models in religious institutions. The findings also open avenues for future studies exploring the long-term impact of spiritual leadership on student development in pesantren contexts.

INTRODUCTION

In a fast-paced and digitally connected life, religious leaders like Kyai often go beyond being spiritual leaders (Aditoni & Rohmah, 2022; He et al., 2023; Robingatun et al., 2024). Kyai is in charge of directing worship and shaping the character and religious culture in the pesantren (Mujahid, 2021; Nor, 2021; Setiawati et al., 2023). Pesantren has long been an educational center that combines academic and religious aspects (Fatmawati et al., 2023; Hidayah, 2021; Mujahid, 2021). In the Islamic boarding school, Kyai has a central role in creating an environment that supports the spiritual development of students. Although research on Kyai's leadership in shaping religious culture in Islamic boarding schools has been conducted before, much is still limited to administrative and methodological aspects. Several studies have shown that the Kyai influenced important decisions in daily religious practice, but their role in shaping the religious culture as a whole has not been well studied (Faisal et al., 2022; Koehrsen, 2021; Roqib, 2021). This research aims to fill this gap by examining how Kyai integrates religious values into daily life in Islamic boarding schools.

Several previous studies have been conducted that highlight Kyai's role in the leadership of Islamic boarding schools. Several studies show that Kyai significantly influences religious rules that affect students' daily lives (Assa'idi, 2021; Ihsan et al., 2021; Rahtikawatie et al., 2021). Other research also discusses Kyai's role in educating students through an exemplary approach and direct instruction, which strengthens religious discipline in Islamic boarding schools (Muttaqin et al., 2024; Purwowidodo & Zaini, 2024; Ramdani & Ihsan, 2021). This is further strengthened by other research that shows how Kyai plays a role in building religious culture through strengthening joint worship activities, such as congregational prayers (Abdullah & Maskuri, 2022; Waston et al., 2024). However, although these studies provide important insights, little research examines how Kyai's spiritual example influenced the formation of a broader religious culture in Islamic boarding schools. This study aims to connect these findings and expand understanding of Kyai's role in creating a religious environment in Islamic boarding schools.

Although previous research provides insight into the influence of Kyai in religious practices in Islamic boarding schools, there is still a gap in the literature regarding Kyai's role in shaping religious culture. This research aims to overcome this void by exploring more deeply the role of Kyai in building religious culture in Islamic boarding schools, not only in terms of worship but also in social interaction and character formation of students. This gap is important because it can provide a deeper insight into the influence of spiritual leadership in daily life and its impact on the moral and social development of students in Islamic boarding schools. This study seeks to identify how Kyai's example and instruction strengthen the religious culture in Islamic boarding schools, which has not been widely discussed in previous research.

This research provides a new nuance by exploring how Kyai, as a spiritual leader, shapes and strengthens the religious culture in the pesantren through example, direct instruction, and consistent social interaction. In contrast to previous research that focused more on Kyai's administrative role, this study examines in depth how Kyai instills religious values that are internalized in students' daily lives. This research also dissects how Kyai functions not only as a teacher but also as a spiritual guide who shapes the religious character of students in their social and personal aspects. By examining the multifaceted role of Kyai, this study provides new insights into the integration between spiritual leadership and the formation of religious culture in Islamic boarding schools.

