

FROM CHARISMA TO ACADEMIC RATIONALITY: An Ethnographic Study of “Academic *Kiai*” Leadership in Indonesian *Pesantren*

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Abstract: This study explores *Kiai Sanuri*’s leadership as an “academic *kiai*” at *Pesantren Sholahuddin Surabaya*, focusing on how his approach reshapes the cultural foundations of a traditional Islamic boarding school. Employing an ethnographic qualitative design, the research draws on in-depth interviews, participant observation, and institutional documents. The findings show that *Kiai Sanuri* has cultivated an integrative leadership model that brings together charismatic religious authority, participatory governance, and academically grounded management. Leadership practices are expressed through structured decision-making, strategic planning informed by evidence, and the deliberate integration of scientific literacy into everyday *pesantren* life. These efforts have strengthened organisational professionalism, expanded educational networks, enhanced academic standards, and repositioned *santri* as active contributors to knowledge. The study suggests that the “academic *kiai*” model offers a credible and contextually grounded framework for *pesantren* leadership in navigating contemporary educational and social change.

Keywords: Academic *kiai*, leadership model, ethnography, institutional transformation, *Pesantren Sholahuddin*.

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Introduction

Pesantrens have been Islamic educational institutions deeply rooted in Indonesia's scientific and spiritual traditions for hundreds of years.¹ As an institution that not only organises religious education, a *pesantren* also functions as a centre for *da'wah*, moral guidance, and socioeconomic empowerment of Muslims. The role of *pesantren* in shaping Islamic character and identity, as well as its contribution to national unity and progress, cannot be ignored. However, amid modernisation and globalisation, which have affected various aspects of life, *pesantrens* face significant challenges in maintaining the relevance and quality of their education and management while preserving their traditional values as a foundation.²

According to data from the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia (2024), there are approximately 41,220 *pesantrens* across the archipelago.³ This figure shows a significant increase since the passing of Law No. 18/2019 on *pesantren*, which provides a strong legal umbrella for the development of *pesantren*.⁴ In the last five years, the number of *pesantrens* has increased by more than 11,000, reflecting the community's intense enthusiasm for *pesantren* education as the primary choice for religious learning and character development. However, this quantitative growth is accompanied by significant pressure on *pesantrens* to improve the quality of their management, curricula, and teaching methods to compete nationally and globally.⁵

In the dynamics of rapid social change, *pesantren* face a variety of new challenges, including digital disruption, socio-cultural paradigm shifts, and the complexity of religious thought. The penetration of information and communication technology and globalisation demands that *pesantren* not only maintain classical scientific traditions such as *tafaqquh fi ad-din* (deepening religious knowledge), but also open themselves to modern science and methodology. This condition underscores the need for a *kiai* figure that can combine traditional authority with qualified academic and managerial capabilities. This figure is known as an "academic *kiai*," a *pesantren* leader who is not only spiritually and religiously strong, but also competent in the academic and scientific realms.

The phenomenon of "academic *kiai*" reflects the adaptive response of *pesantren* to the increasingly complex demands of the times. *Kiai* with high levels of formal education from Islamic colleges and public and private universities play an active role in developing curricula that integrate religious education with science and technology. They also actively participate in academic and research forums, encouraging a more holistic, context-based transformation of *pesantren* education.

At Pesantren Nurul Islam 1 Antirogo Jember, for example, the *kiai* plays an important role in compiling and developing the *pesantren*-based *madrasah's* local curriculum by analysing students' needs, adjusting the curriculum, and developing extracurricular programs. As a result, the *madrasah* curriculum is not only rich in Islamic

values but also opens space for strengthening scientific and technological insights.⁶ Similarly, at Pesantren Nurul Qarnain Jember, integration between the *pesantren* and formal madrasah curricula is achieved through the inclusion of diniyah materials and the incorporation of reading yellow classical books into learning activities.⁷ This leadership model shows that the transformation of *pesantren* does not only occur structurally, but also substantively. Academic clerics bridge religious texts with social reality through a holistic and contextual curricular approach.

One concrete example of the “academic *kiai*” leadership model is Kiai Sanuri, the caretaker of Pesantren Sholahuddin Surabaya. With a strong academic background and active involvement in higher education, Kiai Sanuri transformed the *pesantren* into an institution that was not only a centre for traditional Islamic studies but also a progressive intellectual and social centre. His leadership combines strong religious charisma with a professional managerial approach. He can manage the *pesantren* effectively, develop adaptive educational programs, and strengthen social and academic networks with various outside institutions.

Furthermore, Kiai Sanuri’s work in transforming Pesantren Sholahuddin into an educational institution that accommodates religious and academic curricula in a balanced manner is concrete evidence of how the “academic *kiai*” leadership model operates. In addition to strengthening the teaching of *tafaqquh fī al-dīn*, he also developed research, collaboration with universities, and the application of digital learning technology, aspects that are relatively rare in traditional *pesantren*. This integration contributes to improving the quality of graduates who are not only religiously competent but also ready to compete in various professional fields.

