THE *PESANTREN* WAY IN CREATING LEADERS

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Abstract: Pesantren or Islamic traditional boarding school is one the unique institution within Indonesian Islam. Serving a comprehensive education with emphasis on the internalization of Islamic values is the main purpose of pesantren. Additionally, since they also serve the society safeguarding and leadership, Pesantren promote the emergence of new leadership. This study explores how pesantren cultivates leadership by integrating spiritual depth with intellectual rigor highlighting 5 pesantrens across East Java. Using a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) from Scopus, WoS, and Semantic Scholar, the findings identify five leadership development categories in pesantren: moral and character-based, entrepreneurial, humanist and inclusive, spiritual and religious, and transformational and innovative leadership. As a result, Pesantren provides a strong foundation for leadership education, grounded in moral, spiritual, and local wisdom. This model has been proven effective in shaping character, integrity, and responsibility, making it a relevant framework for fostering the nation's moral and leadership development. Their alumni show strong leadership skills that beneficial for their role in society.

Keywords: *Pesantren*, leadership, character education.

Introduction

Indonesia as the 4th most populous country in the world with 287 million people and counting, is currently experiencing demographic bonus. It is considered as a competitive advantage since it becomes the basic foundation of Golden Indonesia Vision for 2045. However, the success of realizing the vision is in question since there are many challenges with the primary risk factor is its young generation. The generation thus is expected to be the foundation of the nation's future

should exhibit good morality and ethos. this generation should deal with issues range from politics and economy that make it even more difficult for the vision to be realized.

Since one of the concerns is the moral degradation, a strong attention should be given to address the issue. Hence, series of attempts are conducted and the character education becomes the forefront of Indonesia's education reform[1]. As a consequence, new curriculums such as K-13 which then is revised to Merdeka curriculum were formulated to promote character building in education system[2]. This Merdeka curriculum allows more flexibility for teachers to customize their teaching to meet the diverse needs and characteristics to develop specific capability in order to build creativity and innovation[3].

Among the modalities to promote education and leadership in Indonesia is Pesantren. In pursuing modernization, Indonesia's education reforms seem to have overlooked the strength of its own educational heritage—the deeply rooted and resilient Islamic boarding school system or known as "pesantren". Pesantren are educational institutions based on Islamic teaching and tradition which are passed on through the learning of classic books known as "Kitab Kuning/Yellow Book"[4] in which santri stay in the boarding houses

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[1] Dwi Meinanto, Bobby Kurnia Putrawan, and Amran Simangunsong, "Degradasi Moral Generasi Z: Suatu Tinjauan Etis Teologis Terhadap Penggunaan Internet," *IMMANUEL: Jurnal Teologi Dan Pendidikan Kristen* 3, no. 1 (2022): 21–32, https://doi.org/10.46305/im.v3i1.86.

[2] Resty Fauziah et al., "Pembinaan Karakter Siswa Berdasarkan Kurikulum 2013 Sekolah Dasar," *Jurnal Basicedu* 5, no. 6 (2021): 6357–66, https://doi.org/10.31004/basicedu.v5i6.1727; Heroza Firdaus et al., "Analisis Evaluasi Program Kurikulum 2013 Dan Kurikulum Merdeka," *Jurnal Pendidikan Dan Konseling* 4, no. 4 (2022): 686–92, https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/322599509.pdf; Utami Maulida, "Pengembangan Modul Ajar Berbasis Kurikulum Merdeka," *Tarbawi : Jurnal Pemikiran Dan Pendidikan Islam* 5, no. 2 (2022): 130–38, https://doi.org/10.51476/tarbawi.v5i2.392.

[3] Laily Rahmah et al., "Navigating the Curriculum Landscape: The Impact of Curriculum 2013 and Merdeka Curriculum on Teachers' and Students' Learning Outcomes in Indonesia," *Journal of Ecohumanism* 3, no. 6 (September 17, 2024): 917–31, https://doi.org/10.62754/joe.v3i6.4061; Supianto et al., "Exploring Teacher Acceptance of the Merdeka Curriculum in Indonesia: A Diffusion of Innovation Analysis," *Multidisciplinary Science Journal* 6, no. 12 (2024), https://doi.org/10.31893/multiscience.2024267.

[4] Muhamad Arif, Makmur Harun, and Mohd Kasturi Nor bin Abd Aziz, "A Systematic Review Trend of Learning Methods for Reading the Kitab Kuning at Pesantren (2000-

throughout their study under the tutelage and guidance of *kiai* (traditionalist ulama). Pesantren survives in the midst of the encroachment of digital transformation without losing their identity and spiritual values,[5] producing leaders who are able to embrace, accommodate, and cultivate capital in sustainable way,[6] as many writings of pesantren kiai show that.[7] Pesantren as education institution shows powerful impact not only on their santri (students of pesantren), but also to the community. The leadership of santri is impactful in the community they live in. These leadership values are things that formal education in Indonesia is currently lost.

History has shown that pesantren had produced a number of influential national figures. Names like Hasyim Asy'ari, Wahid Hasyim and Abdurrahman Wahid, the fourth President of Indonesia, are only among many names that are educated within the pesantren. Not only that, they also maintain to promote the values they have been educated with in Pesantren into their public leadership.[8] Today, figures like Yahya Cholil Staquf and Afifuddin Muhajir continue this tradition globally and nationally. Political leaders such as Muhaimin Iskandar, Saifullah Yusuf, and Khofifah Indar Parawansa further reflect *pesantren's* lasting impact on governance and inclusive nationalism,

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2022)," *Journal of Islamic Civilization* 4, no. 2 (2023): 146–64, https://doi.org/10.33086/jic.v4i2.3578.

[5] Akhmad Nurul Kawakip and Sulanam, "The Practice of Shared of Values and Islamic Educational Identity: Evidence from A Pesantren in East Java, Indonesia," *Journal of Indonesian Islam* 17, no. 1 (2023): 29, https://doi.org/10.15642/JIIS.2023.-17.1.27-53.