This research aims to explore the role of Kyai in building religious culture in Islamic boarding schools, focusing on how Kyai's example and instruction shape the religious character of students. This study uses a qualitative approach with in-depth interview and observation methods to collect data from Kyai, pesantren administrators, ustadz, and students. Through this approach, this study seeks to provide a more comprehensive picture of how Kyai's leadership affects the formation of religious culture, not only in worship but also in the social interaction and daily life of students in Islamic boarding schools. The results of this study are expected to enrich the literature on spiritual leadership in Islamic boarding schools and provide deeper insights into the relationship between leadership, religion, and culture in Islamic education.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study type of research to explore the role of Kyai in shaping religious culture at the Al-Manaar Batuhampar Limapuluh Kota Islamic Boarding School (Alam, 2021; Priya, 2021; Renjith et al., 2021). The selection of pesantren as a research context is very relevant to understanding how Kyai's leadership can affect the formation of religious behavior in Islamic-based schools. The context of pesantren offers a rich setting to delve deeper into the social and religious dynamics that occur. The case study approach allows researchers to explore complex experiences and phenomena in specific contexts without generalizing research results (Alhazmi & Kaufmann, 2022; Prosek & Gibson, 2021; Renjith et al., 2021). The inductive approach focuses on understanding phenomena based on emerging data rather than testing predetermined hypotheses.

The data collection method in this study involves in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and documentation. Interviews were conducted with Kyai, pesantren administrators, ustadz, and students to gain in-depth insight into Kyai's leadership and its impact on religious culture in Islamic boarding schools. Participatory observation was conducted to observe religious practices, social interactions, and routines in Islamic boarding schools. In addition, as additional evidence. Combining these methods allows researchers to collect data thoroughly, providing a more comprehensive picture of the studied phenomenon. This approach also allows for data triangulation, which increases the validity of findings by providing different insights from each method used.

The data analysis in this study uses the qualitative analysis model of Miles and Huberman, which consists of three main stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawn (C. Fan et al., 2021; Ray et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2021). In the first stage, data reduction, the researcher selects and focuses relevant data, grouping information based on emerging themes, such as spiritual exemplification and religious discipline, and eliminating irrelevant data to improve the quality of the analysis. The second stage, data presentation, compiles selected data as narratives and tables to facilitate understanding the relationship between themes. This process is carried out iteratively by continuously reviewing and verifying existing findings. In the third stage, concluding, the researcher draws the main findings based on the analysis that has been carried out. The findings were tested for validity through triangulation with various data sources. The Miles and Huberman approach allows for in-depth and systematic analysis, resulting in valid and relevant findings to the research objectives.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

Kyai as a Spiritual Example

Kyai's role as a spiritual role model reflects the leadership dimension that focuses on exemplary morals and daily religious practices. In the context of Islamic-based schools, Kyai functions as a principal with administrative duties and as a central figure in building a religious atmosphere that blends into school life. This example is manifested in formal instruction and direct practice, such as carrying out congregational prayers, starting activities with prayer, giving tausiyah, and maintaining manners in social interactions.

The influence of this spiritual example is decisive in shaping the religious behavior of students and teachers, as they not only hear the values taught but also witness them directly from their leaders. Thus, Kyai, as a spiritual role model, plays a central role in internalizing religious values in school culture. A good leader gives instructions and sets an example through tangible actions. Kyai showed this by being present early at the mosque and inviting the students to carry out dhuhr prayers in the congregation. As conveyed by an Islamic boarding school administrator.

"Kyai always came to the mosque earlier and invited the children to pray dhuha. Not only did he instruct, but he set an example (*I_PP*)."

From the results of this interview, it can be seen that Kyai not only relies on orders to educate students but also shows an example that the students can immediately see. Examples of worship, such as dhuha prayers, have a significant impact on shaping the religious behavior of students. It will be easier for students to follow and imitate what they see from Kyai, a real example of the teachings conveyed. Kyai's example is also seen in his patient and wise education attitude. Kyai also showed an example of interacting with students not only in worship. One of the ustadz shared his experience.

"He never gets angry. If he reprimands students, he always uses polite and soothing language. We are embarrassed if we cannot imitate his *patience* (*I_U*)."

His example of how he speaks and reprimands reflects that *Kyai* prioritizes manners and compassion in education. This patient approach creates a conducive and harmonious atmosphere in the pesantren. Students, teachers, and staff feel encouraged to imitate *Kyai's* behavior, which is taught through words, politeness, soothing daily actions, and attitudes. Kyai's presence in daily interactions strengthens the strong religious culture in the pesantren. One of the students said,

"I saw for myself every morning that Kyai greeted the children individually; he also liked to recite prayers together. From there, we felt that this school has a strong religious aura (*I_S*)."

