

# Examining Tradition and the Current State of Education Innovation in Contemporary Indonesia: Challenges of a Middle Eastern University Alumni *Kyai* in an Islamic Boarding School

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## ABSTRACT

This research focuses on the activities of a young *kyai* who seeks to provide education, informed by his experience of studying in the Middle East at a *pondok pesantren*, an Islamic boarding school, in contemporary Indonesia. This study is an analysis derived from fieldwork that focused primarily on qualitative interviews and the author's own observations while residing at one of the *pesantren* in East Java. Since inheriting the *pesantren* at a young age, the *kyai* have incorporated the study of languages such as English and Arabic alongside the continuation of the traditional Islamic book, *kitab* learning. Furthermore, it has become apparent that in the context of the diversifying landscape of *pesantren* education, the *kyai* is striving to cultivate boarding students, *santri* with a broad perspective, even though they are in a rural area, by sharing the knowledge gained from studying in the Middle East and advocating for a committed approach to learning. This research found that the goal of the *pesantren* is to broaden the horizons of Indonesian society by developing people who can think flexibly while remaining grounded in religious values and norms.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary Indonesian society is becoming increasingly concerned about educational opportunities for its children and faces a dilemma regarding where to educate them, reflecting a high economic growth and a growing middle and upper-middle class. Urban areas have several private schools that focus on science, math, language education, and arts and traditional performing arts, suggesting an accelerating enthusiasm for education. Families are sending their children to such private schools, right from kindergarten, to make them fluent in Indonesian and English. In addition, they are hiring private tutors from an early age to prepare their children for schools that consistently rank high in the annual national examination.

In contrast, Islamic boarding schools, or *pondok pesantren* (hereafter, *pesantren*), are ubiquitous throughout Indonesia, in both urban and rural areas. *Pesantren* provides diverse education. While religious education and norms are emphasized, some of them offer subjects, such as science, mathematics, and languages. *Pesantren* differ in their educational formats and methods according to the policies of the *kyai* who preside over them, and several families continue to choose such schools for their children.

Abaza is a leading scholar on community studies of Indonesian students in the Middle East, especially in Cairo, Egypt (Abaza, 1993, 1994, 2003). In addition, there is a vast amount of research on Islamic and *pesantren* education in Indonesia, such as Dhofier (1999), Nishino (1990), and Lukens-Bull (2008). The author is interested in the social role played by Indonesian students who have studied in Middle Eastern universities after their return to their home country, which has been discussed in Abaza's work. Thus,

the author has attempted to connect and discuss two elements that have not been discussed in previous works—the social role of Indonesian alumni of Middle Eastern universities and the role they play in Islamic education in Indonesia. This research focuses on a community of Indonesian students studying at al-Azhar University in Egypt. It includes their ethnography within the Egyptian community and a study of the subsequent career paths of former students on returning to Indonesia (Kinoshita, 2010, 2012)..

## 2. RESEARCH METHOD

This research is a qualitative observation of the social role that Indonesians who have studied in the Middle East play in Indonesian society. Specifically, the author focuses on a *pesantren* headed by a young *kyai* in East Java province. Through the *kyai*'s experience of studying in the Middle East, his struggle to educate children to the standards of private and urban schools, and the education provided in his *pesantren*, the study will discuss the role of the Middle Eastern university alumni in contemporary Indonesian society where enthusiasm for education is accelerating.

This study is based primarily on field research and interviews conducted in Madura Island, East Java, Republic of Indonesia, in November 2022, using participant observation as the primary research method. In addition, interviews were conducted with *kyai* and their families in *Pondok Pesantren* during the same period, as described below. Interviews were conducted as personal communication. The data collected from these sources were subjected to qualitative analysis for the purposes of this study.

## 3. RESULTS

The results of this study discuss the typology of *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools) and *kyai* in Indonesia including: typology of *pesantren*, *pesantren* and *kyai*, as well as the challenges of a young *kyai* on the island of Madura including an overview of the *Pesantren Miftahul Ulum Al-Islamy*, the daily life of *Santri*, and religious learning and *Kitab Kuning* in *pesantren*.