[6] Lukman Hakim, "Pesantren as the Identity of Islamic and Cultural Education in West Java," *Al-Ishlah: Jurnal Pendidikan* 15, no. 4 (2023): 4578–86, https://doi.org/10.-35445/alishlah.v15i4.3369; Herdis Herdiansyah, Hadid Sukmana, and Ratih Lestarini, "Eco-Pesantren as A Basic Forming of Environmental Moral and Theology," *Kalam* 12, no. 2 (2019): 303–26, https://doi.org/10.24042/klm.v12i2.2834; Arivan Mahendra et al., "Peran Politik Pengurus Besar Nahdlatul Ulama Dalam Penguatan Pendidikan Pesantren," no. 8 (2024): 378–87; A. Faiz Khudlari Thoha, "Visionary Leadership and Dynamic Capabilities: Transforming Pesantren into a Social Enterprise," *International Journal of Islamic Business Ethics* 9, no. 1 (2024): 46, https://doi.org/10.30659/ijibe.-9.1.46-62.

[7] Ahmad Zainal Abidin et al., "Qur'anic Exegesis as A Social Critique: A Study on the Traditionalist Bisri Musthofa's Tafsīr Al-Ibrīz," *Al-Jami'Ah: Journal of Islamic Studies* 62, no 1 (2024), 217.

[8] Wina Wardiana, Adi Fadli, and Masnun Masnun, "Contribution of Women in the Education Management of Islamic Boarding School," *Ulumuna* 28, no. 1 SE-Articles (2024): 408, https://doi.org/10.20414/ujis.v28i1.805.

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making *pesantren* a vital force in Indonesia's moral and leadership development. Certainly, in addition to social and religious aspects, politics is the main realm to see the application of leadership skills of pesantren nowadays.[9] On that remark, this study analyzes how *Pesantren,* as one of Indonesia's most successful institutions in cultivating skillful, as well as dignified and morally grounded leaders.[10] It certainly is interesting to explore how *Pesantren* education system is able in producing a number of significant leaders in the country. *Pesantren* leadership has emerged as an intriguing model of leadership education[11]. While many scholars attribute *Pesantren* leadership to character and moral building[12], the concept of "character and moral building" itself are merely descriptive. Meanwhile, detailed information on how these values are being developed or how the pedagogical strategies are being used to build the character and moral are still unexplored.

Leadership is considered to extends beyond character, it demands a strong foundation of knowledge and critical thinking[13]. The ways in which pesantren produce leaders are well known or quite familiar among the pesantren circles or certain religious circles but rarely explained in academic terms. This study seeks to bridge that gap by

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[9] Moh Bahar, Dodik Harnadi, and Ahmad Ali, "Political Polarization and Marketing Strategies of Pesantren Alumni in the 2024 Presidential Election," *Islamica: Jurnal Studi Keislaman* 20 (2025): 142, https://doi.org/10.15642/islamica.2025.20.1.141-159.

[10] A Ansori, H Setiawan, and H Fauzi, "Local Islamic Traditions And Adaptive Leadership: Arakan Sahur And Ulema Regeneration In Jambi," *Jurnal Ilmiah Peuradeun* 13, no. 3 (2025): 1941–66, https://doi.org/10.26811/peuradeun.v13i3.1894.

[11] Dian Dian et al., "The Role of Kiai Leadership in Developing Students' Character at Islamic Boarding School," *Al-Ishlah: Jurnal Pendidikan* 16, no. 1 (2024): 234–46, https://doi.org/10.35445/alishlah.v16i1.4378; Subandi et al., "Pesantren-Based Transformational Leadership: Strategies toward International Superior Madrasah in Indonesia," *Webology* 18, no. Special Issue (2021): 1023–40, https://doi.org/10.14704/WEB/V18SI05/WEB18279.

[12] Muhammad Roy Purwanto et al., "Optimization of Student Character Education through the Pesantren Program at the Islamic Boarding School of the Universitas Islam Indonesia," *Review of International Geographical Education Online* 11, no. 5 (2021): 2829–37, https://doi.org/10.48047/rigeo.11.05.179.

[13] Isabel Coronado-Maldonado and María Dolores Benítez-Márquez, "Emotional Intelligence, Leadership, and Work Teams: A Hybrid Literature Review," *Heliyon* 9, no. 10 (2023), https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2023.e20356; Turgut Karakose et al., "The Development and Evolution of Digital Leadership: A Bibliometric Mapping Approach-Based Study," *Sustainability (Switzerland)* 14, no. 23 (2022), https://doi.org/10.3390/su142316171.

offering a comprehensive understanding in how leadership is being developed by the education system and culture of *Pesantren* tradition. Certainly, in pesantren context, the *kiai* (the the leader of pesantren both in religious-spiritual realm as well as social-communal domain) is in the top leadership,[14] backed up by senior *santri* and teachers who manage the pesantren and santri on day-to-day basis. The management of pesantren, which anchors in the concept of baraka,[15] covers religious as well as moral--spiritual activities, instructional-educational practices, as well as logistical-general issues.[16]

To initiate an understanding of leadership in *Pesantren*, a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) as the preliminary stage is conducted. Web of Science, Scopus, and Semantic Scholar were used as databases for the SLR. Keywords used are ("Pesantren" OR "Islamic Boarding School") AND ("Leadership" OR "Leaders" OR "Leadership Development" OR "Educational Leadership") AND ("Indonesia"). The searching process yielded a total of 668 records, comprising 49 from Scopus, 386 from Web of Science, and 233 from Semantic Scholar. Screening process were based on the publication year, language, and duplication. Only articles from the last 5 years (2021-2025) are included. The research includes articles written in Indonesian or English with all duplicate being removed. After screening, there are 329 articles remain for analysis. The selection process is (see figure 2). From 329 initial records, 115 were retrieved for full-text review. After further screening, 20 studies met the criteria and were included in the final review, offering focused insights into how *pesantren* shape leadership values and character. In addition, interviews with personalities in 5 pesantren were conducted to view the what happened on the ground.

