



Conceptual Article

Pesantren Educational Institutions Amid the Currents of Global Change

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Abstract

This study aimed to explore the roles and challenges faced by *pesantren* in responding to global changes. A literature review approach was utilized to gain a comprehensive understanding of this topic. Over the past few decades, global transformations, including advancements in information and communication technology, globalization, and rapid information flows, have significantly impacted various aspects of life, including education. As traditional Islamic educational institutions, *pesantren* are not immune to these changes. This study identified key roles *pesantren* play in adapting to and addressing global transformations while maintaining their traditional values. Various scholarly sources, including academic journals, books, research reports, and online articles, were analyzed to develop a comprehensive perspective on the opportunities and challenges *pesantren* face in this evolving landscape. The findings of this study are expected to provide valuable insights and recommendations for the future development of *pesantren* education in an era of continuous global change.

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INTRODUCTION

Pesantren is known as a traditional educational institution that has long existed in Indonesia and has significantly influenced the nation's social and religious dynamics. As an indigenous institution, *pesantren* is deeply rooted in Indonesian society, as highlighted by Nurcholis Madjid (1992). Its cultural and religious role has made *pesantren* a key pillar in the dissemination of Islamic teachings (Wahjoetomo, 1997).

In addition to its role in religious education, *pesantren* also serves as a center for religious propagation and social engagement. During the colonial era, *pesantren* was among the most influential institutions that closely interacted with the grassroots community (Matuhu, 1994).

As part of Indonesia's educational landscape, *pesantren* has consistently aimed to nurture knowledgeable individuals who can apply their understanding of Islam while upholding strong moral values. Long before formal schools were established, *pesantren* had already played a crucial role in shaping educated individuals through its structured Islamic teachings (Ahmad Syifa'un Na'im, 2023).

However, in today's era of globalization, *pesantren* faces new challenges and must adapt to technological advancements and societal changes. While globalization brings both opportunities and risks, *pesantren* must balance modernization and tradition. The principle of "*al-muhafadhotu 'ala qodimi as-sholih wa al-akhdzu bi al-jadidi al-aslah*" (preserving valuable traditions while embracing beneficial innovations) serves as a guiding framework for sustainable transformation. Therefore, this paper aims to critically examine the

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transformation of pesantren in the face of globalization and explore the characteristics of an ideal pesantren that can navigate contemporary challenges while maintaining its core values.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Pesantren in Historical Perspective

The term *pesantren*, according to the Great Dictionary of the Indonesian Language, refers to “a boarding school where students (*santri*) learn religious studies.” As an educational institution, *pesantren* serves as a place where *santri* develop their knowledge of Islamic teachings. The word *pesantren* itself originates from *santri*, derived from “*pe-santri-an*”, which was later simplified for easier pronunciation. The term *santri* is believed to have been assimilated from the Sanskrit word “*shastr*”, meaning a scholar of Hindu sacred texts (Zamakhsyari Dhofier, 1997). Over time, its meaning has shifted, and in the Islamic context, it refers to a *santri* who studies Islamic religious sciences (M Hasyim dan Abdullah Botma, 2014).

According to the Oxford Encyclopedia of Islam, *pesantren* is recognized as a Southeast Asian educational institution specializing in Islamic studies. The term *pesantren* is commonly used in Java, while in Sumatra, a similar institution is known as *surau*. In Malaysia and Cambodia, it is referred to as *pondok*, whereas in Singapore and the Philippines, it is called *madrasah*. Traditionally, these institutions were established by religious scholars known as *kyai* (Java), teacher (Malaysia & Brunei), *ustadz* (Philippines, Cambodia, & Thailand), or *‘alim* (various regions) (Federspiel dan Howard M, 2022).

In Indonesia, *pesantren* institutions often reflect regional characteristics. In Java, for instance, the *kyai* plays a central role as the institution's leader, recognized by society for his deep religious knowledge and moral character. His reputation attracts students who wish to learn Islamic teachings, and from this process, *pesantren* emerged and evolved (Muhammad Jamaluddin, 2022).

The development of pesantren is closely linked to the historical transformation of Indonesian society. Historically, pesantren has played a crucial role in shaping Islamic civilization in the archipelago (Gamal Abdul Nasir Zakaria, 2010). Although the exact origins of pesantren remain unclear, many scholars trace its establishment back to the Islamic dissemination efforts of the Walisongo in the 15th century (Nurhayati. 2022).