## 4. DISCUSSION

### Typology of *Pesantren*

Schooling in Indonesia spans a total of nine years, comprising six years of primary education and three years of secondary and higher education. The national education system is headed by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (*Kementerian Pendidikan, Kebudayaan, dan Teknologi*, KPKRT), which oversees national and private general schools, or *sekolah*, and the Ministry of Religious Affairs (*Kementerian Agama*) oversees national and private Islamic schools, or *madrasah* (*Kementerian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan*, 1995).

There are no major differences between the curricula and educational systems of general schools and *madrasahs* because the ratio of general and religious subjects was changed in 1994 with the declaration of nine years of compulsory education. The ratio of religious subjects was reduced to 20% with 80% allotted to general subjects. According to the “Three Ministerial Decisions on Improving the Quality of Education in Madrasahs” issued in 1975, the ratio of general subjects such as arithmetic and science to religious subjects taught in the *madrasahs* was 70:30. However, the 1994 decision further reduced the percentage of religious subjects. In addition, religious education was made compulsory in general schools, with approximately two hours being mandated per week (Hattori, 2007, pp. 8–12). Hence, the differences between the curricula of general schools and *madrasahs* diminished.

*Pesantren* are at the heart of Islamic education in Indonesia. The origin of *pesantren* is uncertain; however, they are believed to be based on a private school established by a master of Islamic religion in Java who was a prominent and influential local figure. After the colonial government introduced the school system, *pesantren* functioned as a place of education for children who could not attend school due to financial reasons (Dhofier, 1999, pp. 2–5, 13–18). Children studying at *pesantren* are called *santri*. *Pesantren* range in size from rural Qur'anic schools, where people of different ages gather to study, to large boarding schools in urban areas. The number of *santri* varies, from small schools with a few students per *kyai* to schools with over 1,000 students and employing several teachers (Pohl, 2007, p. 92). Geertz's description of the *pesantren* landscape is of a loose learning environment, with no timetable or strict rules, under the guidance of a *kyai*. He depicts *santri* traveling long distances to seek the guidance of an eminent *kyai*, as each *kyai* has their own specialty (Geertz, 1960, pp. 177–198). Thus, *pesantren* was responsible for religious education as a traditional, private, and non-institutional place of education that was not limited by grade or curriculum.

However, they gradually began to assume more diverse forms after Independence, during their incorporation into the Indonesian education system (Dhofier, 1999, pp. 20–24). *Pesantren* can be divided into three main categories, according to the Ministry of Religious Affairs – *Pesantren Salafiyah*, *Pesantren Khalafiyah*, and *Kombinasi* (Department Agama, 2003, pp. 29–33).

The presence or absence of *Kitab Kuning* (yellow book) learning is the primary difference between the *Salafiyah* and *Khalafiyah*. The *Salafiyah* uses *Kitab* as the core of learning and does not introduce a grading system or general subjects. Rather, they gather under a *kyai* and follow the *kyai*'s choice of *Kitab* for learning (Husni, 2001, p. 159). Hence, they conduct religious education in a traditional and non-institutionalized manner. In contrast, the *Khalafiyah* does not conduct *Kitab* education, has a general school on its premises under the jurisdiction of the KPKRT, and incorporates general subjects and foreign languages into the educational system of *madrasah* under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Religious Affairs (Husni, 2001, p. 159). *Pesantren* that cannot be strictly classified as *Salafiyah* or *Khalafiyah* is classified as a combination type, that is, *Kombinasi*. The *Kombinasi* continues the study of *Kitab*; however, it focuses on teaching foreign languages and general subjects. Upon completion of a *Khalafiyah* or *Kombinasi Pesantren*, students may receive a certificate of completion from a general or Islamic high school.

### ***Pesantren and Kyai***

*Pesantren* is organized by *kyai*, also called *pengasuh*, a *kyai*'s family, and several relatives, including full-time and part-time teachers and senior *santri*. Besides running the *pesantren* with extensive knowledge of Islam, they serve as decision-makers for residents, mediating daily issues, such as neighbor disputes. The *kyai* are usually descendants of previous generations of *kyai*, who maintain and strengthen their lineage by marrying their sons to daughters of other *kyai* (Dhofier, 1999, p. 38). The form and educational policies of *pesantren* are largely based on the *kyai*'s ideas, which allows the *kyai* to determine the education forms and policies at their discretion. Thus, *pesantren* differ widely depending on the management policy, location, and the presiding *kyai*.