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[14] Afidah Wahyuni, Harisah, and Nur Yunus, "Between Tradition and Religious Doctrine: Questioning Kiai's Status as Zakāt Recipient," *Al-Ihkam: Jurnal Hukum & Pranata Sosial* 19 (June 30, 2024): 186, https://doi.org/10.19105/al-lhkam.v19i1.8780.

[15] M Rusydi, "Visionary Leadership in Islamic Boarding Schools: Implications for Institutional Management within the Barakka Framework," *International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research* 24, no. 8 (2025): 1041–57, https://doi.org/-10.26803/ijlter.24.8.46.

[16] S Ma'arif and N El Muna, "Pesantren Entrepreneurship: Harmonization of the Theories of Kasb Asy'ariyah And Locus of Control on Strengthening Santripreneur," *Qudus International Journal of Islamic Studies* 11, no. 1 (2023): 33, https://doi.org/10.-21043/qijis.v11i1.17404.

Figure 1. Systematic Literature Review Process with PRISMA Flow Diagram
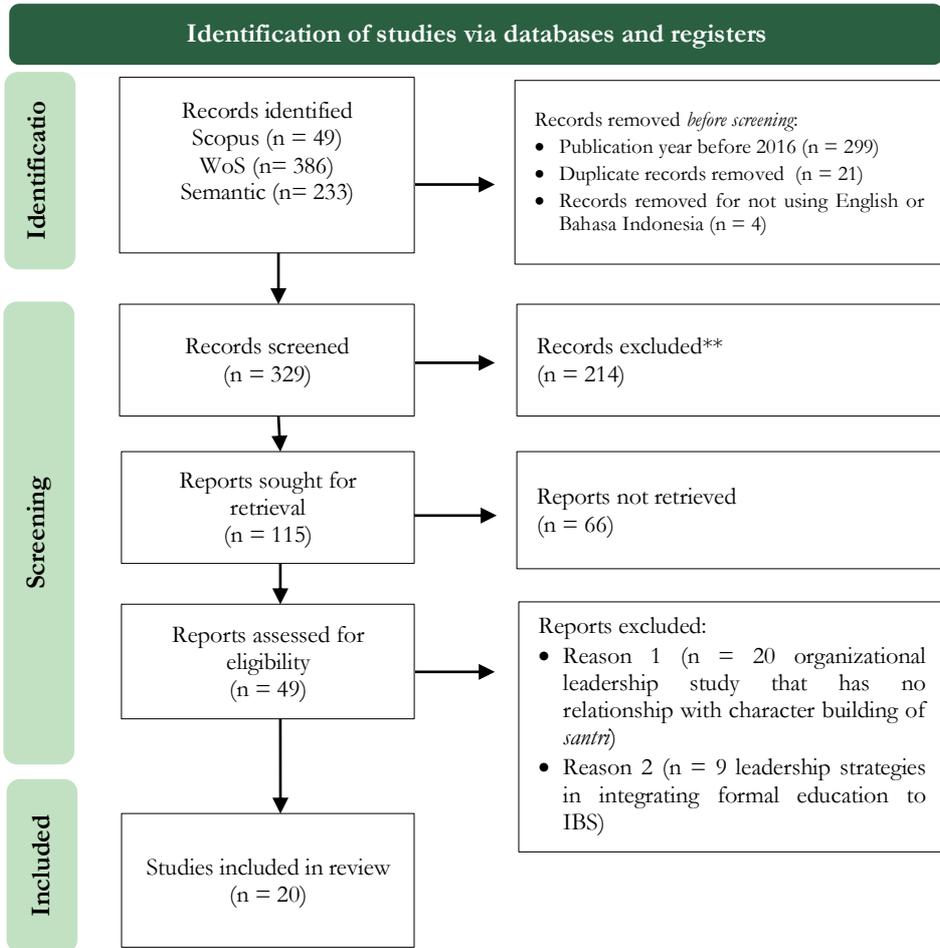
The complexity of *Pesantren* leadership, which is grounded in various religious and humanistic values, offers rooms for multiple perspectives-based exploration. In addition to the literature-review, fieldwork including interviews and observations are conducted in order to deepen the understanding on leadership development in Pesantren. Since East Java is commonly acknowledged as the centre for Pesantren in Indonesia, five Pesantren located here are chosen to be the locus of the research. They are as follows: (1) H. Abdulloh Mukti Tsani Hasona

as Tahfîdh (Quran-memorization) supervisor / mentor at IBS Sidogiri (Pasuruan City): founded in 1745 is one of Indonesia's oldest salaf pesantren[17]. While maintaining traditional *kitab kuning* learning, it has built a strong cooperative network and the "Basmalah" retail chain, becoming a model of pesantren-based economic empowerment; (2) KH. Abdul Hakim Machfudz as Head of IBS Tebuireng (Jombang City): The center of nationalism movement in 1945 and before. Founded by K.H. Hasyim Asy'ari, one of the national heroes. it combines Islamic learning with nationalism and social reform, producing national figures like Gus Dur; (3) HM. Adibussholeh Anwar as Head of IBS Lirboyo (Kediri City): Pesantren that focuses on Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and mastery of yellow book (*kitab kuning*). Lirboyo alumni often become religious leaders, NU figures, and public speakers who maintain traditional Islamic values in modern; (4) Assoc. Prof. Dr. Ir. Muhammad Ridho Zarkasyi as Head of IBS Gontor (Ponorogo City): A modern pesantren integrating Islamic and general education, known for producing visionary, globally minded leaders; (5) RKH. Fahruddin Aschal as Leader of IBS Syaichona Moh. Cholil (Bangkalan City): founded by Syaichona Kholil, the "Teacher of the Founders" including Hasyim Asy'ari, making it a root source of *pesantren* leadership in Indonesia. Renowned as the source of spiritual and intellectual inspiration for later generations of *kiai* in East Java.