One of the earliest figures associated with pesantren education was Sunan Gresik (Sheikh Maulana Malik Ibrahim), who is credited with laying the foundation of *pesantren*-based learning. He established an Islamic learning center that later evolved into a structured *pesantren* institution, aimed at producing skilled preachers (*da'i*) with extensive religious knowledge. His initiative gained momentum during the decline of the Majapahit Kingdom (1293–1478 CE), coinciding with Islam's rapid expansion, particularly in coastal trading hubs (Alwi Shihab. 2002).

The Islamic preaching orientation embedded within *pesantren* education plays a fundamental role in its learning process (Nuryanto, 2022). Azra identified three key functions of *pesantren*: a) as a center for transmitting religious knowledge, b) as a guardian of Islamic traditions, and c) as a hub for the reproduction of Islamic scholars (*ulama*) (Azyumardi Azra, 2022). Azra's perspective highlights the central role of *pesantren* in both religious education and cultural preservation. As Indonesia's oldest Islamic educational institution, *pesantren* serves as a foundation for Islamic preaching and social transformation.

Pesantren has been a part of Islamic education in the Nusantara since the 15th century. Over time, its educational structure became more organized with the emergence of Islamic study centers. Eventually, boarding facilities for *santri* were introduced, giving rise to the *pesantren* system. Despite its initially modest form, *pesantren* was the only structured Islamic education institution at the time and was regarded as a prestigious learning center. Through *pesantren*, the community could deepen their understanding of fundamental Islamic doctrines, particularly in religious practices (Masyhud Sulthon, dkk, 2005).

In the early 20th century, *pesantren* began to undergo significant transformations, adapting to the social changes within Indonesian society. This evolution was marked by modifications in teaching methods and curricula.

During the colonial period, Pesantren Tebuireng pioneered a reform movement within *pesantren* education. In 1919, it became the first *pesantren* to adopt a *madrasah* (classical) system and introduce general subjects into its curriculum. This reform was later followed by Pesantren Denanyar in 1920, which took a further step by allowing female students to pursue Islamic education (Joko Sayono, 2005).

The year 1926 marked a milestone in the modernization of Islamic education in Indonesia, with the establishment of a *pesantren* that fully adopted a modern management system. This institution applied structured planning, including defined objectives and targeted outcomes, resembling modern educational institutions.

Subsequently, in 1941, Pondok Gontor emerged as a leading *pesantren* with a fully planned educational system, setting a new standard in Islamic education.

The integration of secular subjects into *pesantren* curricula through the *madrasah* system broadened *santri*'s intellectual horizons, allowing them to engage with various fields of knowledge. By 1942, most major *pesantren* had incorporated *madrasah* education, although not all adopted general subjects. This shift positioned *pesantren* as an essential component of the national education system, coexisting with government-run schools, Muhammadiyah institutions, and Taman Siswa schools. Despite these reforms, *pesantren* has retained its core identity as a center for Islamic education, ensuring the continuity of religious learning within its curriculum (Joko Sayono, 2005).

METHOD

This study was conducted using a library study method, where the researcher collected various scholarly sources, including books, academic articles, journals, and other publications related to *pesantren* and global transformations. These sources provided insights into the history, philosophy, curriculum, and management of traditional *pesantren*. The gathered information was then analyzed to understand how *pesantren* adapt to global changes, such as technological advancements, globalization, and modern educational demands. Moreover, this study aimed to explore the challenges faced by *pesantren* in maintaining their traditional values while integrating contemporary developments.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Foundation of *Pesantren* as an Educational Institution

In the context of *pesantren* as an educational institution, one relevant Quranic verse often cited is Surah At-Taubah: 122: “*It is not for the believers to go forth all together. But why should not a party from every group among them go forth to gain understanding in religion and warn their people when they return to them, so that they may beware?*” (QS. Al-Taubah : 122).

This verse serves as a theological foundation for *santri* and *pesantren* in fulfilling their role of *tafaqquh fi al-din* (deepening religious knowledge). Beyond its religious significance, this verse also carries philosophical implications related to the functions and responsibilities of *pesantren* and *santri*.

Some of the key philosophical principles that *pesantren* uphold include: (a) *Pesantren* as a vital societal component that strives to uphold Islamic teachings; and (b) *Pesantren* as a facilitator for *santri* to engage in *li yatafaqquhu fi al-dini* (deepening religious knowledge) (Asmawi Mahfudz, 2022). An essential aspect of this verse is the use of *yatafaqquhu fi al-dini*, which in Arabic grammar *fi'il mudhari'* signifies both the present and future. This implies that *pesantren* must remain dynamic, adaptive, and forward-looking to maintain their relevance in contemporary and future contexts. As a result, *pesantren* undergo continuous transformation, whether in terms of curriculum, institutional structure, leadership management, or their relationship with society (Asmawi Mahfudz, 2022).