The *kyai* of *Khalafiyah Pesantren* in South Jakarta, for example, which the author has studied in the past, considers himself more of a business executive than a *kyai*, as the operation of the *pesantren* is a business matter. Under his supervision, and his proximity to senior officials in the Ministry of Religious Affairs, the *pesantren* actively receives inspection groups from other countries and university students, and holds various events, such as *iftar* (meals after Ramzan fasting), with the participation of foreign embassies and government officials. The school has made English a compulsory subject. Several of its students have completed the equivalent of a high school diploma and are studying in universities abroad or are entering universities through scholarship funds. The boarding school system in this *pesantren* protects children from the influence of smartphones and the internet and allows them to lead disciplined life, even in urban areas. The students' subsequent high enrolment rate at overseas and general universities, and by being based on Islamic religious norms, has enabled them to attract several wealthy and influential families. In addition, the *kyai* runs a travel agency within the *pesantren*, which has expanded its business by selling pilgrimages to *santri* families and relatives and establishing over 10 school branches in West Java (Kinoshita, 2012, pp. 100–110).

The *pesantren* discussed in this paper is located on an island northeast of Surabaya, the second largest city in Indonesia. Most of its *santri* come from neighboring cities and suburbs of Surabaya. The next section will focus on the *pesantren* management policy of a young *kyai* and the education provided.

### **Overview of Pondok Pesantren Miftahul Ulum Al-Islamy**

The author conducted fieldwork in a *pesantren* on Madura Island in East Java in November 2022. All of Ayyub's narratives and perceptions described in this paper are based on the field research (interviews were conducted from 10 to 12 November 2022). This *pesantren* was chosen as a case study because it is the largest combination-style *pesantren* on Madura Island. It can be reached by crossing the Suramadu Bridge that connects Surabaya and Madura Island. Named *Pondok Pesantren Miftahul Ulum Al-Islamy*, it was established in 1871 by KH (an honorific title combining *kyai* and *Hajj*, a title given to those who have made a pilgrimage) Ahmad Dahlan. After his demise in 1920, his son, KH. Ach. Khotib Dahlan returned from *Makkah*, where he was studying, and took over its operations. During his time, eight dormitories were built, housing approximately 60 male *santri*. In addition to the *pesantren*, he established a *madrasah* under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Religious Affairs and a religious teacher training school (*Pendidikan Guru Agama*) in 1967, which was later changed to a high school program, *Madrasah Tsanawiyah*.

When KH. Ach. Khotib Dahlan died in 1983, his son, KH. Moh. Ilyas Khotib Dahlan, returned from *Makkah* to run the *pesantren*. In 1985, the first girls' dormitory was completed and the school began accepting female *santri*. A secondary school (*Sekolah Menengah Pertama*), a high school (*Sekolah Menengah Atas*), and a vocational school (*Sekolah Menengah Kejuruan*) were started under the jurisdiction of the KPKRT. After the death of KH. Moh. Ilyas Khotib Dahlan in 2018, KH. Moh. Ayyub Mustofah, the eldest of his eight children, and his younger brother As'ad have been jointly presiding over the *pesantren* (Pondok Pesantren Miftahul Ulum Al-Islamy, n.d.).

Ayyub, the current *pengasuh*, received an education equivalent to a high school diploma at a *pesantren* in East Java before enrolling at the al-Azhar University in Cairo, Egypt, where he studied for four years and received a bachelor's degree or *Lc* (license). The author was a master's student at the time, conducting field research on the Indonesian student community in Egypt. Ayyub recalls that when he heard that the author was coming from Japan to conduct research, he was curious and wanted to meet the author. He introduced himself to the author as a student. Ayyub accompanied the author to Indonesian student group gatherings, local organizations, and interviews with the people involved.

After returning to Indonesia, Ayyub studied Qur'an recitation at the Institute of Qur'anic Studies at the National Islamic University of Jakarta (*Universitas Islam Negeri*). In 2014, he married the daughter of another *kyai* in East Java. His father passed away just as he was preparing to become his successor, and Ayyub was suddenly assigned to lead the *pesantren*. Currently, in addition to running the *pesantren*, he manages a fish farm started by his father and oversees general schools, making it difficult for him to coordinate with the relevant ministries and agencies on curriculum revisions and other matters. However, Ayyub believes that his mission is to expose his *santri* to the world by allowing them to experience different cultures, as he did while studying at al-Azhar University.