Findings show that there are several approaches being used by Pesantren in the development of character and moral of leadership among santri.

Table 1. *Pesantren* Education Approach in Building Character and Moral of Leadership in Santri[18]

Character & Moral	Education Approach
Selflessness	Formal integration of character curriculum into pedagogy and student management[19]; Transmission of

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[17] Kawakip and Sulanam, "The Practice of Shared of Values and Islamic Educational Identity: Evidence from A Pesantren in East Java, Indonesia."

[18] Table 1 compiles themes identified in the systematic literature review; all themes were confirmed by the authors' interview and observation in East Java, 1-7 November 2025.

[19] Hasse Jubba et al., "The Contestation between Conservative and Moderate Muslims in Promoting Islamic Moderatism in Indonesia," *Cogent Social Sciences* 8, no. 1 (2022), https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2022.2116162.

Character & Moral	Education Approach
	classical ethical texts through informal teaching models[20]; Use of Islamic arts to instill values of humanity, patience, and spiritual refinement[21]; Ethical and social values embedded through multi-method educational approaches[22]; Cultivating the awareness that every individual is accountable for their actions to God and community, including to environment[23]
Physical & Mental Endurance	Character building through ritual practices such as fasting, silence, and prayer, fostering discipline, self-control, and resilience[24]; Upholding moral integrity and resilience when confronting systemic challenges[25]; Business and innovation skills integrated with Islamic ethics to promote economic self-reliance[26]; Long-term

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[20] Dwi Puspitarini et al., "Humanistic Pesantren: Systematic Literature Review and Bibliometric Visualization Analysis on Character, Moral, and Ethical Values," *Pertanika Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities* 31, no. 2 (2023): 465–90, https://doi.org/ 10.47836/PJSSH.31.2.01; Sofyan Sauri, Sandie Gunara, and Febbry Cipta, "Establishing the Identity of Insan Kamil Generation through Music Learning Activities in Pesantren," *Heliyon* 8, no. 7 (2022): e09958, https://doi.org/10.1016/ j.heliyon.2022.e09958.

[21] Sauri, Gunara, and Cipta, "Establishing the Identity of Insan Kamil Generation through Music Learning Activities in Pesantren."

[22] Puspitarini et al., "Humanistic Pesantren: Systematic Literature Review and Bibliometric Visualization Analysis on Character, Moral, and Ethical Values."

[23] Based on multiple interviews with respondents in East Java, 1-7 November 2025

[24] Meta Malihatul Maslahat and Ludiyyah Zauli Khaq, "The Impact of Fasting Mondays and Thursdays on Self-Control of Students at Al-Mustaqim Bugel Islamic Boarding School, Jepara," *Proceedings of International Conference on Psychology, Mental Health, Religion, and Sprirituality* 1, no. 1 (2023): 25–33, https://doi.org/10.29080/pmhrs.v1i1. 1157.

[25] Abdul Karim et al., "Altruistic Works, Religion, and Corruption: Kiais' Leadership to Shape Anti-Corruption Values in Pesantren," *Cogent Social Sciences* 9, no. 1 (2023), https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2023.2238968.

[26] Adrian Ariatin, Wawan Dhewanto, and Oktofa Yudha, "Entrepreneurial Muslim Leadership in Islamic Cooperative Business Unit," *Journal of Islamic Accounting and Business Research* 15, no. 3 (2024): 499–518, https://doi.org/10.1108/JIABR-04-2022-0100 Muhammad Mukhlis Izzat, Sugiarto, and Matin, "Kiai Leadership In Coaching Is Entrepreneurship Skills Pesantren School Students," *Multidisciplinary Output Research For Actual and International Issue(MORFAI Journal)* 4, no. 4 (2025): 1572–77; Thoha, "Visionary Leadership and Dynamic Capabilities: Transforming Pesantren into a Social Enterprise."

Character & Moral	Education Approach
	strategic planning and social innovation for community benefit[27]; Fostering practical business and life skills alongside religious formation[28];
Compassionate Empathy	Inspirational and goal-oriented guidance by female leaders rooted in trust and care[29]; Charisma-based leadership emphasizing long-standing relationships and community respect[30]; Student-centered leadership valuing dignity, empathy, and individualized guidance[31]; Communication modeled on the Prophet's compassionate interaction style[32]; Devotion to the community (Khidmah) through ideas, manpower, and community education[33]
Collaborative	Involving students in school decision-making and daily management[34]; Use of digital media to connect

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[27] Thoha, "Visionary Leadership and Dynamic Capabilities: Transforming Pesantren into a Social Enterprise." ; this finding is also validated by the author's fieldwork conducted in Pasuruan City, 1 November 2025

[28] Ariatin, Dhewanto, and Yudha, "Entrepreneurial Muslim Leadership in Islamic Cooperative Business Unit."

[29] Samsu Samsu et al., "Community Empowerment in Leading Pesantren: A Research of Nyai's Leadership," *International Journal of Evaluation and Research in Education* 10, no. 4 (2021): 1237–44, https://doi.org/10.11591/IJERE.V10I4.21833.

[30] Yuwono Dimas Prasmiwardana et al., "Women Leadership in Navigating Self-Sufficient Transformational and Transactional Leadership in an Islamic Context," *Leadership and Policy in Schools* (2025): 1–16, https://doi.org/10.1080/ 15700763.-2025.2496219.

