

The Leadership Of The Kiai In The Moral Guidance Of Students At Islamic Boarding Schools

Syarif Ali Alqadrie¹, Asmawati Mahidi²

¹Institut Agama Islam Negeri Pontianak, ²Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

 sahihag@gmail.com¹, asmawati@um.edu.my²

Abstract:

This study examines the leadership of kiai in fostering the character of santri at the Al Mubarok Miftahul Ulum Islamic Boarding School as a central mechanism for character building through the integration of managerial, cultural, and spiritual functions. This study departs from the finding that kiai not only play a role as managers of educational institutions, but also as moral authorities who set standards of behavior, value expectations, and character-based educational practices in the daily lives of santri. The research uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive design. The research subjects were selected purposively, including kiai, teachers, and santri. Data were collected through in depth interviews, participatory observation of religious and learning activities, and documentation of the pesantren's programs and rules. The results show that the kiai leadership model is formed from a combination of personality, religious authority, knowledge, and leadership experience, which is manifested in continuous supervision, exemplary behavior (Ibda' bi Nafsi), religious habits, and competency based task distribution. This pattern reflects the integration of contingency, transformational, religious, and path-goal leadership applied contextually through democratic, firm, and supportive styles. Routine worship, moral advice, and daily discipline reinforce the internalization of values until they become habits of the santri.

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INTRODUCTION

The leadership of kiai in Islamic boarding schools not only functions as managers of educational organizations, but also as central figures in the moral guidance of students, which determines the direction of their character formation, which in turn has a direct impact on the quality of graduates and their contribution to society. Kiai have strong socio-cultural and spiritual authority in setting moral standards, behavioral expectations, and educational practices oriented towards good character, thereby strengthening the internalization of moral values in the daily lives of santri (Supriani et al., 2023; Sholehah & Suwadi, 2024). The complexity of this function makes the study of kiai leadership models and styles relevant in understanding how they influence the improvement of santri morality and discipline in the unique and dynamic

context of pesantren (Supriadi et al., 2021; Ikhsani & Zunaidah, 2024; Wibowo, 2025). In addition, religio-paternalistic leadership and value-based leadership approaches have been shown to play a role in shaping strong character, responding to the challenges of modernization without sacrificing the identity of pesantren education (Karim & Ashoumi, 2025; Afiful Hair, 2023).

Previous studies have identified the leadership of kiai as a key factor in shaping the character and morals of santri in Islamic boarding schools, revealing the role of kiai as central figures who set educational standards, moral examples, and institutional management to shape the behavior of santri with noble character (Supriani, Basri & Suhartini, 2023; Sholehah & Suwadi, 2025). Other studies highlight the spiritual and moral leadership of kiai in building santri character through religious activities and moral values (Aminullah & Barizi, 2025), as well as evidence that leadership styles such as charismatic, democratic, and humanistic influence santri motivation, participation, and internalization of values (Ahmadi, 2025; Hair, 2023). In addition, studies on transformative leadership show the role of kiai in developing a pesantren organizational culture that is adaptive to social change (Arifin et al., 2026), and studies on the internalization of discipline show the process of moral values through daily interactions between kiai and institutional rules (Jannah, 2023). However, aspects that are still rarely studied are how the mechanism of daily interactions between kiai directly influences the moral formation of santri at the micro level, as well as the specific strategies of kiai in dealing with contemporary socio cultural crises in the context of complex modern pesantren.

This study aims to analyze and describe the model and style of leadership of kiai in the moral guidance of santri at the Al Mubarok Miftahul Ulum Islamic boarding school, by placing kiai as leaders who integrate managerial, cultural, and spiritual functions in shaping the Islamic character of students. This study also aims to identify how the standards, expectations, and educational practices set by the kiai are internalized through programs that instill Islamic values in the daily lives of santri. In addition, this study fills the gap in previous studies, which tended to highlight the leadership of kiai at the organizational and spirituality levels in general, by focusing on the concrete mechanisms of interaction, exemplary behavior, communication patterns, and contextual moral guidance strategies in response to socio-cultural changes and the impact of the institutional transformation of Islamic boarding schools from public to private. Thus, this study seeks to explain the relationship between the socio-cultural context of Islamic boarding schools, institutional dynamics, and the effectiveness of kiai leadership in shaping the moral character of santri in a sustainable manner amid the challenges of globalization.

This study advances the argument that the kiai's leadership in Islamic boarding schools is the decisive mechanism through which students' moral character is formed, sustained, and translated into disciplined conduct and social responsibility. Beyond administrative management, the kiai's socio-cultural and spiritual authority is hypothesized to shape moral standards, behavioral expectations, and value-oriented educational practices that are internalized in students' daily lives. While prior studies confirm the influence of charismatic, spiritual, democratic, humanistic, and transformative leadership on character development, they have not sufficiently explained how these leadership forms operate through everyday interactions, exemplification, and communication at the micro level of student guidance. This

research therefore posits that the effectiveness of moral guidance depends on the integration of managerial control, cultural legitimacy, and spiritual modeling enacted by the kiai within the unique socio-cultural ecology of the pesantren. It further argues that specific leadership strategies employed by the kiai enable pesantren to respond to contemporary socio cultural crises without losing their educational identity, thereby ensuring sustainable moral formation among students.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive research design conducted at Pondok Pesantren Al Mubarok Miftahul Ulum, located on Jalan Trans Kalimantan, Sungai Ambawang, West Kalimantan. This approach is chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences, perceptions, and meanings constructed by the kiai, teachers, and students regarding moral guidance practices within the daily life of the pesantren. The research design adopts Responsive Evaluation, which emphasizes the active participation of research subjects and the exploration of meaning derived from their lived experiences in the moral development process (Fahrurrosi & Husni, 2025; Roulston & Halpin, 2022). This model is relevant for capturing the natural dynamics of social interaction, role modeling, and value habituation that occur in the pesantren environment, enabling the study to provide not only descriptive findings but also reflective insights into the kiai's leadership practices.

