

# PESANTREN IN DYNAMIC TRANSFORMATION: Harmonizing Classical Roots and Modern Practices

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**Abstract:** Caught between the pull of tradition and the push of modernity, *pesantren* is undergoing a crucial transformation in the landscape of Indonesian Islamic education. This study explores how pesantrens maintain their classical roots while integrating modern educational practices. It employs a narrative review with data collected from relevant peer-reviewed literature. These data are synthesized according to common themes and analyzed qualitatively. The review reveals that, despite external pressures (e.g., colonial rule and state policies) and its active role in civil society, pesantren continues to preserve traditional Islam by sustaining classical Islamic scholarship, moral teachings, and kyai-led authority. At the same time, modernization has strongly influenced pesantren education, with many institutions expanding their curricula, adopting inclusive governance, utilizing digital tools, and aligning with national education policies to strengthen institutional capacity and relevance. These pesantrens demonstrate a careful balancing act; they selectively integrate modern educational reforms while upholding their religious traditions although certain issues still merit further attention. Overall, these findings underscore the pesantren’s resilience, adaptability, and significance in today’s Indonesian educational context.

**Keywords:** Pesantren transformation, Islamic education, Indonesia

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## Introduction

*Pesantren*, Indonesia's traditional Islamic educational institution with a boarding system, has long been recognized as a vital institution for religious education, character formation, and community development. It has played an important role in shaping the country's Islamic scholarship and cultural identity. Initially, this institution emphasizes classical Islamic studies, such as *tafsîr* (Quranic exegesis), *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), and *hadîts* (prophetic traditions), alongside moral discipline among *santris* (pesantren students). However, in the face of modern educational demands, pesantren tries to adapt while maintaining its core identity. Its evolving nature reflects a broader dynamic within Islamic education between honoring tradition and embracing modernization.

A widely embraced motto within the pesantren world is *al-muḥâfazhotu 'ala al-qodîm as-shôlih wal akhdzu bi al-jadîd al-ashlah*, which translates as 'to preserve good old traditions and to adopt better new ones.' This motto captures the heart of transformation and reflects the pesantren's dedication to safeguarding its established values while integrating modern educational practices. This way, pesantren takes a dual approach; it needs first to stay relevant in an era of rapid social change and second to serve as a center for religious learning, moral formation, and community development. Some pesantrens still strongly focus on traditional Islamic scholarship, while many have adopted a hybrid model that blends classical studies with contemporary subjects. As this process unfolds, we come to know that this adaptation is not simply about modernization. It is about preparing graduates with a deep grounding in Islamic knowledge and the practical skills required for success in today's world.

Structurally, pesantren is built upon at least five key elements: the *pondok* (dormitory) where students reside; the mosque as a center for worship and learning; the *santris*; the teaching of *kitab kuning* (literally "yellow books," referring to classical Islamic scriptures); and the *kyai* who holds religious, educational, and social authority.<sup>1</sup> While often classified as either *salaf* (traditional) or *khalaf* (modern), the boundary between the two types is increasingly blurred. Many salaf pesantrens, for instance, have introduced modern features such as structured curricula, libraries, and formal schooling that includes non-religious subjects. Despite these adaptations, they remain categorized as salaf pesantren due to their commitment to maintaining distinctive teaching methods (e.g., *sorogan* or one-on-one study and *bandongan* or group study session), social roles (e.g., spiritual guidance and *tarekat*), and reliance on *kitab kuning*.<sup>2</sup> For many pesantrens, retaining these markers of tradition serves as a symbolic anchor that signals continuity with centuries of Islamic scholarship amid institutional change.

Throughout its long history, pesantren has functioned as a self-sustaining institution led by the *kyai*. These *kyais*, through their teachings and leadership, shape a learning environment where *santris* study religious subjects and live communally under strict discipline. Ismail et al. mention that emotional and moral development in pesantren is

systematically nurtured through various ways, among which pedagogical practices such as *talaqqî* (the Javanese *sorogan*) and *halaqah* (the Javanese *bandongan*) play a significant role.<sup>3</sup> Bruinessen further emphasizes that the tradition of Islamic learning in Indonesia is preserved in pesantren through the transmission of *kitab kuning*. Although this corpus is often regarded as a closed and finite body of knowledge with little room for reinterpretation, the pesantren tradition demonstrates notable flexibility and adaptability.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, Harnadi et al. highlight how the kyai's religious authority is maintained through the pesantren's daily practices, the study of *kitab kuning*, and the concept of *barakah* (divine blessing). This authority remains resilient, particularly among santris who continue to engage in lifelong learning under the kyai's guidance, despite the rise of digital religious expressions.<sup>5</sup> Beside its educational role, pesantren also serves as a center of political resistance during the independence movement<sup>6</sup> and a distribution hub during natural disasters.<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, the expansion of Indonesia's national education system, growing demands for standardized curricula, and the rapid rise of information technology have forced many pesantrens to redefine their educational models. For example, Sarwenda et al. find that some pesantrens have successfully integrated advanced technology into their agribusiness programs through a digital entrepreneurship initiative called *Infratani* (integrated farming with technology and information). Their finding demonstrates how pesantren can leverage agricultural expertise and digital tools to support both education and institutional economic sustainability.<sup>8</sup> Next, Raihani highlights both prospects and limitations of a pesantren in integrating multicultural education through its curriculum. While subjects like Sociology, Civics (PKn), Ethics (akhlak), and History include topics on cultural diversity and tolerance, classroom practices show these themes are not meaningfully emphasized. Instead, multicultural values are more effectively cultivated through informal interactions.<sup>9</sup> Last but not least, Isbah and Sakhiyya conclude that many pesantrens have recently undergone substantial changes in their education systems by updating what they teach and how they teach. These changes are driven by state-led modernization, evolving parental expectations tied to socio-economic shifts, and the visions of pesantren leaders regarding future Muslim generations.<sup>10</sup>