[31] Moh. Afiful Hair, "Humanist Values in Kiai Leadership in Islamic Boarding Schools Moh.," *Islamentary: Journal of Islamic Elementary Education* 1, no. 1 (2023): 1–19; Mieke T.A. Lopes Cardozo and Eka Srimulyani, "Analysing the Spectrum of Female Education Leaders' Agency in Islamic Boarding Schools in Post-Conflict Aceh, Indonesia," *Gender and Education* 33, no. 7 (2021): 847–63, https://doi.org/10.1080/ 09540253.2018.1544361.

[32] Hasbi Indra et al., "Prophetic Leadership Perspective Didin Hafidhuddin in Pesantren Ulil Al-Baab UIKA Bogor Indonesia," *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice* 28, no. 4 (2022): 34–45.

[33] Based on multiple interviews with respondents in East Java, 1-7 November 2025

[34] Sarofatul Hidayah, "The Role of Kyai Implementing Character Education at As-Suniyyah Islamic Boarding School," *International Proceedings of Nusantara Raya* 1, no. 1 (2022): 407–10, https://doi.org/10.24090/nuraicon.v1i1.163.

Character & Moral	Education Approach
	communities and strengthen school identity[35]; Applying *Pesantren* values collaboratively to enhance school standards and competitiveness[36]; Holistic moral education integrating daily religious practices with communal values in *Pesantren* life[37]
Tauhid (Islamic-centric)	Traditional Islamic teachings (*turath*) and transmission of classical Islamic ethical texts to cultivate moderation, devotion, and ethical sensibilities[38]; Modeling leadership values on the Prophet Muhammad's traits: honesty, trustworthiness, wisdom, and God-centered communication[39]; Leadership that prioritizes spiritual development, service to students, and mutual trust[40]; Role-model–based religious leadership that actively involves students in spiritual life and decision-making[41],

While each of pesantren has its unique personality, there are similarities in the ways in which their education process train *santri* to

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[35] Munifah and Septiana Purwaningrum, "Leadership Strategy: Developing School Culture through Digital Turats Learning," *Cypriot Journal of Educational Sciences* 17, no. 1 (2022): 68–80, https://doi.org/10.18844/cjes.v17i1.6682.

[36] Subandi et al., "Pesantren-Based Transformational Leadership: Strategies toward International Superior Madrasah in Indonesia."

[37] Muhammad Abror Rosyidin, Jasminto, and Jumari, "The Absorption of Islamic Education Thought of KH. M. Hasyim Asy'ari through Teaching of Adab Al-'Alim Wa Al-Muta'Allim among the Santri at the Pesantren Tebuireng," *Millah: Journal of Religious Studies* 22, no. 2 (2023): 611–40, https://doi.org/10.20885/millah.vol22.iss2.art12.

[38] Imam Mujahid, "Islamic Orthodoxy-Based Character Education: Creating Moderate Muslim in a Modern Pesantren in Indonesia," *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies* 11 (December 8, 2021): 185–212, https://doi.org/10.18326/ijims.v11i2.185-212; Puspitarini et al., "Humanistic Pesantren: Systematic Literature Review and Bibliometric Visualization Analysis on Character, Moral, and Ethical Values"; Sauri, Gunara, and Cipta, "Establishing the Identity of Insan Kamil Generation through Music Learning Activities in Pesantren."

[39] Indra et al., "Prophetic Leadership Perspective Didin Hafidhuddin in Pesantren Ulil Al-Baab UIKA Bogor Indonesia."

[40] Nur Chasanah, "Leadership of Kiai and Students' Obedience in Islamic Boarding School," *Resolusi: Jurnal Sosial Politik* 4, no. 1 (2021): 42–52, https://doi.org/10.32699/resolusi.v4i1.1875.

[41] Hidayah, "The Role of Kyai Implementing Character Education at As-Suniyyah Islamic Boarding School."

have strong sense of leadership. There are five unique points of character development that constitute the *Pesantren* way in creating leaders as elaborated in the paper.

Way 1: Santri are Trained to be Selfless

Selflessness is a core value cultivated in pesantren through formal character education, classical ethical texts, daily routines, and Islamic arts[42]. Students learn humility, service, and communal responsibility through lessons, stories, guidance from teachers and the kiai,[43] and practices of adab, especially respectful conduct toward the kiai[44]. Acts of service and disciplined obedience help santri internalize that personal desires must yield to moral and communal principles, making selflessness an ingrained trait. The kiai, as moral and intellectual anchor, guides students according to their strengths, transmitting humility and service-mindedness through mentorship and ensuring leadership aligns with the pesantren's ethical vision.

Figure 2. Three Pillars of Human Relations in Islam
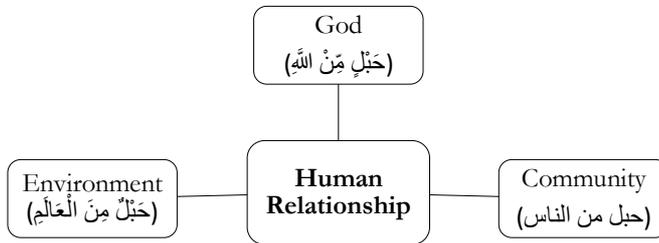
The value is further grounded in Islamic relational ethics: maintaining one's relationship with God (*habl min Allah*), with others (*habl min al-nas*), and with the natural world (*habl min al-'alam*). These

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[42] Jubba et al., "The Contestation between Conservative and Moderate Muslims in Promoting Islamic Moderatism in Indonesia."

[43] Wardah Nuroniyah, "Gender Discourses within Pesantren in Cirebon: Understanding the Typologies of Kyais' Interpretations of the Concept of Qawwām," *Samarah: Jurnal Hukum Keluarga Dan Hukum Islam* 7, no. 2 (2023): 885, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.22373/sjhk.v7i2.15689.