The statement delivered by one of the students above shows that Kyai is actively creating a religious atmosphere in the pesantren through formal activities and meaningful daily interactions. Reading the joint prayer and greetings from Kyai builds an emotional closeness between Kyai and the students, strengthening the existing religious culture. This example illustrates that spirituality-based leadership is about giving orders and building relationships of respect and togetherness.

Based on the interviews and observations, it can be seen that Kyai in this pesantren plays a central role as a figure who provides an example of religious behavior. This example is concrete and can be observed in various activities, such as leading congregational dhuha prayers, starting morning activities with prayers, and giving *tausiyah* regularly. These activities are carried out formally and with complete seriousness, ultimately creating an intense religious atmosphere in the pesantren. The ustadz and students witnessed that the actions taken by Kyai had a significant impact on changing their attitudes. Kyai's example influenced how they behaved, worshipped, and interacted with others in many ways. For example, Kyai not only gave instructions for carrying out worship but also showed directly how to carry out worship solemnly and with full awareness, which became a real example for the students.

In addition, his example of speaking and reprimanding is reflected in Kyai's communication style, which is full of patience and sincerity. Kyai prioritizes a gentle approach to educating and reprimanding, making every interaction a means to educate with deeper values. This patient and gentle attitude is an example that inspires pesantren administrators and students to imitate in their daily lives. Thus, Kyai conveys religious values through teachings or theories and brings these values to life through real daily actions. This example provides great moral and spiritual strength for all Islamic boarding school residents, making the religious culture a formality and an internalized part of their lives. This creates an authentic and deep-rooted religious culture in the pesantren community.

Kyai's Instructions as a Driver of Religious Discipline

The instructions given by *Kyai* have a vital role in shaping religious discipline in Islamic boarding schools. As a leader who regulates the administration and instills religious values, *Kyai* moves the students to carry out religious obligations, such as congregational prayers, tadarus, and other religious activities, with example and direct supervision. Instructions from *Kyai* are not just commands but part of direct learning that teaches the importance of discipline in daily life. His influence on the attitude and behavior of students is huge because *Kyai* is a source of authority and an example of implementing religious discipline. This discipline is not only limited to certain worship times but also permeates daily activities, making religious values and discipline an integral part of the student's character. During the research conducted at the Al-Manaar Batuhampar Limapuluh City Islamic Boarding School, information was found, as shown in Figure 1.

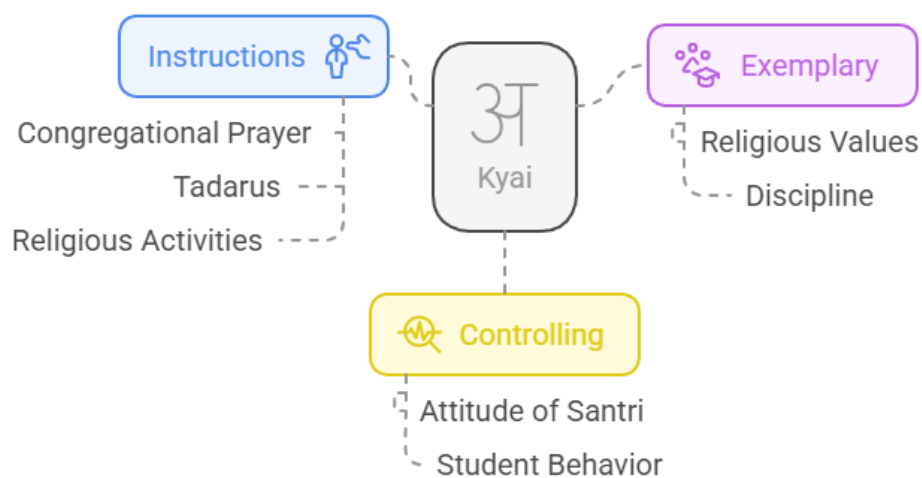


Figure 1. The Role of Kyai in Shaping Religious Discipline in Islamic Boarding Schools