Figure 1. View of the *pesantren*

Source: Photograph by Ayyub

### Daily Life of a *Santri*

On the compound of the *pesantren* which is shown in Figure 1, in addition to the residence of the *kyai* and his family, there is a mosque, prayer hall, dining hall, kitchen, separate dormitories for male and female *santri*, and classrooms. Other facilities include a mini-soccer field, an audio-visual room, a computer room, a library, and a laundry room. Classes take place from Monday through Friday, and Saturdays and Sundays are holidays. On holidays, families of *santri*, who live nearby, visit them, bringing snacks and refreshments, while those who do not receive visitors, often for financial reasons, spend time with their friends. While the school charges tuition from families with financial means, it provides free education to children from financially weaker families. Many of them work for the *kyai* after completing their education at the *pesantren*.



Figure 2. Inside the *pesantren* compound

Source: Photograph by Ayyub

As of 2023, there were 608 boys and 707 girls in the *pesantren*. This includes children who attend only the general school attached to the *pesantren*, *madrasah*, and Qur'anic tutoring school. A day in a *pesantren* follows the schedule presented in Table 1, except during special events, such as the month of Ramadan or the festival of Eid. The day begins very early. The *Tahajjud* prayer at 3:30 a.m. is not one of the five daily obligatory prayers of the Sunnah; however, it is included in the schedule of this *pesantren* as a practice encouraged by the Qur'an and Hadith. This is followed by the pre-dawn *Subuh* prayer. Everyone gathers for a morning meeting, as shown in Figure 2, several times a month. Study time is scheduled during the morning hours before the general school begins. After lunch, there are classes. Evening prayers and dinner are further followed by studies.

Table 1. General schedule of the *pesantren*

Time	Activities
03:30 to 04:00	Prayer ( <i>Tahajjud</i> )
04:00 to 04:30	Prayer ( <i>Subuh</i> ) pre-dawn

04:30 to 05:00	<i>Pengajian Qur'an</i> (basic Islamic study)
05:00 to 05:30	Language study (Arabic or English)
05:30 to 06:30	<i>Kitab Kuning</i> studying
06:30 to 07:00	Preparation for general school and breakfast
07:00 to 11:30	Classes in the general school
11:30 to 13:15	Rest for lunch and prayer ( <i>Zuhur</i> )
13:15 to 14:00	Preparation for studying religious subjects
14:00 to 16:00	Study of religious subjects
16:15 to 17:00	Prayer ( <i>Ashar</i> ) and dinner
17:00 to 17:30	Reading time
17:30 to 18:00	Prayer ( <i>Maghrib</i> )
18:00 to 19:15	<i>Pengajian Qur'an</i>
19:15 to 19:45	Prayer ( <i>Isha'</i> )
20:00 to 21:30	Self-study (homework, Qur'anic recitation, language study, etc.)

Source: Created by the author

The language study held every morning is one of the first aspects Ayyub incorporated into his *pesantren* as *pengasuh*. When he first started studying at Al-Azhar University, he could only speak Indonesian, which made it difficult for him to communicate with fellow students. Therefore, he began studying English and Arabic every morning. This enabled him to have discussions with international students and participate in study groups (*halqah*) that were voluntarily conducted by his teachers at the university. Ayyub believes that active participation in group studies at the Al-Azhar and language study made him a successful *kyai*, and he wishes the same experience for his *santri*. In the mornings, *santris* are scheduled to attend the general school. According to the schedule, general school spans 4.5 hours, and religious study spans 4 hours and 15 minutes, not including language or self-study time. In addition, this *pesantren* emphasizes the study of general subjects and aims to develop academic skills for future university studies.

This *pesantren* is unique in that the *santri* live in separate dormitories for males and females according to their age. In the girls' dormitory, there are 8–10 *santri* per room. New *santri*, who are 6–8 years old and have just left their parents' house, live in rooms with older *santri*, aged 15–17 years. This role is determined by the wife of the *kyai*, based on their daily routine and academic performance. While it is a great honor to be selected, the older *santri* have several roles to fulfill in addition to their studies, such as bathing the younger *santri* in the morning, conducting early morning prayers, dressing and feeding them, helping them study, and comforting them. The young *santri* go to bed after the evening service as they do not have the energy for self-study. By living in a group for several years, away from their parents, and following a precise schedule from an early age, they can establish healthy living and learning habits, while fostering a sisterhood. As they grow older, they take care of the younger *santri* and take up different roles within the *pesantren*, such as serving as the dormitory supervisor, entertaining the *kyai*'s visitors and their families, and managing the official *pesantren* social networking site.