Kiai Sanuri’s leadership excellence is also reflected in his ability to adapt to social and technological changes. On various occasions, he demonstrated a visionary approach by initiating information technology-based learning programs and building strong academic networks. This leadership configuration positions Pesantren Sholahuddin as an example of a modern *pesantren* that maintains a balance between charismatic *kiai* authority and professional governance. Therefore, the figure of Kiai Sanuri is highly representative as an object of study for the “academic *kiai*” leadership model, the focus of this study.

Several studies have discussed the role and leadership model of *kiai* in *pesantren*. Yaturrochmah et al. emphasised the importance of transformational leadership in developing a *pesantren* organisational culture that is adaptive to changing times.⁸ Khofi and Furqon identified *kiai* leadership strategies that combine traditional values with modern managerial approaches to face the challenges of globalisation.⁹ Meanwhile, Saerozi and Sukarji highlighted the influence of *kiai* leadership on the quality and competitiveness of *pesantren* by strengthening organisational culture.¹⁰ However, scientific studies on the leadership model of “academic *kiai*” are still relatively few and have not

been systematically mapped, especially in the context of *pesantren* in big cities that face the challenges of urbanisation and modernisation, as exemplified by Kiai Sanuri at the Pesantren Sholahuddin. This gap in the existing literature opens a new space for scholarly inquiry within the discourse of contemporary *pesantren* leadership.

While existing studies have provided important insights into *pesantren* leadership, the accelerating complexity of institutional change in contemporary Islamic education demands analytical frameworks that go beyond descriptive categorisation. Scholars must understand leadership in *pesantren* today not only as a personal capacity or cultural legacy, but as a site of negotiation between inherited religious authority and emerging regimes of academic rationality, bureaucratic governance, and digital mediation. Within this shifting landscape, the author advances the analysis beyond typological description and examines how *pesantren* actors reconstitute authority, knowledge, and institutional legitimacy in their daily practices.

Beyond its descriptive relevance, this study strategically situates itself within a broader sociological and institutional context in which *pesantren* increasingly engage with global processes of bureaucratisation, rationalisation, and knowledge reconfiguration. Urban *pesantren* such as Pesantren Sholahuddin Surabaya operate within dense socio-cultural ecosystems where actors continuously negotiate religious authority through encounters with state regulation, academic norms, digital culture, and public expectations. In this setting, the figure of Kiai Sanuri becomes analytically significant not merely as an individual leader, but as a symbolic locus where classical Islamic authority intersects with modern institutional rationality. This study, therefore, moves beyond biographical exploration to investigate how religious leadership takes shape within contemporary Islamic institutions.

Existing scholarship on *pesantren* leadership has concentrated mainly on normative or structural aspects of *kiai* authority, often portraying *pesantren* leadership as either inherently charismatic or administratively traditional. While studies by Yaturrochmah et al.,¹¹ Yumitro and Kurniawati,¹² Ma'arif et al.,¹³ Al-Humaidy et al.,¹⁴ Khofi and Furqon,¹⁵ Hidayati et al.,¹⁶ and Saerozi and Sukarji¹⁷ have made important contributions by identifying transformational, strategic, and culture-based leadership patterns; these works tend to treat “academic capacity” as a peripheral attribute rather than as a constitutive dimension of leadership itself. Consequently, the conceptual category of the “academic *kiai*” has remained under-theorised and insufficiently operationalised in the existing literature, particularly within the context of urban *pesantren* navigating modernisation pressures.

This study addresses this gap by conceptualising the “academic *kiai*” not as an incidental hybrid identity, but as a structurally emergent leadership model shaped by intersecting regimes of knowledge, authority, and governance. By focusing on Kiai Sanuri and Pesantren Sholahuddin Surabaya, this research situates itself at the intersection of leadership theory, the sociology of religion, and institutional ethnography. It develops an analytical understanding of how religious actors reorganise authority in late-modern Islamic educational settings.

Furthermore, this study addresses a central problem that extends beyond institutional adaptation by examining how *pesantren* leaders transform authority through the integration of religious charisma and academic rationality. This process involves deep tensions between preservation and innovation, textual fidelity and contextual interpretation, and spiritual discipline and bureaucratic professionalism. By foregrounding these tensions, the study lays a conceptual foundation for a more rigorous analysis of leadership as a dynamic, negotiated, and socially embedded process within *pesantren* institutions.