While previous studies have portrayed both the traditional role of pesantren and its pedagogical change, the rapid developments in education and society today demand a deeper exploration of how pesantren manages modernization while safeguarding its core values. To better understand and assess this ongoing transformation, some fundamental research questions (RQs) emerge. RQ1: How does pesantren preserve its traditional values and practices? RQ2: To what extent has modernization shaped educational reforms in pesantren? RQ3: How does pesantren balance religious traditions with modern educational reforms?

## Method

This study uses a narrative review approach to synthesize existing research on the dynamic transformation of Indonesia's pesantren. It examines three key issues: the strategies pesantren employ to maintain their traditions, the extent to which modernization has shaped their educational practices, and the ways in which they balance religious heritage with contemporary reforms. A total of twenty-six studies were specifically analyzed, selected from academic databases (e.g., Scopus, Google Scholar, and SINTA) using keywords and phrases relevant to the research questions. Inclusion criteria required that sources (1) be peer-reviewed, (2) directly address at least one of the three key issues, and (3) provide substantive empirical or conceptual insights. Most sources came from Scopus-indexed journals to ensure quality and credibility, with additional peer-reviewed sources from Sinta 2-accredited Indonesian journals. While most sources are recent, the authors do not specify the years of publication, as some older sources remain relevant and significant. The authors then summarize the main findings from these selected sources, organize common themes according to the research questions, and interpret them qualitatively. By connecting ideas from various studies, the authors construct a cohesive narrative for each research question to provide a clear understanding of the subject matter. To reflect the above analytical approach, the following section (results and discussion) is divided into four subheadings: the first offers general background, while the remaining three directly address each research question in order.

## Results and Discussion

### Historical origins of pesantren

Pesantren has firm historical roots that are intimately connected with the spread of Islam across the Indonesian archipelago. The term *pesantren* is believed to originate from *santri*, meaning a devout learner dedicated to the study of Islamic knowledge. In Javanese, adding the prefix *pe-* and the suffix *-an* turns the word into a noun that denotes a place; thus, *pesantren* refers to a place where santris live and pursue their studies. This institution has played a crucial role in shaping Indonesia's religious and educational landscapes. The origins of pesantren can be traced back to the early arrival of Islam in the archipelago, facilitated mainly through trade routes connecting the region with the Arabian Peninsula and the Indian subcontinent. As Muslim traders and scholars settled in coastal communities, they established centers of learning that sought to educate local populations about Islamic teachings and practices.<sup>11</sup> Over time, these early learning hubs paved the way for a more structured pesantren system that would become integral to Indonesia's Islamic education tradition.

The pesantren began to take form around the 16th century,<sup>12</sup> during the early spread of Islam in the archipelago and the missionary efforts of scholars known as the *Walisongo*

(Nine Saints). These influential figures played a vital role in *da'wah* (propagating Islam) through peaceful means. They placed religious education at the heart of spiritual life.<sup>13</sup> For example, to make Islamic teachings more accessible, these saints creatively incorporated *wayang kulit* (shadow puppetry) into their *da'wah* methods. Sunan Kalijaga, in particular, gained renown for using *wayang* performances to spread Islamic values.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, rather than relying solely on Arabic, these saints translated and explained Islamic teachings in local languages (e.g., Javanese and Sundanese) to help the new faith resonate more deeply with local communities. Figures such as Sunan Giri and Sunan Bonang composed *tembang* (traditional Javanese songs) and poetry to deliver Islamic messages more artistically and engagingly. Alongside these efforts, the Walisongo also established pesantrens as formal centers for studying Quranic knowledge, *ḥadīths*, *fiqh*, and the Arabic language (mainly for reading), which laid the foundation for a peculiarly Indonesian model of Islamic education.<sup>15</sup>

Among the most influential figures in the history of pesantren are Haji Ahmad Dahlan and Kyai Muhammad Hasyim Asy'ari. Ahmad Dahlan (1868–1923) in 1912 established the Islamic reformist organization named Muhammadiyah with the goal of modernizing Islamic education. He sought to blend Western-style schooling with religious teachings by creating a new educational model. Unlike traditional pesantrens, Muhammadiyah schools incorporated science, mathematics, social studies, and other subjects alongside Islamic studies. Through this approach, Ahmad Dahlan aimed to equip Muslims with a balanced knowledge base that enabled them to engage fully with modern society and uphold Islamic values.<sup>16</sup> Meanwhile, Hasyim Asy'ari (1871–1947) founded Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) in 1926 and firmly advocated for the preservation of traditional pesantren models. His teachings emphasized the importance of classical Islamic scholarship, yet they also took on a political dimension, particularly during Indonesia's struggle for independence. Hasyim Asy'ari encouraged santris to defend their homeland. He also helped solidify pesantren as a crucial center of both religious learning and nationalist movements.<sup>17</sup>