The Transformation of *Pesantren* in the Era of Global Change

The possibility of declining public interest in *pesantren* can be understood as a critical challenge urging *pesantren* to adapt and improve in response to modern realities brought by globalization. Modernization, in essence, refers to societal shifts from traditional or pre-modern states toward modernity (Isomuddin, 2005).

The transition of *pesantren* from traditional to modern represents an educational transformation. However, this shift does not occur in isolation; rather, it is driven by broader social changes (G. Ritzer dan Douglas J. Goodman, 2010). As George Ritzer (2010) explained, that social change, stemming from political revolutions, industrial revolutions, and urbanization, has significantly impacted the religious sphere. Given that *pesantren* are Islamic educational institutions, it is only natural that modernization in society influences *pesantren*'s educational approach. This transformation is essential for *pesantren* to remain relevant in a globalized world.

A defining characteristic of modern civilization is technology, while modern knowledge is largely driven by empiricism. This distinction separates modern knowledge from classical knowledge, as modern science continuously looks forward, pushing beyond boundaries (frontiers) (Nurcholish Madjid, 2008). Research and exploration are intrinsic to modern scientific development.

The paradigm shifts among Muslims regarding previously established values stems from the institutional modernization of education, particularly in *pesantren*, which has long relied on traditional approaches. Modernization in Islamic education and *dakwah* (religious propagation) not only reshapes the socio-cultural

and intellectual foundations of *santri* but also has broader implications for the Muslim community as a whole (Nurcholish Madjid, 2008).

The ongoing educational transformation within *pesantren* is part of a broader effort to humanize individuals. Education is not only about shaping good character but also about equipping students with specialized skills to ensure they are prepared for a competitive job market. Ary H. Gunawan (2010) emphasized that education is a process of humanizing individuals in a humane manner, which must be adapted to societal conditions and contemporary developments. In this regard, the educational transformation in *pesantren* is a strategic response to the evolving needs of modern society. *Pesantren* reform is a smart move, as it allows the system to modernize while preserving its classical traditions.

Transformation is an unavoidable necessity. According to Steenbrink, (Daulay, Haidar Putra, 2004), four key factors drove the renewal of Islamic education in Indonesia at the beginning of the 20th century:

- a. Since the year 1900, there have been many thoughts advocating a return to the Quran and Sunnah as a starting point for reconnecting with religion and existing culture. The central theme is the rejection of taqlid. Returning to the Quran and Sunnah has led to various changes in perspectives on religion.
- b. National resistance against Dutch colonial rule.
- c. Efforts by Muslims to strengthen their social and economic structures.
- d. The transformation of Islamic education, led by reformist movements dissatisfied with traditional methods of Qur'anic and religious studies. This movement sought to modernize Islamic education, adopting elements from colonial educational models but modifying them to align with Islamic principles. A significant example of this transformation was the educational movement initiated by Muhammadiyah, which later inspired traditional *pesantren* to modernize. One of the first to adopt such changes was Pesantren Tebuireng, which embraced modern educational systems while retaining its deep-rooted *pesantren* traditions. This approach exemplifies a balanced transformation, adapting to contemporary needs without abandoning time-honored traditions. Rather than fully rejecting modern educational systems, *pesantren* selectively adopted and modified them to ensure compatibility with their values. See Steenbrink, Karel A. *Pesantren Madrasah Sekolah*. translated by Karel A. Steenbrink dan Abdurrahman. I. (1986).

The four key drivers behind the reform of Islamic education in Indonesia laid the foundation for the realization of broader educational transformation. However, this transformation was not solely driven by dissatisfaction with traditional methods. Instead, it emerged as a necessary response to the evolving demands of the modern era.

Fazlur Rahman (2001) argued that Islam, as a religious, cultural, political, and ethical heritage, faces the challenges of modernization and rapid global change. He describes modernization in the Islamic world as a Janus-faced (dual-faced) phenomenon. While it brings technological and scientific advancements to Muslim societies, it also profoundly impacts cultural values and traditions. A purely pragmatic approach to modernization can lead to an unexpected rupture from intellectual traditions, disconnecting societies from their historical foundations.