In the conceptual framework, this study refers to educational leadership models, such as transformational,¹⁸ participatory,¹⁹ and charismatic leadership,²⁰ that have long characterised *pesantren* institutions. Within this framework, leadership is understood, in line with modern organisational theories, as an individual's ability to influence group members' behaviour in order to achieve shared goals.²¹

Transformational leadership emphasises the development of a shared vision, the empowerment of organisational members, and the creation of an environment that supports innovation; recent studies demonstrate that this leadership model positively influences organisational performance through dynamic capabilities and institutional innovation.²² Complementing this approach, participatory leadership highlights collective involvement in decision-making processes, fostering organisational ownership, responsibility, and accountability.²³ Through collaboration, open communication, and mutual respect, participatory leadership has been shown to enhance motivation, performance, and knowledge sharing within educational organisations.²⁴

Alongside these models, charismatic leadership operates through the personal authority of leaders who possess a strong capacity to inspire and mobilise followers, particularly in contexts of change or crisis.²⁵ Characterised by a compelling vision and emotional resonance, charismatic leadership integrates intellectual, emotional, and spiritual dimensions, enabling leaders not only to mobilise collective action but also to reshape the cognitive and normative orientations of their followers.²⁶ Together, these leadership models provide a coherent analytical lens for understanding *pesantren* leadership as a relational and institutional practice shaped by authority, participation, and visionary transformation.²⁷

Rather than positioning tradition and academic rationality as opposing domains, this study conceptualises the term “academic *kiai*” as a leadership orientation in which a *pesantren* leader consciously integrates classical religious authority with formal academic training, modern organisational management, and reflective engagement with contemporary knowledge systems. In this sense, “academic” does not imply the absence of traditional scholarship—since *pesantren* have historically embodied rigorous intellectual traditions—but refers to the *kiai*'s active engagement with formal higher education, academic discourse, and institutional rationalisation in responding to contemporary social and organisational challenges.

Grounded in this background, the central problem addressed in this study is not simply a matter of identifying leadership traits or managerial practices. Instead, it concerns a more profound and consequential question: how does the figure of an “academic *kiai*” negotiate, reshape, and legitimise religious authority within a *pesantren* actively navigating the pressures of modernisation, urban complexity, and academic rationalisation? Accordingly, this study seeks to explore: (1) What are the defining characteristics of Kiai Sanuri’s leadership as an “academic *kiai*”?; (2) What leadership model is employed in the governance and management of Pesantren Sholahuddin?; (3) How does this leadership influence institutional development and the formation of *santri* identity?

The purpose of this study is to deeply analyse Kiai Sanuri’s leadership model as a representation of “academic *kiai*” in the context of *pesantren*, in order to contribute to the development of Islamic leadership theory and practical inspiration for young *kiai* in building tradition-based and academic *pesantren* in a balanced manner.

Method

This research uses a qualitative, ethnographic approach to deeply understand Kiai Sanuri’s leadership model in the socio-cultural context of Pesantren Sholahuddin Surabaya. This approach allows researchers to be directly involved in the life of the *pesantren* community, observing social interactions, symbols, values, and leadership practices that take place naturally. This study selects Pesantren Sholahuddin in Surabaya as the research location because Kiai Sanuri, an “academic *kiai*” with a higher education background and academic experience, leads the institution. The primary focus is on the figure of Kiai Sanuri as the key subject, while supporting informants include daily administrators, *Ustâdz*, senior *santri*, and alumni who understand the leadership pattern applied. Researchers interact directly with them to obtain authentic and contextual data. This approach is in accordance with the main characteristics of ethnographic research, which emphasises understanding the meaning from the perspective of social actors in a particular community.²⁸

This study employs a qualitative ethnographic approach because the leadership of a *kiai*, particularly an “academic *kiai*,” is enacted not only through formal managerial structures but also through everyday cultural practices, symbolic interactions, and negotiated forms of authority. Grounded in classical ethnographic traditions that emphasise prolonged engagement and interpretive understanding, this approach enables the analysis of cultural logics and power relations shaping leadership within *pesantren*.²⁹ Following Hammersley and Atkinson, ethnography is treated as an iterative process that moves continuously between field engagement and analytical reflection, making it especially suitable for examining religious authority embedded in relational practices and culturally mediated legitimacy beyond the reach of positivist or survey-based methods.³⁰

In developing and applying this ethnographic approach, the study follows a phased strategy that includes gaining entry into the *pesantren*, establishing rapport with key actors, conducting long-term observation, and engaging in iterative interpretation of emerging data. The research process involves moving between the “emic” perspective, which refers to understanding leadership as experienced and articulated by *pesantren* insiders, and the “etic” perspective, which refers to the researcher’s analytical interpretation using relevant theoretical frameworks.³¹ This dual movement ensures that the analysis remains grounded in the lived realities of the *pesantren* while also contributing to broader scholarly discussions on Islamic leadership and institutional transformation.

The researchers collected data through semi-structured in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and documentation studies. Interviews focused on exploring *Kiai Sanuri*’s views and leadership values, as well as those of other informants. Participatory observation was conducted by following the *pesantren*’s daily activities, including recitation, board meetings, and informal interactions between *kiai* and *santri*, to record the cultural practices and power relations that emerged. Documentation includes reviewing official *pesantren* documents such as vision and mission, organisational structure, activity reports, and relevant writings of *Kiai Sanuri*. Data analysis used the interactive approach of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, which consists of data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing.³² To maintain data validity, researchers used triangulation across sources and methods, as well as member checks by discussing the findings with key informants, to ensure interpretations aligned with real experiences.³³

Results and Discussion

Profiling *Kiai Prof. Dr. Sanuri, S.Ag., M.Fil.I.*

Kiai Sanuri is a central figure in the development of *Pesantren Sholahuddin Surabaya*. His educational background places him as a unique figure in the flow of *pesantren* leadership. In addition to pursuing classical *pesantren* education, he continued his studies to the doctoral level in Islamic studies, making him an accurate representation of an “academic *kiai*”. The combination of mastery of traditional Islamic knowledge and modern academic insights makes his leadership pattern different from that of *kiai* in general.