Looking at the historical record, pesantren has functioned as an educational institution and vital center for community development, social cohesion, and cultural protection. This role is evident in many pesantrens, which actively preserve traditional Javanese Islamic arts (e.g., *qasidah*, poetic Islamic songs performed in Javanese or Arabic) and promote interfaith and intercultural dialogue.<sup>18</sup> Many pesantrens also offer vocational training programs in areas like handicrafts and entrepreneurship to prepare santris with practical skills for economic empowerment.<sup>19</sup> They have also played a critical role in nurturing *ulamâ*, religious scholars guiding local communities in faith and practice. In addition, pesantren has been instrumental in maintaining Indonesia's pluralistic society by fostering tolerance and mutual respect among different religious and cultural groups. A notable figure who embodies these values is KH. Abdurrahman Wahid, affectionately known as Gusdur. Gusdur, an alumnus of Pesantren Tebuireng in Jombang, East Java,

became a respected Islamic scholar and later served as president of Indonesia. He championed pluralism, democracy, and interfaith dialogue. Through his leadership, Gusdur influenced local communities and national policies promoting religious tolerance and social justice.<sup>20</sup>

Pesantren has evolved from an early center of Islamic learning established during the initial spread of Islam in the Indonesian archipelago into a structured educational institution. It has significantly shaped the country's religious and educational landscape, as well as offers a strong foundation for Islamic scholarship and community development. Its historical continuity has positioned pesantren as a vital bridge between Indonesia's Islamic roots and contemporary practices.

### **Preservation of traditional identity**

In Indonesia, pesantren has long stood as the guardian of traditional Islam preserving its teachings, moral values, and educational model. It focuses on both Islamic intellectual development and spiritual growth. Despite the challenges of modernization and globalization, pesantren has demonstrated remarkable resilience in maintaining its core identity. Fauzi argues that this endurance rests on the pesantren's ability to sustain intellectual and spiritual connections across generations through the transmission of religious scholarship in kyai families and the cultivation of *tarekat* (sufi traditions). These practices, reinforced by the concept of *barakah*, legitimize the pesantren's role as a center of Islamic knowledge and moral guidance.<sup>21</sup> The preservation of tradition is also reflected in regular ritual practices such as *tawassul*, *dhikr*, *salawât*, and the recitation of *râtib al-haddâd*, as practiced at Pondok Pesantren At-Tamur in Bandung, West Java.<sup>22</sup> Such a 'system' builds a strong sense of cultural and religious identity among santri and keeps pesantren important in guiding Muslims to live good and faithful lives.

Observed more closely, pesantren has maintained Islamic orthodoxy since the colonial period, when European educational models were seen as a threat to Islamic teachings. In response to this, pesantren leaders strengthened their ties with Islamic learning centers in the Middle East. Isbah explains that, despite external pressures (i.e., secular education imposed by colonial rulers), pesantren's curricula remained rooted in classical Islamic knowledge and ensured the authenticity of its teachings. However, with the rise of reform movements in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, many pesantrens began to adapt their educational methods. The introduction of graded-class systems, alongside traditional *halaqah* (study circles), marked a major shift that reflected a blend of preservation and innovation.<sup>23</sup> Today, pesantren continues to contend with the influence from the Indonesian government, which seeks to integrate this institution into the national education system. While many of them have incorporated elements of the formal curriculum, some remain committed to their traditional mission to produce Islamic scholars or *ulamâ*.

Apart from educational roles, pesantren helps strengthen civil society by showing how traditional religious institutions can preserve their identity while participating in public life. In this sense, some scholars argue that pesantren, due to its religious foundations, is inherently resistant to democratic values. However, Sirry challenges this assumption and points out how pesantren actively engages in civil-pluralist traditions, such as religious tolerance, democracy, and interfaith dialogue. Although it is true that certain pesantrens continue to uphold rigid interpretations of Islam, many serve as centers of pluralism, reject the notion of an Islamic state, and advocate for religious values in the public sphere. This perspective, according to Sirry, aligns with global viewpoints holding that religious institutions can separate from direct political power yet still influence democratic norms.<sup>24</sup> The pesantren experience proves that traditional Islam is not necessarily opposed to modern governance. Instead, it can serve as a moral foundation that reinforces ethical conduct, civic participation, and social harmony.

Equally important is to note the pesantren's evolving approach to education, which it achieves without compromising its traditional identity. Regarding this point, Nilan highlights how pesantren cultivates a "spirit of education" that integrates religious learning with intellectual and vocational skills. This dual approach fosters that santri view their education as (1) a spiritual journey and (2) a practical foundation for engaging with contemporary society.<sup>25</sup> In a corresponding tone, Lukens-Bull states that pesantren reconstructs modernity and tradition to create an educational framework harmonizing Islamic teachings with professional competence. Institutions such as Pesantren Al-Hikam exemplify this balance by combining secular higher education with traditional religious training. As a result, these institutions can produce professionally skilled graduates deeply committed to Islamic values.<sup>26</sup> By promoting an Islamic modernity that aligns career development with religious devotion, they aim to confirm that modernization enhances, rather than diminishes, their fundamental religious identity.