### Religious Studies and *Kitab Kuning* in *Pesantren*

Since this *pesantren* has the features of a *Khalafiyah*, that is, the traditional *Kitab Kuning*, and a *Salafiyah*, that is, language education, it is classified as a combination type. However, according to Ayyub, this *pesantren* is a *Pesantren Salafiyah Modern* (traditional and modern *pesantren*), which emphasizes *kitab* learning or traditional religious education, while encouraging language learning (Arabic and English) and general subjects. Thus, it hopes to overcome the prejudice of rural *santri* being viewed as those who have only studied religion.

Ayyu/b emphasizes *Pengajian Qur'an* and *Kitab Kuning* study. *Pengajian Qur'an*, which takes place early in the mornings and evenings, is a study of the Qur'an to acquire basic Islamic knowledge. It involves a comprehensive study of Islamic teachings and doctrines, beginning with the recitation and reading of the Qur'an, followed by a review of the proper conduct during prayer, and the religious norms and ethics



Figure 3. *Kitab Kuning*

Source: Photograph by Author



of Islam. During this time, Ayyub goes around the *pesantren*, sharing his experiences and stories with the younger and older *santri* to motivate them. The *santri*, in turn, follow Ayyub with excitement and respect, since they get very few opportunities to meet the *pengasuh*.

In *Kitab Kuning* (yellow book) study (Figure 3), which takes place every morning for one hour, students from different grades gather with their *kyai* to study a *kitab* appropriate to their level of Islamic knowledge. In this *pesantren*, there are cases where students study in one classroom due to limited space (Figure 4). When the author visited the classroom with Ayyub, the *santri* stood up and kept their eyes lowered as a sign of respect, even though a senior teacher was teaching the class. The pages are read from right to left and learning starts with reading aloud. The teacher reads the text one sentence at a time, adding phonetic symbols where necessary. The teacher then explains the sentence and *santri* scribbles notes on the page. Ayyub stated that the number of *pesantren* and teachers who can teach *kitab* is decreasing. He aims to continue the study of *kitab*, which is sometimes criticized as outdated, while simultaneously focusing on training the younger generation to teach *kitab*. Since the study of *kitab* is the origin of the study of Islam, Ayyub wants the *santri* in his *pesantren* to venture out into the world while keeping the tradition alive. The young *kyai*'s aspirations are passed on to the *santri* through their education.



Figure 4. *Santri* studying *Kitab Kuning* in the classroom

Source: Photograph by Author

## 5. CONCLUSION

This study focuses on the role of one Al-Azhar University alumni in an Islamic boarding school in Indonesia. The school curriculum runs parallel to the national education system while maintaining religious values and norms in contemporary Indonesian society where enthusiasm for education is increasing. This paper reveals how, using his experience of studying abroad, a *kyai* educates children in a way that parallels the education imparted in private and urban schools.

Unlike *sekolah* and *madrasah*, where curricula are established and guidelines for each grade level are set, the educational format and content of *pesantren* are determined at the *kyai*'s discretion. Some *pesantren* have their main school in South Jakarta and attract wealthy urban residents under a strategic *kyai*, while others, such as Ayyub's *pesantren* on Madura Island, provide educational opportunities for children in the suburbs under a prominent and young *kyai*. From Ayyub's narrative, the *pesantren* does not seek to educate conservative students who only study religion, rather to educate well-balanced *santri* who are knowledgeable about a variety of topics while adhering to religious values and norms. Ayyub's desire to broaden the horizons of the *santri* who have never left the island of Madura or neighboring towns is reflected in his efforts to introduce new languages and share his experiences as part of *Pengajian Qur'an* while maintaining the traditional *kitab* learning style. The goal of the *pesantren* is to broaden the horizons of Indonesian society by developing people who can think flexibly while remaining grounded in religious values and norms.

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