Kiai Sanuri was born in Tuban, East Java, on January 21, 1976. He is a permanent lecturer at the Department of Akidah and Islamic Philosophy, Faculty of Ushuluddin and Philosophy, State Islamic University (UIN) Sunan Ampel Surabaya. Currently, he serves as Head of the Study Program of the Doctoral Program in Qur’anic Sciences and *Tafsîr* at the Postgraduate Program of UIN Sunan Ampel Surabaya for the 2022-2026 term.³⁴

His educational history began at the primary school level, where he completed his studies in 1987. Furthermore, he took his junior and senior high school education in a *pesantren* environment. He spent six years (1987-1993) at the *Pesantren Maqom Tahrir* in Rengel, Tuban, while completing his formal education at the *Madrasah Tsanawiyah (MTs)* and

Madrasah Aliyah Negeri (MAN) levels.³⁵ He took his higher education at IAIN Sunan Ampel Surabaya. He earned a bachelor's degree (S1) in Islamic Law from the Faculty of Sharia in 1996. Then he continued to the master's level (S2) and earned an M.Fil.I. degree in Islamic Thought in 2001. He also completed his doctoral studies (S3) at IAIN Sunan Ampel Surabaya in 2014, with a concentration in Islamic Thought.³⁶ On 23 December 2025, he was formally appointed as a Professor in the field of Sharia Economic Law Thought.³⁷

In addition to his formal academic career, Kiai Sanuri has been actively engaged in sustained community service and religious outreach. Since 2001, he has consistently taught kitab turth at Pesantren Sholahuddin, contributing to the preservation and transmission of classical Islamic scholarship within the *pesantren* tradition. At the international level, he served as an imam and religious preacher in Hong Kong in 2009, reflecting his involvement in transnational Islamic *da'wah*.³⁸

At the regional level, he has been a member of the East Java Provincial Institute for Qur'anic Recitation Development (LPTQ Jawa Timur) since 2014 and has served as a board member of LPTQ Surabaya since 2023. Furthermore, since 2014 he has played an active role as a mentor in Qur'anic exegesis in both Indonesian and English for *Musâbaqah Tilâwatil Qur'ân (MTQ)* delegations, supporting their preparation for national-level competitions as well as for various regional contests across East Java, including Surabaya, Gresik, Sidoarjo, Lamongan, Tuban, Pasuruan, Jember, Malang, Jombang, Pamekasan, Sumenep, and Mojokerto.³⁹

To provide a clearer empirical basis for understanding Kiai Sanuri's academic trajectory and institutional role, the following profile illustrates the formal documentation of his educational background and scholarly credentials.

Figure 1. Kiai Sanuri's Biodata on UIN Sunan Ampel Surabaya Lecturer Profile Website⁴⁰

The screenshot displays the official website of UIN Sunan Ampel Surabaya. At the top, there is a navigation menu with links for HOME, FAKULTAS, KONSORSIUM, GURU BESAR, and UINSA. The main heading reads "Website Profile Dosen UIN Sunan Ampel" and "DATA PROFILE DOSEN". Below this, there is a profile card for Kiai Sanuri, which includes a portrait photo, personal details, and a list of publications. The profile card is titled "Biografi" and contains the following information:

Daftar Riwayat Hidup
 Nama : SANURI Tempat & Tanggal Lahir : Tuban, 21 Januari 1976 Jenis Kelamin : Laki-laki Agama : Islam Pekerjaan : Dosen UINSA, Fakultas Syariah dan Ekonomi Islam, Surabaya Riwayat Pendidikan : - SDN : Lulus tahun 1987 - MTs : Lulus tahun 1993 - MAN : Lulus tahun 1996 - S1 : Fakultas Syariah IAIN Sunan Ampel (2001) - S2 : Pemikiran Islam IAIN Sunan Ampel (2003) - S3 : Pemikiran Islam IAIN Sunan Ampel Surabaya (2014) Nama Istri : NurSuriya Jumlah Anak : - Rangga Warsito Ahmad - Raden Sa'ad Sholeh - Rose Cyllia Azizah Alamat Rumah : Jl. Sivalankerto Utara 2/7 Surabaya Alamat e-mail : suns_76@yahoo.com Karya Ilmiah : - Artificial Insemination within the Perspective of the Law of Islam (skripsi: 2001) - Muslims' Responses Toward Orientalists' Views on Hadis as the Second Sources of Law in Islam With Special Referen Mustafa al-Siba'i's Criticism Toward Ignaz Goldziher's Viewpoints (Jurnal Al-Qanun: Vol. 12, No. 2, Desember 2009) - Social Justice under the Perspective of Philosophy of Law and Maqasid al-shari'ah (Jurnal Teosofi: Vol. 2, No. 02 Tahun 2012) - Respon terhadap Paham Pluralisme Agama (Jurnal Religio: Vol. 2, No. 01 Tahun 2012) - Religion, Belief, Gender Mainstreaming and the Theory of Social Construction (Jurnal Studi Gender Indonesia: Vol. 3, No. 1 Tahun 2012) - Shifting Paradigm of the Classical Maqasid al-Shari'ah (The International Conference on Expressions of Islam in Resent Southeast Asia's Politics, 2012). - Maqasid al-Shari'ah sebagai Panduan Dasar dalam Melakukan Ijtihad (ISLAMICA 2014) - Analysis of Hurriyyat al-Ta'addud againts an Exemption Clause of a Standart Contract in Syari'ah BRI Branch Office of Gresik (An Analysis of Philosophy of Islamic Law) (ICOEN / the International Conference on Entrepreneurship 2015) di Universitas CIPUTRA Surabaya.