Furthermore, pesantren continues to preserve its traditional identity by grounding modern practices in long-standing Islamic teachings, such as inclusive values. Pohl specifically demonstrates the example of Pesantren Al-Muayyad Windan, which actively promotes democracy and pluralism. This institution challenges the idea that pesantren is inherently exclusivist; it demonstrates that traditional Islamic education can stimulate progressive social change. This pesantren shows how pesantren integrates modern ideals without losing its religious essence by prioritizing conflict resolution, interfaith understanding, and civic engagement.<sup>27</sup> This case highlights an important truth: continuing traditional Islam doesn't mean resisting change. Rather, it means selectively adopting new ideas that enrich the pesantren's educational and social functions. This ability illustrates the pesantren's dynamic role in shaping Indonesian society.

The persistence of pesantren as the guardian of traditional Islam in Indonesia shows how religious institutions can preserve their identity while withstanding social and political

change. While critics often view pesantren as by nature conservative, the evidence suggests otherwise: many pesantrens actively engage in pluralist practices, promote civic participation, and selectively adopt modern pedagogical forms without abandoning their core traditions. This evidence raises a broader academic debate about whether Islamic institutions can simultaneously safeguard orthodoxy and support democratization. Hefner argues that Indonesian Islamic education is distinctive precisely because it has combined orthodoxy with a civic ethos.<sup>28</sup> Here, pesantrens both teach strict religious knowledge and practices and encourage students to engage constructively in society. Likewise, Barton contends that Islamic civil society actors, including the pesantren, are key to Indonesia's democratic resilience, as they reinterpret tradition to address contemporary challenges.<sup>29</sup> Viewed through this lens, the pesantren's preservation of its traditional identity is not a passive resistance to change but an active negotiation of modernity.

## Modernization and educational reform

The modernization of pesantren education is an ongoing and multifaceted process shaped by both internal transformations and external influences. From the start, pesantrens focused on religious instruction with curricula centered around classical Islamic texts and traditional learning methods. However, significant reforms have become necessary due to globalization, socio-political changes, and shifts in national education policies. Many pesantrens have expanded their curriculum to include non-religious subjects such as mathematics, science, and foreign languages in response to these pressures. This expansion is not merely about adding new subjects but a strategic move to equip santri with a more comprehensive education that can enhance their competitiveness and adaptability in modern society.<sup>30</sup> Some pesantrens have even engaged in environmental activism, with junior kyais known as *lora* promoting waste management and eco-theology with the potential for sustainable programs.<sup>31</sup> Gradually, pesantren is no longer seen solely as a center of Islamic scholarship. It has transformed into an institution capable of preparing students for diverse academic and professional pathways.

One of the most considerable transformations in pesantren education has been the evolution of leadership and governance structures. The kyai held absolute authority, and leadership was often hereditary (i.e., passed down through the family lines). This model may sustain continuity but limits external input. However, as pesantren expanded and modernized, it adopted more participatory governance models to accommodate a growing student population and increasing administrative complexity. Lukens-Bull points out that many contemporary pesantrens now involve multiple stakeholders (such as parents, alumni, and even external education experts) in their decision-making processes. This shift has contributed to more efficient institutional management, financial sustainability, and systematic curriculum development.<sup>32</sup> Such collective leadership and



structured administration also enable educational reforms within pesantren to be well-organized and adaptable to modern challenges. This idea is evident as these reforms allow the institution to benefit from shared expertise, coherent governance, and flexible strategies.

Technology has also played a transformative role in the modernization of pesantren education. Even traditional pesantrens or *pesantren salaf* have begun integrating digital tools into their learning systems. Many pesantrens nowadays use online platforms, websites, and messaging applications to facilitate religious instruction, improve communication, and expand community engagement.<sup>33</sup> These digital innovations empower pesantren to extend its educational reach beyond physical boundaries; they provide wider access to Islamic teachings. However, limited internet access, inadequate digital literacy, and financial constraints hinder widespread adoption, especially in rural areas. Despite these obstacles, Esposito is right when stating that religious institutions must embrace modern technological advancements to stay relevant in an increasingly digitalized world.<sup>34</sup> In the pesantren context, digital platforms should enhance the efficiency of learning and strengthen its role in disseminating Islamic teachings to a broader audience.

In addition to technological adaptation, structural changes in pesantren education have been reinforced by government policies. These policies integrate pesantren into Indonesia's national education framework, as evidenced in the enactment of Law No. 20/2003 on the National Education System that officially recognized pesantren as an essential component of the country's education sector. Furthermore, the RUU Pesantren (Pesantren Bill) of 2019 solidified its legal status and provided a more formal foundation for its role. Zuhdi believes that these policy developments reflect a broader recognition of pesantren's contribution to national education and its capacity to produce well-rounded graduates. This legal recognition has enabled pesantren to receive government funding, expand infrastructure, and improve teacher training programs, which in turn accelerate its adaptation to modern practices.<sup>35</sup> These facilities help ensure its continued relevance in society.