Figure 1. presents a conceptual framework that describes the multifaceted role of Kyai in influencing religious discipline. This diagram organizes Kyai's role into four main categories: Instruction, Example, Control, and its impact on students' attitudes and behaviors. This image highlights that Kyai's guidance includes instruction through religious activities, such as congregational prayer and tadarus, and embodies values, such as discipline and religious principles, through personal example. The role of Control emphasizes the influence of Kyai in shaping the behavior of students, which is very important in maintaining religious discipline. Thus, it can be concluded that Kyai's behavior is an example that helps foster religious values and disciplined behavior among students.

This was strengthened by the interviews with several informants, where one of them explained that direct instruction from *Kyai* played a significant role in instilling religious discipline in Islamic boarding schools. One of the administrators of the pesantren stated that,

"Every morning, *Kyai* ensures that students gather to carry out congregational prayers before starting other activities. He emphasized the importance of congregational prayer as the main foundation of religious discipline in Islamic boarding schools (*I_PP*)."

The statement illustrates that *Kyai's* instructions for carrying out congregational prayers are not only an obligation of worship but also a means to instill discipline in students. Through this firm and consistent instruction, students learn to respect time and understand the importance of discipline in carrying out religious obligations. This serves as a foundation for forming a religious character that is not only focused on individual worship but also on a well-organized social life. In addition to worship, *Kyai* also gave instructions about other religious regulations. One of the *ustadz* revealed that,

"*Kyai* not only instructed us to pray but also taught us to maintain the cleanliness and purity of the place of worship. He always emphasized that cleanliness is part of faith (*I_U*)."

From the above statement, it is known that *Kyai* also gave instructions on hygiene aspects as part of religious discipline. This shows that *Kyai's* leadership does not only focus on ritual activities but also on aspects of daily life that support religious practices. Discipline in maintaining the cleanliness of places of worship reflects the importance of applying religious values in every aspect of life, strengthening students' religious character. In addition, *Kyai's* instructions in leading routine religious activities also strengthen the sense of togetherness among the students. One of the students said,

"We always follow programs led by *Kyai*, such as reciting the Qur'an together every afternoon. He strongly emphasized the importance of tadarus as a form of discipline in understanding religion (*I_S*)."

The instructions to carry out the tadarus of the Qur'an show that the *Kyai* encourages religious activities not only in the context of formal worship but also as part of an ongoing religious custom. Through consistent instruction and direct supervision, *Kyai* ensures that students are actively involved in deepening their religious understanding. This also increases the sense of togetherness among the students, as they carry out this activity together, strengthening the social and spiritual bonds in the pesantren. *Kyai's* instruction in pesantren is essential in shaping religious discipline among students. Through consistent orders to carry out congregational prayers, maintain cleanliness, and participate in Qur'anic tadarus activities, *Kyai* teaches discipline and forms a solid religious character in daily life. This instruction is seen as a form of exemplary that leads to discipline in worship and covers all aspects of pesantren life.

Islamic Boarding School Culture in School Life

The pesantren culture applied in school life reflects the values and practices derived from the tradition of the pesantren, which are then integrated into daily activities at school. In this case, Kyai, as the leader of the pesantren, has a central role in building a strong religious culture through religious routines, interactions between students, and its influence on the school environment. The culture of this pesantren is not only limited to formal worship activities such as congregational prayers but also includes social aspects such as manners, social attitudes, and values that prioritize simplicity, discipline, and togetherness. Kyai's role in this process is vital because he is the central figure who instills and introduces these values to students, teachers, and pesantren administrators. Therefore, the pesantren culture developed in schools reflects Kyai's leadership, which successfully integrated religious teachings into social life more broadly. The pesantren culture formed by Kyai significantly impacts daily life at school. One of the administrators of the pesantren stated that,

"In this Islamic boarding school, the religious culture is robust. Kyai always emphasizes the importance of maintaining manners in speaking and acting, both inside the mosque and outside. We are taught to respect each other, both to teachers and fellow students (*L_PP*)."