Personal Details:
 NIP: 197601212007101001
 Nama: Prof. Dr. Sanuri, S.Ag., M.Fil.I.
 NPWP: 08.635.623.5-609.000
 NIDN: 2021017603
 Unit Kerja: Fakultas Syariah dan Hukum
 Rumpun Ilmu: AGAMA

The profile data include Kiai Sanuri's personal background, academic education, professional positions, and scholarly publications, providing a verifiable record of his academic and *pesantren* leadership. Rather than serving merely as biographical information, this profile constitutes an essential empirical basis for examining the relationship between his academic credentials and religious authority in leading Pesantren Sholahuddin.

The documentation of his scholarly activities—such as participation in academic forums, publications in reputable journals, and involvement in curriculum development—demonstrates that his leadership is not solely symbolic but also intellectually productive. Accordingly, the inclusion of this profile in the findings section substantiates the institutionalised foundations of his academic authority and illustrates how scholarly legitimacy reinforces religious charisma within the “academic *kiai*” leadership model, contributing to the institutional transformation observed in this study.

Pesantren Sholahuddin

Pesantren Sholahuddin stands at Jl. Siwalankerto Utara II/7, Wonocolo District, Surabaya City, East Java, operates under an educational orientation that integrates *pesantren* traditions with the formal education system.⁴¹ Functioning both as a religious learning institution and a space for character formation and intellectual development, the *pesantren* provides an integrated educational structure that allows students to pursue religious and general education simultaneously. Formal secondary education is organised through Bina Bangsa Junior High School and High School, both operating within the *pesantren* framework.⁴²

The *pesantren* curriculum includes Qur'anic studies, *tafsîr* (*Jalâlain*), *hadits*, *fiqh*, and Arabic grammatical sciences such as *nahw* and *sharf*, alongside routine religious practices and selected cultural activities. Under the leadership of Kiai Sanuri, Pesantren Sholahuddin has experienced institutional growth in terms of student enrolment, programmes, and networks, reflecting an educational orientation that balances traditional Islamic learning with academic and managerial rationalisation within an urban context.⁴³

“Academic *Kiai*”: The Integration of *Pesantren* and Academic Traditions

In the context of dynamic social change, *pesantren*, as traditional Islamic educational institutions, face significant challenges in maintaining their relevance. On the one hand, society and the *pesantren* community expect *pesantren* to maintain the traditional values that form their identity, such as the study of the kitab kuning, moral formation, and spiritual development. However, *pesantren* are also required to respond to the development of science and technology and to society's increasingly complex needs. This tension between conservatism and modernity is an inevitable debate among academics and practitioners of Islamic education.

In this context, Kiai Sanuri's leadership model at Pesantren Sholahuddin Surabaya is an interesting case study. Kiai Sanuri shows intellectual courage and transformative vision in building a pattern of *pesantren* education that is adaptive to the times, without ignoring traditional roots. The approach he applies integrates traditional *pesantren* values (*tafaqquh fī al-dīn*) with academic approaches grounded in modern systems and science. According to Kiai Sanuri: "...*Pesantren* must be a place to build character, scientific reasoning, and social responsibility. If possible, the *santri* write scientific articles, but also understand the classical books..."⁴⁴

The Chairman of the Board of Pesantren Sholahuddin, M. Sulton, reinforced this view, stating that the Pesantren's overarching vision is to produce cadres of scholars with analytical and academic abilities. In his interview, Sulton explained: "...This *pesantren* is not only a place to memorize books but also a laboratory for thinking and developing knowledge. This is the vision instilled by Kiai Sanuri from the beginning..."⁴⁵

Muh. Buni Andaru Bahi, one of the *Ustadz*, said that the *pesantren* curriculum under Kiai Sanuri's leadership includes the study of classical books such as *Fath al-Qarīb*, *Tafsīr al-Jalālain*, *Al-Hikam*, and *Mukhtār al-Ahādīts*, and the administration equips it with materials such as research methodology and digital literacy at the beginning of each semester of learning. According to him: "*Santri* here not only learn the books but are also taught how to write articles and do research..."⁴⁶