However, some pesantrens remain cautious about excessive state intervention. These pesantrens are concerned it could dilute their religious autonomy. This ongoing issue of balancing government support with institutional independence continues to shape how pesantrens navigate the complexities of modernization. In line with this point, Tolchah and Mu'ammarr introduce key obstacles, namely cultural tensions between conservative traditions and modern influences, a shortage of highly qualified educators, and structural limitations in governance. As a response, pesantren has adopted innovative strategies, including interdisciplinary curriculum development, participatory education planning, and strengthened collaboration with external academic and vocational institutions.<sup>36</sup> Meanwhile, Budiharso and Suharto affirm that pesantren needs to implement quality

assurance mechanisms to maintain its competitiveness within Indonesia's broader education sector. This endeavor involves incorporating modern management practices, enhancing teacher competency, and refining academic programs. In doing so, pesantren can sustain its role as a dynamic educational institution that addresses both religious and secular needs.<sup>37</sup>

The modernization of pesantren is a complex process that thoughtfully balances the preservation of Islamic educational traditions with the reforms necessary to meet contemporary challenges. As Rohman et al. explain, integrating traditional Islamic teachings with modern subjects ensures that pesantren graduates are proficient in religious knowledge and equipped to engage with the demands of a rapidly globalizing world.<sup>38</sup> This commitment to integration is reflected in the emergence of diverse pesantren models, ranging from traditional pesantrens to those offering formal education up to the university level. Many pesantrens also provide vocational training, entrepreneurship programs, and community development initiatives as part of their holistic educational approach. These initiatives demonstrate the flexibility and resilience of the institution.<sup>39</sup> More importantly, the ability of pesantren to adapt reflects its enduring significance in Indonesia's educational and cultural landscape. Pesantren continues to evolve and will remain a vital institution for future generations.

### **Balancing tradition and modernity**

Globalization and modernization have prompted pesantren to recalibrate and stay relevant within the evolving educational landscape. It is no longer solely dependent on classical methods. Many of them now blend contemporary subjects such as science, technology, and social studies with traditional religious teachings. This shift is guided by the principle of *al-muhâfazhatu 'ala al-qadîm as-shâlih wal akhdzu bi al-jadîd al-ashlah*.<sup>40</sup> By integrating classical Islamic knowledge with modern pedagogical practices, pesantren ensures that students develop both spiritual depth and intellectual flexibility. As Mujahid exemplifies in his research, institutions like Pesantren Assalaam have successfully embraced this approach by combining rigorous religious education with contemporary disciplines. At this pesantren, the educational process is developed based on five major principles: mastery of science and technology, *tafaqquh fî al dîn*, *akhlâq al karîmah* (noble character), commitment to Islamic *da'wah*, and leadership skills.<sup>40</sup>

One key way pesantren balances tradition with educational reform is through its engagement with national education policies. Since the passage of the Undang-Undang Sistem Pendidikan Nasional (UUSPN, National Education System Law) in 1989 and 2003, pesantren has faced the challenge of mediating the complex relationship between religious identity and state regulations. According to Ihsan et al., many pesantrens struggle to fully implement both religious and national curricula. This challenge is not merely administrative; it is also philosophical. That is, pesantren strives to ensure that religious

education remains central while also allowing students to engage with contemporary scientific knowledge.<sup>41</sup> In line with this issue, Yusuf and Taufiq emphasize the crucial role of kyais in shaping how pesantrens navigate the balance between religious tradition and state regulations. In this sense, these kyais creatively interpret and implement government policies by offering multiple educational units within the institution. This strategy gives students and parents choices while maintaining pesantren ideals.<sup>42</sup>

The balancing act between tradition and modernity in many pesantrens is also reflected in their use of language. Susylowati et al. highlight that pesantren has become multilingual environments where Indonesian, Arabic, English, and Javanese are seamlessly integrated. Indonesian is the dominant language, used for both formal instruction and everyday communication, and acts as a bridge between religious and secular subjects. Arabic, however, holds a central role in religious discourse; it allows students to engage directly with classical Islamic texts and deepens their understanding of Islamic scholarship. In addition, the growing emphasis on English reflects pesantrens' awareness of global interconnectedness and facilitates students' participation in international academic and professional spheres. Javanese, particularly in informal settings, maintains its importance as a cultural anchor; it reinforces the pesantren's local identity.<sup>43</sup> The ability of santri to switch fluidly between languages demonstrates the structured yet adaptable approach to communication in pesantren. This condition prepares graduates for roles in religious leadership, education, and other professional fields.

A critical aspect of this balancing act deals with governance and institutional autonomy. Nurtawab and Wahyudi note that the passing of the 2019 Pesantren Law marks a notable milestone for pesantren, as its legal recognition and equal status within Indonesia's educational system prompt shifts in traditional pedagogical values. In this regard, pesantren is compelled to adapt its informal learning methods to align with modern administrative and bureaucratic standards.<sup>44</sup> Later, from Fatmawati et al.'s study, we know how pesantren-based universities, such as Institut Agama Islam (IAI) Al-Qodiri and IAI Syarifuddin, have navigated the challenge of seeking academic independence while retaining their religious foundations. On the one hand, this approach facilitates greater academic freedom (i.e., promoting research, innovation, and curriculum development), while ensuring that the essence of pesantren's core values remains intact. On the other hand, governance challenges persist, particularly in reconciling the autonomy of academic administration with the expectations of the kyais, who have traditionally held significant authority within these institutions. Issues such as financial sustainability, regulatory compliance, and faculty recruitment further complicate the governance structures.<sup>45</sup> In this situation, strong leadership, resilience, and a clear vision are essential for ensuring that pesantren-based higher education continues integrating religious knowledge with modern academic standards that adequately prepare students for religious and professional careers.