[44] Puspitarini et al., "Humanistic Pesantren: Systematic Literature Review and Bibliometric Visualization Analysis on Character, Moral, and Ethical Values"; Sauri, Gunara, and Cipta, "Establishing the Identity of Insan Kamil Generation through Music Learning Activities in Pesantren."

three pillars teach that every human action carries consequences beyond the self. Students learn that selflessness involves fulfilling divine obligations, respecting the dignity of others, and caring for the environment. The spiritual orientation of *habl min Allah* trains santri to subordinate personal desire to divine command, making selflessness an ethical discipline: doing what is right even when unseen, choosing duty over convenience, and seeking God's pleasure rather than human praise. As one informant stated: *"Every aspect of their leadership contribution is directed toward the benefit of the community, the pursuit of God's pleasure, and the preservation of the scholarly lineage inherited from the council of teachers."*[45]

In recent discourse, the pesantren notion of selflessness has broadened to include environmental responsibility (*habl min al-'alam*). Although articulated more frequently today, the concept is deeply rooted in classical Islamic teachings that humans are stewards of the Earth (*khalifah fi al-ard*). This reinforces that ethical leadership requires leaders to not only protect communities but also ecological balance.

The development of selflessness in *pesantren* aligns with the SSHM framework, which suggests that selflessness reduces afflictive emotions and promotes harmony and emotional stability[46]. In the *pesantren*, this manifests in a relational worldview in which the self is always understood in connection with God, community, and the environment. As a result, leadership is framed not as the pursuit of personal ambition but as an obligation to uphold communal welfare, preserve scholarly lineage, and contribute to the greater good. Selflessness thus becomes both the ethical foundation and the emotional backbone of *pesantren* leadership formation, enabling the cultivation leaders who serve with humility, integrity, and a deep sense of responsibility.

The centrality of selflessness in pesantren leadership also reflects the principles of Servant Leadership, where the well-being of followers

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[45] Abdul Hakim Mahfudz, Qur'an Memorization Supervisor and MMU Tsanawiyah Teaching Staff, Sidogiri Islamic Boarding School, interview by authors, Jombang, East Java, 2 November 2025. Original Indonesian: *"setiap kontribusi kepemimpinannya diarahkan untuk kemaslahatan umat, mencari rida Allah, serta menjaga sanad keilmuan yang diwariskan para dewan guru*

[46] Nicolas Pellerin, Michael Dambrun, and Eric Raufaste, "Selflessness Meets Higher and More Stable Happiness: An Experience Sampling Study of the Joint Dynamics of Selflessness and Happiness," *Journal of Happiness Studies* 23, no. 6 (2022): 3127–42, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-022-00503-8.

and the community precedes personal gain[47]. Likewise, the kiai's moral modeling resonates with Ethical Leadership, in which followers internalize ethical standards through observation[48]. The alignment of selfless behavior with divine purpose further parallels Spiritual Leadership theory, which emphasizes values-driven, altruistic motivation[49].

Way 2: Endurance, Physically and Mentally

Physical and mental endurance (*riyāḍah al-nafs*) is a critical component of character building within the pesantren tradition. It is cultivated through a combination of ritual discipline, ascetic practices, and the moral demands of communal life, all of which encourage santri to develop resilience, emotional stability, and steadfastness in the face of hardship.

At the core of this endurance training are ritual practices such as fasting, night prayers (*qiyām al-layl*), periods of silence (*khāliqah*), and structured routines of memorization and study. These practices serve a dual purpose: physically, they build stamina and self-control; mentally, they foster patience, focus, and the ability to remain composed under pressure. Fasting, for instance, trains the santri to regulate bodily impulses, while night prayers cultivate emotional discipline and deep spiritual awareness. Over time, such rituals strengthen the santri's capacity to endure discomfort, manage stress, and develop conscientious self-regulation[50].

Endurance is also shaped by the rigor of pesantren daily life, which demands punctuality, long hours of study, collaborative chores, and adherence to strict schedules. The pesantren environment is intentionally structured to challenge the students' limits in a controlled, constructive manner. Waking before dawn, balancing academic study with religious obligations, participating in communal work, and

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[47] R. K. Greenleaf, *The Servant as Leader* (Westfield, IN: Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership., 1970).

[48] M. E. Brown, L. K. Treviño, and D. A Harrison, "Ethical Leadership: A Social Learning Perspective for Construct Development and Testing," *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 97, no. 2 (2005): 117–134.

[49] L. W. Fry, "Toward a Theory of Spiritual Leadership," *The Leadership Quarterly* 14, no. 6 (2003): 693–727.

[50] Maslahat and Khaq, "The Impact of Fasting Mondays and Thursdays on Self-Control of Students at Al-Mustaqim Bugel Islamic Boarding School, Jepara."

maintaining moral conduct at all times require sustained focus and perseverance. This lifestyle habituates santri to push beyond momentary fatigue and emotional fluctuations, cultivating a disciplined mindset capable of facing long-term challenges. Even after formal classes ended, the pesantren grounds remained alive with learning. Over time, such habits build a deep reservoir of resilience that supports their intellectual, spiritual, and leadership development.

Karim et al.[51] highlight that moral integrity is strengthened when individuals face challenges without compromising their values. In the pesantren, endurance is thus not only personal toughness but also ethical steadfastness, grounded in Islamic spirituality. Rituals and moral teachings frame perseverance as devotion, cultivating sincerity (*ikhlas*), patience (*sabr*), and trust in God (*tawakkul*) while helping santri maintain composure under pressure. Through daily discipline, santri learn to guide others with calm determination, uphold moral principles, and navigate challenges wisely. Over time, this steady perseverance fosters confidence, adaptability, and initiative, preparing them for meaningful roles both within the pesantren and beyond, including leadership opportunities, competitions, and international programs.