Ainun Nadjib, a senior *santri*, also shared his experience that programs such as scientific debate training, internal seminars, and open discussions are an important part of the learning process. "...*Kiai* encourages us to be active, he even often asks: 'When will you write an article?' This is a challenge that not all *kiai* give..."⁴⁷

From the alum's side, Ali Hamdan acknowledged that Kiai Sanuri's approach provided him with important guidance in the academic world. He stated: "...In college, I felt that I was used to the academic atmosphere. Discussions, debates, and writing were already part of daily life at the *pesantren*..."⁴⁸

This integration model is close to the concept of transformational leadership proposed by Bass and Riggio, in which a leader inspires change, increases followers' capacity, and organises the organisation towards a long-term, adaptive, future-oriented vision.⁴⁹ This finding also aligns with the emphasis on updating the *pesantren* curriculum to address the digital era without losing its traditional identity.⁵⁰ Thus, Kiai Sanuri's leadership characteristics reflect a synthesis between cultural conservatism and methodological progressivism. This approach is not only innovative but also responsive to the demands of the times while maintaining the scientific spirit of the *pesantren* as a centre of '*ulamā'*' breeding.

Kiai Sanuri's Leadership Model: Participatory and Collective

Leadership in Islamic educational institutions, including *pesantrens*, is not measured solely by a *kiai's* ability to educate students or master classical texts. More than that, leadership also includes how a leader creates a collaborative ecosystem that supports collective growth and strengthens the values of togetherness in the educational process. In this context, *pesantren* is not only a place of knowledge transmission, but also a laboratory for character building, leadership, and participatory culture.

Kiai Sanuri views *pesantren* as a dynamic learning community, where every element, whether administrators, teachers, or *santri*, plays an important role in advancing the institution. The principles held by Kiai Sanuri are openness in communication, the involvement of all parties in decision-making, and individual empowerment based on each person's respective capacities. He emphasised: "...We are not living in an authoritarian era. If everyone is involved, the results are better, and everyone feels responsible. That is the spirit of deliberation in *pesantren*..."⁵¹

M. Sulton, Chairman of the Board of Pesantren Sholahuddin, corroborated this statement by explaining that all important agendas, from learning programs to activity management, were discussed in a monthly forum attended by administrators, *ustadz*, and *santri* representatives. According to him: "...*Kiai* always says, 'We are a big house. All must have a voice.' And that's not just a slogan, because everyone is involved..."⁵²

In line with that, Muh. Buni Andaru Bahi added that during the evaluation of *pesantren* programs, Kiai Sanuri often sought input from *ustadz* and administrators, even inviting senior *santri* to join the discussion. "...Sometimes *Kiai* asks the *santri*: 'Do you think we need to add or change the study of this book?' This is a form of *Kiai's* respect for the voice of the *santri*..."⁵³

From the perspective of *santri*, Ainun Nadjib, a senior *santri*, said that Kiai Sanuri's leadership style fostered a sense of collective responsibility among *pesantren* residents. He said: "...We feel involved, not just told to obey. Even when there are problems in the dormitory, *Kiai* often asks us to discuss first, then report to him..."⁵⁴

Ali Hamdan, an alumnus, also shared a similar view, assessing that this participatory leadership pattern contributed to the formation of the *santri* leadership mentality after graduation. "...I feel the benefits. Because I am used to being consulted at the *pesantren*, I am better prepared when I have to lead an organization on campus..."⁵⁵

The leadership model applied by Kiai Sanuri reflects the principle of shared leadership, which is leadership based on collaboration, participation, and appreciation of the contributions of the organisation. Progressive Islamic educational institutions have widely adopted this concept as a response to the complexity of modern educational challenges.⁵⁶ In the literature on Islamic educational leadership, this pattern aligns with the idea of prophetemphasised leadership, which emphasises deliberation as the primary instrument in the decision-making process.⁵⁷

These participatory principles are reflected concretely in the management structure and programs at Pesantren Sholahuddin. The following Table illustrates the distribution of *santri* leadership roles.

Table 1. Kiai Sanuri's Leadership Model

Leadership Aspects	Key Characteristics	Practical Implementation
Vision and Mission	Rational, adaptive, long-term	Pesantren roadmap
Integration of Science-Tradition	Synergy of classical books and modern science	Book studies, research training, and scientific debates
Participatory-Collective	Deliberative, dialogic, non-authoritative	Monthly board- <i>santri</i> forum, routine evaluation
Academic Approach	Evidence-based, strengthening literacy culture	Student journal writing

Through this model, Kiai Sanuri not only upholds traditional values but also fosters a participatory academic culture. The findings illustrate how the *pesantren* can serve as an inclusive, democratic, and relevant learning space in response to contemporary challenges.