The influence of modernization is so profound that it can dismantle long-standing traditions and replace them with entirely new ones. However, despite these global transformations, *pesantren* have maintained their core identity and educational patterns. Rather than being swept away by modernization, *pesantren* have strategically integrated modern educational approaches while preserving their traditional framework. Moreover, *pesantren* aim to develop a holistic education system that not only produces highly skilled individuals but also continues to cultivate distinguished Islamic scholars (ulama). This balanced approach ensures that *pesantren* remain relevant in the modern world while staying true to their foundational mission of nurturing both intellectual and spiritual growth.

The Ideal Portrait of *Pesantren* in the Era of Globalization

The rapid advancement of science and technology (IPTEK) during globalization is an inevitable reality. While this progress offers numerous benefits, it also brings disruptive changes that fundamentally alter how people work, conduct business, produce goods, engage in transactions, and interact with one another.

Despite these transformations, *pesantren* remain steadfast in preserving their unique educational model and identity. An ideal *pesantren* is one that can adapt to and address contemporary challenges while adhering to the principle of *al-muhafadhotu 'ala qodimi as-sholih wa al-akhdzu bi al-jadidi al-aslah* (preserving the valuable traditions of the past while embracing new, better advancements).

Preserving the valuable aspects of tradition means safeguarding the pesantren's intellectual and spiritual heritage, including: Aqidah (*ablū as-sunnah wa al-jama'ah*) and Nahdlatul Ulama's way of thinking (*fikrah nahdliyah*), which emphasizes moderation, dynamism, and structured methodology, as well as *amaliyah nahdliyah*. Meanwhile, embracing beneficial modern advancements requires adopting new knowledge and technologies, as these elements are now key drivers of progress and competitiveness (Ma'ruf Amin, 2022).

From this perspective, an ideal pesantren in the era of globalization is one that harmonizes modern and traditional education, integrating various scientific disciplines while upholding the principle of *al-muhafadhotu 'ala qodimi as-sholih wa al-akhdzu bi al-jadidi al-ashlah* (balance between heritage and innovation). This approach ensures that pesantren remain relevant, responsive to contemporary challenges, and continue to attract societal interest amid the ever-evolving landscape of modern civilization.

CONCLUSION

Based on the explanations above, it can be concluded that *pesantren* have played a significant role in preserving Islamic scholarly traditions, spreading religious teachings, and nurturing future scholars (*ulama*). From a socio-historical perspective, *pesantren* evolved from earlier educational systems that existed in the early days of Islam. As Azra noted, Islamic education initially took place in private homes, with *Dar al-Arqam* (the house of al-Arqam bin Abi al-Arqam). As the Muslim community expanded, education shifted to mosques, where it was conducted in the form of *halaqah*. This *halaqah* method, which became a hallmark of early Islamic education, was later adopted by traditional pesantren.

As a traditional educational institution, *pesantren* have maintained the teaching of classical Islamic texts (*kitab salaf*) in Arabic as their core curriculum. The later emergence of the madrasah system was primarily an effort to facilitate the traditional sorogan method, where students study texts individually under the guidance of a teacher. Over time, pesantren institutions and curricula have evolved in response to social and technological advancements. This transformation has led to three distinct educational models within pesantren: traditional (*salaf*), kedua, modern (*khalaf*), and combination of both. This transformation occurred as some traditional *pesantren* adapted to modern educational systems in response to globalization, while others remained committed to their classical traditions. However, despite these variations, all three models continue to retain the essence and identity of *pesantren* education.

The ideal *pesantren* in the era of globalization, as argued in this study, is one that successfully harmonizes traditional and modern education. Such a *pesantren* integrates various disciplines while adhering to the principle of *al-muhafadhotu 'ala qodimi as-sholih wa al-akhdzu bi al-jadidi al-ashlah* (preserving valuable traditions while embracing beneficial innovations).

Additionally, *pesantren* offer several key advantages, including an integrative and comprehensive education system, merging knowledge with moral and ethical development, lifelong learning opportunities unrestricted by age, a 24-hour learning environment within a boarding school system, instilling discipline, cooperation, tolerance, and independence, and promoting a simple and self-sufficient lifestyle.

RECOMMENDATION

This paper is the result of a conceptual study analysis, making it a valuable reference for further in-depth studies. Given the importance of this topic, it is recommended that future studies explore it on a more fundamental level to contribute to the continuous improvement of education in Indonesia.

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