The above statement reveals that Kyai builds a religious culture through worship and the cultivation of moral values in social interaction between students. This strong religious culture is evident in the discipline and manners maintained in the context of religious rituals and in communicating and relating in daily life. This shows that the culture of Pesantren is not only a religious, educational institution but also a place that instills life values that the entire Pesantren community values. In addition, Kyai also has a significant influence in creating an atmosphere of mutual respect in the pesantren, as conveyed by one of the ustadz,

"Kyai always emphasizes that we must be able to maintain harmony in Islamic boarding schools. We are given an example always to work together, share, and not discriminate between one student and another (*L_U*)."

The culture of the pesantren that is applied also includes the values of simplicity that focus on cleanliness and order. Where this is as conveyed by one of the informants from the students who said that,

"At Islamic boarding schools, we are always taught to maintain cleanliness around us, both in the mosque and classroom. We are used to keeping our places of worship clean because cleanliness is part of faith."

This quote shows that cleanliness is valued in Islamic boarding schools. This value is taught through regulations and direct examples from Kyai and Islamic boarding school administrators. By teaching the importance of maintaining cleanliness, Kyai introduces religious values into practical daily life, thus making cleanliness an integral part of faith and religious discipline. Departing from a series of interviews conducted with several informants, it was found that some information related to pesantren culture in school life at the Al-Manaar Batuhampar Limapuluh City Islamic Boarding School, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Islamic Boarding School Culture in School Life

Aspects of Islamic Boarding School Culture	Form of Kyai Implementation	Impact on Islamic Boarding School Residents
Manners in Speaking and Acting	Emphasizing the importance of manners in communication and social interaction	Students and teachers become more polite and respect each other
Togetherness and Collectivity	Teaching to share and cooperate	Increase the sense of togetherness and brotherhood among students and staff.
Cleanliness as Faith	Emphasizing the importance of maintaining the cleanliness of mosques and school environments	Santri is more concerned about the cleanliness and health of the pesantren environment.

Table 1 illustrates the application of pesantren cultural values in school life. This table summarizes three aspects of pesantren's lives: manners in speaking and acting, togetherness and collectivity, and cleanliness as part of faith. Manners in speaking and acting, which Kyai always emphasized, seem to increase politeness and mutual respect among students and teachers. In addition, togetherness and collectivity play an important role in strengthening the sense of brotherhood among students and staff, creating a more collaborative environment. Lastly, cleanliness as part of faith, which is upheld in maintaining the cleanliness of mosques and school environments, seems to encourage students to be more concerned about cleanliness and health. Although the broader impact may warrant further research, these findings suggest that applying pesantren culture can improve social and environmental quality in the educational community.

Departing from the findings above related to pesantren culture in school life that occurred at the Al-Manaar Batuhampar Limapuluh City Islamic Boarding School, it is known that the pesantren culture built by Kyai not only includes aspects of worship but also involves social values such as manners, togetherness, and cleanliness. By providing consistent examples and clear instructions, Kyai succeeded in creating an environment supporting student character formation. Through an emphasis on simple but profound values, such as maintaining manners in speaking, cooperating, and maintaining cleanliness, Kyai has established an authentic and deeply rooted religious culture in the pesantren. This culture is reflected in ritual activities and daily life, which in turn forms students who are disciplined in worship and living their social lives.