Thus, the leadership model applied by Kiai Sanuri shows transformational and participatory characteristics. He not only set an example in spirituality and morals but also designed a *pesantren* management system grounded in a long-term vision. Kiai Sanuri positions himself as a leader who is open to input, builds a solid work team, and encourages innovation in curriculum and teaching methods. Kiai Sanuri combines the approach of Islamic charisma with academic methods grounded in systems. He applies measurable *pesantren* program planning, regular evaluation of learning activities, and deliberation in making important decisions. Kiai Sanuri's leadership thus exemplifies collegial leadership, highlighting respect for every individual's role in maintaining the *pesantren's* sustainability.

The Impact of Leadership on the Development of Pesantren Sholahuddin

Beyond the descriptive presentation of leadership activities, this study's findings reveal a deeper structural pattern that underscores the central argument of this research: Kiai Sanuri's leadership represents an active negotiation between inherited charismatic authority and emerging academic-bureaucratic rationality. This negotiation is not merely implicit in his daily practices but constitutes the core mechanism through which institutional transformation occurs within Pesantren Sholahuddin. The integration of classical Islamic reasoning with academic literacy, participatory governance, and evidence-based decision-making represents not merely a set of managerial innovations but a reconfiguration of religious authority itself. In this sense, the "academic *kiai*" model functions as a hybrid mode of leadership, in which legitimacy emerges from the dialectic among textual mastery, scientific rationality, and collective deliberation. This analytical reading highlights that the transformative power of Kiai Sanuri's leadership lies not solely in

his programs but in how those programs restructure the epistemic landscape of the *pesantren*, shifting *santri* from passive recipients of knowledge to active producers of religious and academic meaning.

Viewed from this analytical standpoint, the participatory practices documented in the field are not only indicators of democratic leadership but manifestations of a broader epistemological transition. Through routine deliberations, collaborative curriculum evaluation, and encouragement of scientific writing, authority shifts from a traditionally vertical structure to a more horizontal, dialogic, and knowledge-centred framework. This shift demonstrates that Kiai Sanuri's leadership is fundamentally transformative because it alters the internal logic of *pesantren* education: from obedience-centred to inquiry-centred, from charisma-dependent to competence-based, and from text reproduction to knowledge production. Such changes reveal the *pesantren's* evolving position within the Indonesian Islamic landscape, where academic credentials and scientific literacy increasingly shape the legitimacy of religious leadership.

This analysis also clarifies why the “academic *kiai*” should be understood as the central issue of this study. The model embodied by Kiai Sanuri does not merely blend two traditions, *pesantren* and academia, but actively redefines what it means to exercise authority in a modern Islamic educational institution. The findings indicate that the transformational impact observed in Pesantren Sholahuddin is a direct result of this hybridised leadership model, which mediates between the demands of tradition and the pressures of modernity. Consequently, the discussion shows that Kiai Sanuri's leadership is not simply effective in managerial terms; it represents a new modality of religious authority capable of shaping institutional culture, pedagogical orientation, and *santri* identity in a rapidly changing social environment.

The academic-transformative leadership applied by Kiai Sanuri proved to have a significant impact. Internal *pesantren* data and field observations show this transformation in the following five aspects.

Table 2. Impact of Kiai Sanuri's Leadership

Impact Aspect	Performance Indicators	Data Description
Quality of <i>Santri</i> Human Resources	Good morals, good academic grades, and published journals	Many students have successfully published articles in reputable national journals SINTA
<i>Ustâdz</i> Development	<i>Ustâdz</i> continues his studies	<i>Ustâdz</i> actively pursuing S2 and S3 studies
Management Modernization	Implementation of data-driven management and evaluation	Academic calendar, SOP, evaluation at the end of each semester

From the data, the leadership model applied by Kiai Sanuri had a significant positive impact on the dynamics of Pesantren Sholahuddin, among others:

1. Improving the Quality of Human Resources (HR) of *Santri* and *Ustadz*

Kiai emphasises leadership emphasises a balance between strengthening spirituality and developing intellect. The increasing number of *santri* publishing articles in reputable national journals and the success of *ustadz* in pursuing master's and doctoral degrees demonstrate the impact of this transformation. This achievement reflects the success of *pesantren* in producing an intellectual generation that is adaptable to changing times without losing its roots, modernising values.

2. Modernizing the *Pesantren* Management System

The management transformation led by *Kiai Sanuri* has made *Pesantren Sholahuddin* a more professional and adaptable institution. The structured academic calendar, standard operating procedures (SOPs) for each activity, and program evaluations at the end of the learning semester demonstrate modernisation. This modernisation reflects a data-based leadership approach (evidence-based management) that supports objective and measurable decision-making.

Kiai Sanuri's leadership at *Pesantren Sholahuddin* not only had an impact on the *pesantren's* internal affairs but also extended its influence into the broader social realm. The participatory, collaborative, and long-term vision-based leadership model applied by *Kiai Sanuri* is clear evidence that *pesantrens* can transform into adaptive, relevant, and globally competitive Islamic educational institutions. Leadership that does not rely solely on traditional charisma but also integrates modern managerial principles and academic approaches, making this *pesantren* a space for intellectual development as well as an agent of social change.