The endurance cultivated through pesantren routines resonates with Transformational Leadership theory[52], as it equips individuals to pursue higher-order goals and collective achievements. This endurance also supports Authentic Leadership[53], allowing santri to express their values, skills, and creativity with confidence. Furthermore, participation in large-scale collaborative events exemplifies Distributed Leadership[54], where leadership emerges through coordinated efforts and shared responsibility across the student body.

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[51] Karim et al., "Altruistic Works, Religion, and Corruption: Kiais' Leadership to Shape Anti-Corruption Values in Pesantren."

[52] Bernard M. Bass, *Transformational Leadership* (New York: Free Press, 1985).

[53] B. J. Avolio and W. L. Gardner, "Authentic Leadership Development: Getting to the Root of Positive Forms of Leadership.," *The Leadership Quarterly* 16, no. 3 (2005): 315–338.

[54] J. P. Spillane, *Distributed Leadership* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2006).

Way 3: Empathy is Not Just a Motive, Rather an Actionable Intention

Compassionate empathy, another important point of pesantren-based leadership education is cultivated through a relational environment where character is shaped as much by daily interaction as by formal instruction. Leadership in pesantren is deeply modeled on prophetic ethics. As one *kiai* explained during our interviews:

> "Through the example of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), the kiai in the pesantren becomes a living reflection of the prophetic qualities: truthfulness (ṣiddīq), trustworthiness (amānah), conveying guidance (tablīgh), and wisdom (faṭānah) which serve as the moral standard for leadership"[55]

This grounding in prophetic character establishes a moral climate where compassion, honesty, and trustworthiness guide every aspect of leadership and student formation. Within this environment, empathy grows through consistent, lived experience. Teachers and leaders interact with santri through warmth, guidance, and dignified communication which reflecting the Prophet's example of gentle speech and attentive listening[56]. Student-centered approaches, relational mentoring, and respect for individual dignity tend to strengthen the capacity for empathy among learners[57].

Service-based activities also reinforce empathy as practical action. Social service programs expose santri directly to community needs and hardships. In one interview, a staff member explained:

> "The Social Service Program trains santri to see social problems and to 'feel the suffering' of others, cultivating practical empathy."[58]

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[55] Muhammad Ridho Zarkasyi, Head of the Darussalam Gontor Modern Islamic Boarding School, interview by authors, Ponorogo City, East Java, 4 November 2025. Original Indonesian: *"melalui Teladan Nabi Muhammad SAW, sosok Kyai di pesantren menjadi cerminan nyata dari sifat-sifat kenabian (Siddiq, Amanah, Tabligh, Fathanah), yang menjadi standar moral kepemimpinan."*

[56] Indra et al., "Prophetic Leadership Perspective Didin Hafidhuddin in Pesantren Ulil Al-Baab UIKA Bogor Indonesia."

[57] Hair, "Humanist Values in Kiai Leadership in Islamic Boarding Schools Moh."; Lopes Cardozo and Srimulyani, "Analysing the Spectrum of Female Education Leaders' Agency in Islamic Boarding Schools in Post-Conflict Aceh, Indonesia."

[58] HM. Adibussholeh Anwar, Head of Lirboyo Islamic Boarding School, interview by authors, Kediri City, East Java, 5 November 2025. Original Indonesian: *"Program Bakti*

Pesantren cultivate actionable empathy through community engagement, teaching santri to serve others, respond to social needs, and care for the environment. Programs like Social Service (*Bakti Sosial*), Community Dakwah Outreach, waste banks, and cooperative economic initiatives provide practical opportunities to translate moral values into service, ecological stewardship, and sustainable development. Rooted in *khidmah* and Islamic ethics, these experiences shape santri into becoming leaders who combine compassion, responsibility, and social awareness with practical action.

The emphasis on empathy in pesantren aligns with Servant Leadership[59], where leadership is grounded in serving and understanding others. Transformational Leadership theory[60] also explains how santri internalize empathy through individualized attention and inspiration, motivating them to transcend self-interest for communal benefit. Moreover, the relational authenticity exhibited by kiai and teachers reflects Authentic Leadership, fostering trust, moral clarity, and transparent communication[61].

Way 4: Collaboration as Habit

Collaboration in Pesantren is a foundational practice that shapes not only the social and moral development of santri but also their emerging leadership capacities. From the beginning of their education, students live together, share meals, study collectively, and participate in communal rituals. These shared routines require continuous negotiation, coordination, and mutual support, which cultivate habits of deliberation (*musyawarah*), patience, and social intelligence. By navigating these communal interactions, santri learn to balance differing perspectives, mediate conflicts, and take initiative—key components of leadership grounded in ethical and social awareness[62]. Through this ongoing negotiation and collective decision-making,

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Sosial melatih santri melihat masalah sosial dan 'merasakan penderitaan' orang lain, menumbuhkan empati praktis"

[59] Greenleaf, *The Servant as Leader*.

[60] Bass, *Transformational Leadership*.

[61] Avolio and Gardner, "Authentic Leadership Development: Getting to the Root of Positive Forms of Leadership."

[62] Hidayah, "The Role of Kyai Implementing Character Education at As-Suniyyah Islamic Boarding School"; Rosyidin, Jasminto, and Jumari, "The Absorption of Islamic Education Thought of KH. M. Hasyim Asy'ari through Teaching of Adab Al-'Alim Wa Al-Muta'Allim among the Santri at the Pesantren Tebuireng."

santri develop skills central to Transformational Leadership, such as inspiring peers, motivating collective effort, and stimulating problem-solving for common goals.

In recent era, digital media serves as an extension of collaborative leadership, enabling santri to coordinate projects, communicate with stakeholders, and maintain school identity beyond the physical campus. Engaging in these collective digital initiatives cultivates adaptability, strategic communication, and distributed influence, demonstrating principles of Distributed Leadership, where leadership responsibilities emerge across the community rather than residing in a single individual[63].