Other significant concerns involve religious tolerance and inclusivity. Mappiasse and Hayadin warn that pesantren, while providing intensive Islamic education, may unintentionally foster exclusivist tendencies if students are not exposed to interfaith dialogue and multicultural perspectives. To address this issue, discussions on religious pluralism, comparative theology, and ethical leadership can be incorporated into the curriculum.<sup>46</sup> Such initiatives are feasible since several pesantrens under the leadership of progressive kyais have actively cultivated inclusive worldviews through critical pedagogy, cross-religious engagement, civic participation, and so forth. These approaches can provide practical mechanisms to promote tolerance and moderation across diverse social and religious contexts.<sup>47</sup> According to Pohl, what pesantren does is more than merely tolerate religious diversity; it actively fosters pluralism while strengthening religious commitment. Pesantren challenges the misconception that openness to interfaith dialogue will undermine Islamic identity.<sup>48</sup> It demonstrates that pluralism and religious commitment are compatible.

A complex interplay of internal initiatives and external policies also influences the evolution of pesantren in the modern era. Kosim et al. underscore the role of government policies in shaping the integration of pesantren into Indonesia's broader educational framework. While government recognition and financial support offer important resources, they also bring with them regulatory requirements that challenge the traditional autonomy of pesantren.<sup>49</sup> For many pesantrens, this condition presents a delicate balance between maintaining their independence and meeting the standards set by the state. This balance requires thoughtful strategic planning and negotiation to secure that pesantren can benefit from government support while staying true to its core religious mission. Besides, pesantren must contend with broader societal challenges such as ideological shifts, globalization, and the increasing demand for curricula that prepare students for the job market. These pressures push pesantren to adopt modern educational practices without compromising its religious teachings. Comparative studies of religious education policies from various countries, as Kosim et al. suggest, could offer valuable insights to engage with these challenges effectively.<sup>50</sup> Through continuous adaptation to evolving social, political, and economic landscapes, pesantren can maintain its relevance and continue producing capable graduates, i.e., those rooted in faith and globally prepared.

## Conclusion

Pesantren is in motion constantly transforming and renegotiating its role in education and religious life. This narrative review ends with three main points based on the research questions. *First*, pesantren has long preserved traditional Islam by upholding classical scholarship, moral teachings, and kyai-led authority to ensure the continuity of religious knowledge through generations. Even amid external influences (i.e., colonial

rule and state policies), it has remained rooted in its core religious identity while actively engaging in public life. Pesantren also shows how traditional institutions can contribute to civil society and support progressive social transformation. *Second*, modernization has profoundly shaped educational reforms in pesantren, evident in curricular expansion into non-religious subjects, the adoption of participatory governance, and the integration of digital technology. Government policies have subsequently formalized their role within the national education system, enabling access to funding and institutional support. Despite ongoing challenges such as limited resources and maintaining autonomy, these pesantrens continue to innovate through curriculum reform, quality assurance, and partnerships with external institutions. *Third*, pesantren demonstrates a continuous balancing act by integrating modern subjects, technology, and governance reforms while upholding its core religious traditions and values. This notion is evident in its curriculum, language use, institutional governance, and engagement with national education policies, notwithstanding the fact that some matters still need to be addressed. By adapting thoughtfully, pesantren confirms that it remains relevant in the modern era without losing its spiritual and cultural identity. Taken as a whole, these findings underscore the pesantren's resilience, adaptability, and significance in today's Indonesian educational context.

However, this study primarily relies on existing literature, which may not fully capture the diverse and evolving nature of pesantren across different regions of Indonesia. While the review highlights broad trends in the modernization of pesantren education, it lacks in-depth empirical analysis of how specific pesantren institutions adapt to modernization in their unique contexts. Future research should incorporate field studies, interviews with pesantren leaders and students, and comparative analyses across different regions. This point would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the ways in which this institution handles contemporary educational challenges and continues to balance its traditional roots with the demands of the current era.

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## Endnotes:

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<sup>2</sup> M. V. Bruinessen, *Kitab Kuning, Pesantren, dan Tarekat: Tradisi-Tradisi Islam di Indonesia* (Bandung: Mizan, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> S. Ismail et al., "Fostering Emotional and Moral Development in Islamic Boarding Schools: The Impact of Talaqqî and Halaqa Traditions," *Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 10, no. 1 (2024): 13–24. See also N. Azizah et al., "Humanizing Humans' in Inclusive Pesantren: The Role of Peer Support in Promoting Self-Efficacy and Independence," *Jurnal Ilmiah Peuradeun* 13, no. 2 (2025): 987–1020, that highlight the role of peer support in enhancing students' self-efficacy and independence in pesantren.

<sup>4</sup> M. V. Bruinessen, "Pesantren and Kitab Kuning: Maintenance and Continuation of a Tradition of Religious Learning," in *Texts from the Islands: Oral and Written Traditions of Indonesia and the Malay World*, ed. Wolfgang Marschall (Berne: University of Berne, 1994), 121–45.