More than just internal transformation, the academic-transformative leadership model developed by *Kiai Sanuri* also has a significant external impact. This impact appears in the *pesantren's* initiatives to strengthen its reputation and institutional networks in the public sphere through collaborations with universities, research institutions, and government agencies. This leadership style allows *pesantren* to no longer function as traditional educational institutions but also to appear as social actors active in contemporary religious discourse, community development, and cross-sectoral collaboration. As noted by Sa'idah et al., the leadership model based on an academic vision is very effective in expanding the social role of *pesantren*, from a place to study kitab to a centre of progressive and inclusive social transformation.⁵⁸

The literary and academic approach systematically developed by *Kiai Sanuri* also shapes the reconstruction of *santri's* intellectual identity. In this context, the learning approach no longer positions *santri* as passive recipients of dogma; instead, it encourages them to be active, critical learners. *Kiai Sanuri* consistently fosters an intellectual atmosphere grounded in discussion, research, and scientific publications, creating space for *santri* to become legitimate knowledge producers. This approach reflects Paulo Freire's pedagogy, which emphasises the importance of dialogical and emancipative relationships between teachers

and students. The findings of Yaturrochmah, Aimah, and Khaudli show that *pesantrens* that adopt a critical academic approach produce graduates who are more adaptable to the academic world and more reflective in their religious practice.⁵⁹ Thus, academic leadership not only creates structural changes, but also forms a new paradigm in learning relations and religious epistemology in the *pesantren* environment.

Another important impact of this leadership organisational formation is an organisational culture that is participatory, egalitarian, and based on evaluative principles. In the practice of program management and strategic decision-making, Kiai Sanuri involves various parties through inclusive regular deliberation forums. This practice not only strengthens internal social cohesion, but also fosters a sense of belonging to the *pesantren* as a shared institution. Sukarji emphasised that *pesantrens* that adopt collectivity-based organisational leadership will foster organisational citizenship behaviour (OCB), a voluntary spirit of involvement in achieving institutional goals.⁶⁰ This kind of culture becomes very important for modernisation and the commercialisation of education, as it enables peasants to grow into sustainable learning organisations.

On that basis, the academic-transformative leadership model applied by Kiai Sanuri has an impact on the governance and internal atmosphere of the *pesantren*, while also strengthening the *pesantren*'s position as a culturally resilient, socially relevant, and dynamic institution. This kind of leadership is important in the context of Indonesian Islam, which is plural and dynamic. It is moving towards a science-based civil society. In an Indonesian context prone to identity conflict and ideological polarisation, the leadership of "academic *kiai*" has strategic value in preventing the development of religious radicalism.

With a scientific approach that combines *pesantren* tradition and critical academic methodology, Kiai Sanuri's religious narrative tends to be contextual and dialogical. Instead of emphasising rigid textual compliance, he encourages contextual reading through critical discussion, hermeneutic approaches, and interdisciplinary exploration. This strategy has proven effective in preventing exclusive scriptural readings that have the potential to give birth to extremism. As stated by Rahmawati et al., *pesantren* with open academic leadership show higher ideological resistance to the infiltration of extreme religious views.⁶¹ Rather than being confined by binary logic, such as *halâl-harâm* or *kâfir-muslim*, *santri* critically engage with the social complexity and dynamics of interpretation, guided by their teachers.

Furthermore, the participatory-academic leadership style, grounded in dialogue and critical reflection, also supports the national agenda of religious moderation. Kiai Sanuri actively makes *pesantren* a space for the production of Islamic discourse that is inclusive, oriented towards public benefits, and open to the plurality of interpretations. Thus, academic leadership in *pesantren* is not only structurally transformational, but also substantive in shaping moderate, tolerant, and contextual Islam in a multicultural society.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the leadership of Kiai Sanuri represents a structurally emergent model of “academic *kiai*”, in which religious charisma is not replaced but rearticulated through academic rationality, participatory governance, and evidence-based institutional management. The findings indicate that this Leadership model contributes to institutional professionalism, knowledge production, and the transformation of *santri* identity from passive recipients to active intellectual agents.

The novelty of this study lies in conceptualising the “academic *kiai*” not as a hybrid personal identity but as a mode of authority negotiation within contemporary *pesantren*. Theoretically, this research contributes to Islamic Leadership studies by extending discussions on religious authority into the domain of institutional rationalisation. Practically, it offers a viable Leadership framework for *pesantren* navigating modern educational, social, and technological pressures without abandoning their classical intellectual foundations.

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¹⁸ Transformational leadership in pesantren is characterized by a clear vision, motivation of *santri* and *ustadz*, curriculum innovation, and collaboration with various parties. See Syaella Sa’idah, Adinda Maula Auladina, and Hasyim Asy’ari, “Model Kepemimpinan Transformasional Pada Visi Misi Pemimpin Perempuan di Pondok Pesantren Al-Isti’aanah,” *Jurnal Pendidikan Tambusai* 9, no. 1 (May 2025): 1481–90.

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