Holistic moral education in Pesantren further intertwines collaboration with leadership development. Daily religious practices, communal responsibilities, and joint rituals require coordination and mutual guidance, enabling santri to practice moral reasoning, empathy, and decision-making in real-life. These experiences cultivate leaders who are socially competent, ethically grounded, and capable of guiding others through collective deliberation and action[64].

Through these routines and experiential learning opportunities, collaboration becomes more than a skill; it becomes a habitual disposition. Santri learn to anticipate the needs of others, negotiate responsibilities, and contribute proactively to group objectives. This habitual collaboration ensures that when santri step into leadership roles, they do so with a deep understanding of teamwork, shared responsibility, and the collective pursuit of communal and societal benefit.

Way 5: The Guide from Qur'an and Islam Itself Are Timeless

Since it is rooted in religious values, leadership in pesantren is acknowledged as exemplary. It is arguably different from leadership models that is based on popularity, trends, or personal ambition; pesantren leadership derives its legitimacy from tauhid—the oneness of God—and ethical principles embedded in Islamic teachings. Qur'an emphasizes the importance of justice, trustworthiness, and

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[63] Munifah and Purwaningrum, "Leadership Strategy: Developing School Culture through Digital Turats Learning"; Spillane, *Distributed Leadership*.

[64] Rosyidin, Jasminto, and Jumari, "The Absorption of Islamic Education Thought of KH. M. Hasyim Asy'ari through Teaching of Adab Al-'Alim Wa Al-Muta'Allim among the Santri at the Pesantren Tebuireng."

accountability: *"Indeed, Allah commands you to render trusts to whom they are due and when you judge between people to judge with justice"*[65]. By adhering to these divine principles, pesantren leaders are supposed cultivate a sense of moral responsibility that transcends temporal and cultural contexts, ensuring leadership that is consistent, principled, and spiritually grounded[66].

Central to this leadership is the cultivation of ethical and spiritual character through the study of classical Islamic texts (*turats*) and prophetic traditions. Santri internalize moderation, devotion, and a deep sense of responsibility toward others, learning to balance personal ambition with service to God and the community[67]. Leadership is modeled on the traits of the Prophet Muhammad—honesty, trust-worthiness, wisdom, and God-centered communication—demonstrating that effective leadership emerges from moral integrity and spiritual consciousness rather than hierarchical authority[68].

Moreover, leadership in pesantren emphasizes service, mentorship, and mutual trust. Senior students actively guide younger peers in spiritual life, decision-making, and ethical reflection, creating a participatory and morally accountable leadership environment. This approach ensures that leadership is not abstract or detached but is practiced as a living commitment to God, people, and the environment*"*[69]. Leaders are trained to act with foresight, fairness, and compassion, embodying a model that remains relevant across generations.

The principles of leadership in pesantren are further supported by contemporary leadership theories that align closely with Islamic values. By inspiring students to internalize moral and spiritual principles, pesantren leaders exemplify transformational leadership[70], fostering a

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[65] Qur'an, 4:58

[66] Chasanah, "Leadership of Kiai and Students' Obedience in Islamic Boarding School."

[67] Mujahid, "Islamic Orthodoxy-Based Character Education: Creating Moderate Muslim in a Modern Pesantren in Indonesia"; Puspitarini et al., "Humanistic Pesantren: Systematic Literature Review and Bibliometric Visualization Analysis on Character, Moral, and Ethical Values"; Sauri, Gunara, and Cipta, "Establishing the Identity of Insan Kamil Generation through Music Learning Activities in Pesantren."

[68] Indra et al., "Prophetic Leadership Perspective Didin Hafidhuddin in Pesantren Ulil Al-Baab UIKA Bogor Indonesia."

[69] Qur'an, 2:60

[70] Bass, *Transformational Leadership*.

shared vision rooted in Qur'anic guidance. Their consistent modeling of ethical behavior and accountability reflects ethical leadership[71], while the emphasis on service, mentorship, and community well-being mirrors servant leadership[72]. The grounding of leadership in *tauhid* and Qur'anic principles also demonstrates spiritual leadership[73], highlighting the integration of ethical, moral, and spiritual development in shaping responsible leaders. These parallels show that *pesantren* leadership is both religiously grounded and academically validated, reinforcing its enduring relevance and effectiveness.

Conclusion

With the existence of both potential and challenge, the demographic bonus and ongoing concerns regarding moral degradation among youth, *pesantren* in Indonesia assumes a strategic position. *Pesantren* provides leadership education model that extends beyond cognitive achievement to emphasize character formation, mental resilience, social empathy, collaborative capacity, and spiritual integrity.

The main finding of the research is that leadership development in *pesantren* emerged from a quite holistic and integrated educational ecosystem that combines formal curriculum, daily disciplinary practices, communal life, and the moral exemplarity of *Kiai* and teachers. Five core approaches—selflessness, physical and mental endurance, empathy translated into action, collaboration as a habitual practice, and leadership rooted in *tauhid*—collectively shape a holistic and sustainable model of leadership formation. These values are internalized through continuous habituation, lived experience, and close relational mentoring.

Conceptually, there is a solid alignment between *pesantren* leadership practices and contemporary leadership theories and this includes servant leadership, transformational leadership, ethical leadership, authentic leadership, and spiritual leadership. This arguably shows that *pesantren* leadership is not only culturally and religiously relevant but also analytically robust and academically explicable within modern leadership frameworks. Admittedly, there are many rooms for

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[71] Brown, Treviño, and Harrison, "Ethical Leadership: A Social Learning Perspective for Construct Development and Testing."

[72] Greenleaf, *The Servant as Leader.*

[73] Fry, "Toward a Theory of Spiritual Leadership."

elaborating more on the matter especially regarding the challenges and stereotypes commonly identified with the *Pesantren* world including the issue of bullying and authoritarianism. Nevertheless, it still is safe to conclude that *pesantren* does contribute a locally rooted yet universally resonant model of leadership education. []

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