<sup>5</sup> D. Harnadi, H. Siahaan, and M. Hilmy, "Pesantren and the Preservation of Traditional Religious Authority in the Digital Age," *Masyarakat, Kebudayaan, & Politik* 34, no. 3 (2021): 272–280.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, M. Islam, M. Fadlan, and A. Abdullah, "Resisting the 19th Century Colonial Politics of Exile: The Study of Kiai Ahmad Arrifai Kalisalak and Kiai Hasan Maolani Kuningan Letters," *Wawasan: Jurnal Ilmiah Agama & Sosial Budaya* 6, no. 1 (2021): 31–42. Also see the role of Mandailing ulamâ at Ja'far et al., "Discovering the Legacy of Mandailing Ulama: Education, Intellectuals, and Politics in North Sumatra in the Early 20th Century," *Ulumuna* 26, no. 2 (2022): 296–336.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, R. Nur Aulia et al., "Pesantren-Based Disaster Mitigation Strategy: Case Study at Pondok Pesantren Darunnajah Cipining Bogor," in *Annual Conference on Environmental Science, Society and Its Application* (Purwokerto, Indonesia: IOP Publishing Ltd., 2019), 1–7.

<sup>8</sup> Sarwenda et al., "Development of Digital Entrepreneurship Programs in Pesantren in Indonesia," in *Religion, Education, Science and Technology towards a More Inclusive and Sustainable Future*, ed. Maila D.H. Rahiem, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 2024), 273–78.

<sup>9</sup> Raihani, "Report on Multicultural Education in Pesantren," *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education* 42, no. 4 (2012): 585–605.

<sup>10</sup> M. F. Isbah and Z. Sakhiyya, "Pesantren in Contemporary Indonesia: Negotiating between Equity and the Market," in *Education in Indonesia: Critical Perspectives on Equity and Social Justice*, ed. Z. Sakhiyya and T. W. Mulya (Singapore: Springer, 2023), 137–52.

<sup>11</sup> A. Azra, *Jaringan Ulama Timur Tengah dan Kepulauan Nusantara Abad XVII & XVIII: Melacak Akar-Akar Pembaruan Pemikiran Islam di Indonesia* (Jakarta: Prenada Media, 2004).

<sup>12</sup> Dhoûer, *The Pesantren Tradition: The Role of the Kyai in the Maintenance of Traditional Islam in Java*.

<sup>13</sup> A. Kasdi, "The Role of Walisongo in Developing the Islam Nusantara Civilization," *Addin* 11, no. 1 (2017): 1–28.

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<sup>15</sup> A. J. Afandi, "Islam and Local Culture: The Acculturation Formed by Walisongo in Indonesia," *Indonesian Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 4, no. 1 (2023): 103–24.

<sup>16</sup> M. Maraulang, "KH. Ahmad Dahlan and the Muhammadiyah Movement: Trailblazers of Educational Transformation in Indonesia," *International Journal of Asian Education* 6, no. 1 (2025): 164–75.

<sup>17</sup> A. Lubis, M. Bakar, and A. Fuad, "Islamic Thought of KH. M. Hasyim Asy'ari in Fostering Love for the Motherland," *Fikrotuna: Jurnal Pendidikan & Manajemen Islam* 14, no. 2 (2024): 52–65.

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- <sup>19</sup> S. Mahmudah, F. Fakhruddin, and A. Rifai, "The Implementation of Vocational Education Programs in Pondok Pesantren Al-Qur'an Gumawang Wiradesa Pekalongan," *Educational Management* 8, no. 1 (2019): 61–69.
- <sup>20</sup> A. Munjid, "Abdurrahman Wahid's Contribution for Inter-Religious Dialogue in Indonesia," *Aqlam: Journal of Islam and Plurality* 5, no. 1 (2020): 44–62.
- <sup>21</sup> M.L. Fauzi, "Traditional Islam in Javanese Society: The Roles of Kyai and Pesantren in Preserving Islamic Tradition and Negotiating Modernity," *Journal of Indonesian Islam* 6, no. 1 (2012): 125–44.
- <sup>22</sup> A. Hasibuan et al., "Sufistic Approach of Character Education in an Indonesian Islamic Boarding School," *Miqot* 49, no. 1 (2025): 184–204.
- <sup>23</sup> M. F. Isbah, "Pesantren in the Changing Indonesian Context: History and Current Developments," *QJIS: Qudus International Journal of Islamic Studies* 8, no. 1 (2020): 65–106.
- <sup>24</sup> M. Sirry, "The Public Expression of Traditional Islam: The Pesantren and Civil Society in Post Suharto Indonesia," *The Muslim World* 100, no. 1 (2010): 60–77.
- <sup>25</sup> P. Nilan, "The 'Spirit of Education' in Indonesian Pesantren," *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 30, no. 2 (2009): 219–32.
- <sup>26</sup> R. Lukens-Bull, "Two Sides of the Same Coin: Modernity and Tradition in Islamic Education in Indonesia," *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 32, no. 3 (2001): 350–72.
- <sup>27</sup> F. Pohl, "Islamic Education and Civil Society: Reflections on the Pesantren Tradition in Contemporary Indonesia," *Comparative Education Review* 50, no. 3 (2006): 389–409.
- <sup>28</sup> R. Hefner, "Islamic Schools, Social Movements, and Democracy in Indonesia," in *Making Modern Muslims: The Politics of Islamic Education in Southeast Asia*, ed. R. Hefner (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2008), 55–105.
- <sup>29</sup> G. Barton, "The Gülen Movement, Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama: Progressive Islamic Thought, Religious Philanthropy and Civil Society in Turkey and Indonesia," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 25, no. 3 (2014): 287–301.
- <sup>30</sup> A. Kawakip, "Globalization and Islamic Educational Challenges: Views from East Javanese Pesantren," *Ulumuna* 24, no. 1 (2020): 105–31.
- <sup>31</sup> N. Hasan et al., "Environmental Activism in Indonesian Pesantren: The Role of Lora in Mainstreaming Islamic Eco-Theology in Tapal Kuda, East Java," *Teosofi: Jurnal Tasawuf dan Pemikiran Islam* 12, no. 2 (2022): 280–306.
- <sup>32</sup> R. Lukens-Bull, "Pesantren, Madrasa, and the Future of Islamic Education in Indonesia," *Kawalu: Journal of Local Culture* 6, no. 1 (2019): 29–48. Similar dynamics have been observed in Acehnese *dayah*, where authoritarian *teungku*–student relations and hierarchical teaching styles further complicate institutional reform. Please see M. Nasir et al., "From Tradition to Transformation: Decontextualization of Dayah in Aceh's Millennial Context," *Journal of Contemporary Islam and Muslim Societies* 8, no. 2 (2024): 157–176.
- <sup>33</sup> Kawakip, "Globalization and Islamic Educational Challenges: Views from East Javanese Pesantren." At the same time, some scholars warn of a knowledge identity crisis in pesantren during the digital era, marked by excessive non-core learning burdens, waning interest in traditional knowledge, and institutional disorientation from pesantren's foundational identity. Please see T. Rosowulan et al., "Pesantren's Knowledge Identity Crisis in the Digital Era," *Jurnal Ilmiah Peuradeun* 13, no. 1 (2025): 49–76.
- <sup>34</sup> J. L. Esposito, *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?* (Oxford, GB: Oxford University Press, 1992).
- <sup>35</sup> M. Zuhdi, "Modernization of Indonesian Islamic Schools' Curricula 1945-2003," *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 10, no. 4–5 (2006): 415–27.
- <sup>36</sup> M. Tolchah and M. Mu'ammad, "Islamic Education in the Globalization Era: Challenges,