Discussion

This research explores how Kyai's leadership plays a role in building religious culture in Islamic boarding schools, focusing on spiritual examples, instruction in religious discipline, and applying Islamic boarding school culture in daily life. The main findings of this study show that Kyai's role is very central in shaping and directing religious values through direct examples in worship, strict instructions related to discipline and its influence in building a social culture that supports religious life in Islamic boarding schools. Kyai's example in worship practices, such as congregational prayer and tadarus, clear instructions on worship discipline and cleanliness, as well as his efforts in building a social culture that prioritizes manners and togetherness, directly answers the research question of how Kyai's leadership contributes to the formation of religious culture in Islamic boarding schools. This finding also reveals that Kyai's leadership focuses on the administrative aspect and the formation of religious values rooted in the life of the Islamic boarding school.

Some of the findings in this study are in line with transformational leadership theory, which emphasizes that effective leaders can inspire and motivate their followers through personal example, individual attention, and a clear vision (Bajrami et al., 2024; X. L. Fan et al., 2022; Mutha & Srivastava, 2023). Kyai, as a spiritual leader, shows transformational leadership qualities by providing direct examples in worship, speaking politely, and providing instructions that motivate the students to become better individuals. In addition, these findings also confirm social-cognitive theory (Almuqrini & Mutambik, 2021; Romeo et al., 2021; Wu et al., 2021), which states that individuals learn and mimic behavior through observation of respected models. In this context, Kyai serves as a model for students who follow orders and imitate the good behavior shown by Kyai. Kyai's example in worship and social interaction significantly impacts the formation of students' religious behavior.

However, these findings also challenge some existing views on leadership in Islamic education. Some previous studies looked more at Kyai's leadership in administrative and traditional contexts (Futaqi & Mashuri, 2022; Mukarromah et al., 2024; Rahtikawatie et al., 2021), while the results of this study show that Kyai's role as a spiritual role model has a greater impact on building religious culture in Islamic boarding schools. This shows the expansion of our understanding of Kyai's leadership in Islamic boarding schools, which is structural, cultural, and spiritual. These findings provide new insights into how Kyai leadership shapes religious culture through example and direct instruction. Although the previous literature has discussed a lot of Kyai's leadership in an administrative context (Mujahid, 2021; Roqib, 2021; Wang et al., 2021), this study enriches the literature by providing strong evidence that Kyai's example in worship practices, social interaction, and religious discipline forms a solid and sustainable religious culture in Islamic boarding schools. The new insight that emerged is that Kyai's leadership must be understood in a broader context, namely as a combination of teaching, example, and influence in shaping the religious behavior of students.

These findings contribute to expanding transformational leadership theory, particularly in Islamic education. Kyai's leadership, which emphasizes spiritual exemplarity, can be used as a model for developing a broader theory of leadership that integrates moral and spiritual aspects of leadership. In addition, the results of this study also support Bandura's social learning theory, which shows how the influence of direct role models in religious education can strengthen the learning of religious values. For Islamic education practitioners, these findings provide important insights on improving leadership effectiveness in Islamic boarding schools. A leadership approach that prioritizes personal example can strengthen religious teaching and build a stronger religious culture in the pesantren environment. Therefore, developing exemplary-based leadership must be the primary focus for pesantren managers to create an atmosphere supporting student religiosity development.

CONCLUSION

This study examines the role of Kyai's leadership in building religious culture in Islamic boarding schools, focusing on spiritual examples, religious discipline instruction, and social culture of Islamic boarding schools. The study's findings show that Kyai plays a central role in instilling religious values through tangible actions, such as leading worship

and providing discipline-related instructions. Kyai's example not only creates a religious atmosphere in the pesantren but also shapes the religious character of the students in their daily lives. This research shows that exemplary-based leadership can strengthen the religious culture in Islamic boarding schools, which is not only formed through orders but also direct examples given by leaders. These findings open up opportunities for further research on the influence of religious leaders' exemplary role models in education. As a recommendation, pesantren needs to strengthen Kyai's role as a role model in improving discipline and religious values, as well as expand the study of the long-term impact of this example on students.

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