Opportunities, and Contribution of Islamic Education in Indonesia,” *Humanities & Social Sciences Reviews* 7, no. 4 (2019): 1031–1037.

<sup>37</sup> T. Budiharso and T. Suharto, “A New Paradigm of Pesantren Management in the Perspective of Social Change in the Globalization Era,” *Eurasian Journal of Educational Research* 100, no. 1 (2022): 90–103.

<sup>38</sup> A. Rohman et al., “Integrating Traditional-Modern Education in Madrasa to Promote Competitive Graduates in the Globalization Era,” *Cogent Education* 10, no. 2 (2023): 1–17.

<sup>39</sup> H. Asrohah, “The Dynamics of Pesantren: Responses toward Modernity and Mechanism in Organizing Transformation,” *Journal of Indonesian Islam* 5, no. 1 (2011): 66–90.

<sup>40</sup> I. Mujahid, “Islamic Orthodoxy-Based Character Education: Creating Moderate Muslim in a Modern Pesantren in Indonesia,” *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies* 11, no. 2 (2021): 185–212.

<sup>41</sup> I. Ihsan et al., “The Contestation of National and Religious Curricula in Indonesia’s Madrasas since the Passage of the UUSPN,” *Educational Studies* 50, no. 1 (2021): 1–14.

<sup>42</sup> M. Yusuf and A. Taufiq, “The Dynamic Views of Kiai in Response to the Government Regulations for the Development of Pesantren,” *Qudus International Journal of Islamic Studies* 8, no. 1 (2020): 1–20.

<sup>43</sup> E. Susylowati et al., “Communication Used by Female Santri as Part of Their Social Interaction in Indonesian Modern Pesantren,” *International Journal of Innovation, Creativity and Change* 9, no. 7 (2019): 77–94.

<sup>44</sup> E. Nurtawab and D. Wahyudi, “Restructuring Traditional Islamic Education in Indonesia: Challenges for Pesantren Institution,” *Studia Islamika* 29, no. 1 (2022): 55–81.

<sup>45</sup> E. Fatmawati et al., “Challenges of Educational Management in the Islamic Higher Education Sector Based on Pesantren,” *Journal of Educational and Social Research* 13, no. 1 (2023): 105–18.

<sup>46</sup> S. Mappiasse and H. Hayadin, “Students’ Religious Tolerance: Comparing Muslim Students at Public Schools and Pesantren,” *Journal of Indonesian Islam* 16, no. 2 (2022): 326–51.

<sup>47</sup> U. Ubaidillah and M. F. Faiz, “Beyond the Sacred Walls: Reimagining Pesantren’s Architecture of Islamic Moderation,” *Ulumuna* 29, no. 1 (2025): 32–70. These inclusive approaches resonate with findings from Pesantren Bali Bina Insani, where Muslim–Hindu collaboration is grounded in tolerance (tasâmuh) and inclusivity, giving rise to what scholars call “organic tolerance.” Please see M. Fahmi, M. Hilmy, and S. Prasetya, “Organic Tolerance and Harmony in the Pesantren Bali Bina Insani,” *Ulumuna* 26, no. 2 (2023): 500–524.

<sup>48</sup> F. Pohl, “Negotiating Religious and National Identities in Contemporary Indonesian Islamic Education,” *Religious Studies Review* 61, no. 3 (2011): 399–414.

<sup>49</sup> M. Kosim et al., “The Dynamics of Islamic Education Policies in Indonesia,” *Cogent Education* 10, no. 1 (2023): 1–15.

<sup>50</sup> Kosim et al.