The research subjects are selected purposively based on their strategic roles in the moral guidance process. The primary informant is the kiai as the pesantren leader, supported by several teachers directly involved in educational and moral development activities, as well as students who actively participate in daily pesantren programs (Ali et al., 2024). This selection aims to obtain comprehensive insights into how the kiai's leadership is practiced, perceived, and experienced in the context of students' moral formation (Zubaidi & Ridlo, 2023; Izzah et al., 2025; Wardana et al., 2023). The emphasis is placed on the depth of information rather than the number of participants, ensuring rich and meaningful data related to everyday leadership practices.

Data are collected through in depth interviews, participant observations of daily religious and educational activities, and documentation of institutional programs, regulations, and value-habituation practices (Febriantie & Amelasasih, 2025; Rahman et al., 2024; Moser & Korstjens, 2017). Data analysis is conducted thematically through transcription, coding, categorization, and interpretation of meanings within the framework of Responsive Evaluation. To ensure data validity, triangulation of sources and techniques is applied by comparing findings from interviews, observations, and documentation (Febriantie & Amelasasih, 2025; Rahman et al., 2024). This process ensures that the research findings authentically represent the perspectives and experiences of participants regarding the kiai's leadership in the moral guidance of students.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The Kiai Leadership Model in Character Building for Islamic Boarding School Students.

Research findings show that the kiai leadership model at Al Mubarok Miftahul Ulum Islamic Boarding School is formed from a combination of personality, religious authority, knowledge, and leadership experience that influences how the boarding school is managed and how the moral guidance of students is carried out. The kiai's leadership is not only administrative in nature, but also a strategic approach to influencing teachers and students to achieve institutional and moral goals. This model is in line with the formal demands of pesantren leadership, which emphasizes academic competence, managerial experience, and personal integrity as the foundation for character building. "The kiai always emphasizes that our main task is not only to teach, but to shape the character of the santri," The results of the observation show that the kiai is regularly present in various daily activities at the pesantren, including when the santri participate in worship and learning activities.

The kiai implements a leadership style that emphasizes control, maximization, and evaluation of the performance of teachers and administrators in accordance with their structural duties in supporting the moral development of students. Continuous supervision and performance evaluation are directed towards ensuring that the moral development program runs consistently. This pattern reflects the practice of contingency leadership, in which leadership effectiveness is highly dependent on the ability to adjust control to the situation in the pesantren environment. Another important finding is the kiai's practice of exemplary behavior based on the principle of *Ibda' bi Nafsik* (starting from oneself). The kiai's discipline, consistency, and daily behavior serve as moral references for teachers and santri. This exemplary behavior fosters respect and voluntary obedience, which indicates the presence of a transformational leadership dimension in character building in Islamic boarding schools.

This study also found a strong religious approach in the daily routines of Islamic boarding schools. Moral guidance is reinforced through the instillation of religious values, worship practices, and the enforcement of discipline based on Islamic teachings. This consistent religious environment supports the process of moral internalization so that it becomes a habit of the students, not just formal teaching. In implementing moral guidance, the kiai divides tasks and responsibilities based on the competencies of teachers and administrators. Clear job descriptions and appropriate guidance ensure that every element of the organization contributes effectively to moral guidance. This demonstrates a path-goal leadership pattern, in which the kiai facilitates his members to achieve goals according to their abilities and the situational challenges they face.

Overall, the integration of contingency, transformational, religious, and path-goal leadership models enables kiai to effectively manage the moral development of santri. This combination of approaches shows that the kiai's leadership strategy contributes directly to the successful moral development of santri in the pesantren environment.

Table, 1

Integrated Kiai Leadership Model for Students' Moral Development in Islamic Boarding Schools

Aspect of Leadership	Key Practice by Kiai	Evidence (Interview/Observation)	Leadership Model Indicated	Impact on Moral Guidance
Leadership foundation	Combines personality, religious authority, knowledge, and experience in managing the pesantren	Kiai consistently present in worship and learning activities	Foundational leadership competence	Strong moral direction in institutional management
Strategic influence	Leadership used to influence teachers and santri toward moral and institutional goals	“Our main task is not only to teach, but to shape the character of the santri”	Values-based leadership	Alignment of teaching with character building
Performance control	Supervises, maximizes, and evaluates teachers' and staff performance	Continuous monitoring of daily duties	Contingency leadership	Consistent implementation of moral programs
Exemplary conduct	Applies <i>Ibda' bi Nafsik</i> (starting from oneself) through discipline and consistency	Teachers and santri show respect and voluntary obedience	Transformational leadership	Moral example becomes behavioral reference
Religious habituation	Embeds religious values through routines, worship, and discipline	Regular collective worship and moral advice sessions	Religious leadership approach	Internalization of moral values into habits
Task distribution	Assigns roles based on competence with clear job descriptions	Guidance adjusted to teacher/staff capability	Path-goal leadership	Effective contribution to students' moral development
Integrated model	Combines contingency, transformational, religious, and path-goal patterns	Observed coherence across leadership practices	Integrated leadership model	Effective and sustainable moral development of santri

Kia Pesantren's Leadership Style in Character Building for Students at the Al Mubarok Miftahul Ulum Islamic Boarding School on Trans Kalimantan Road.

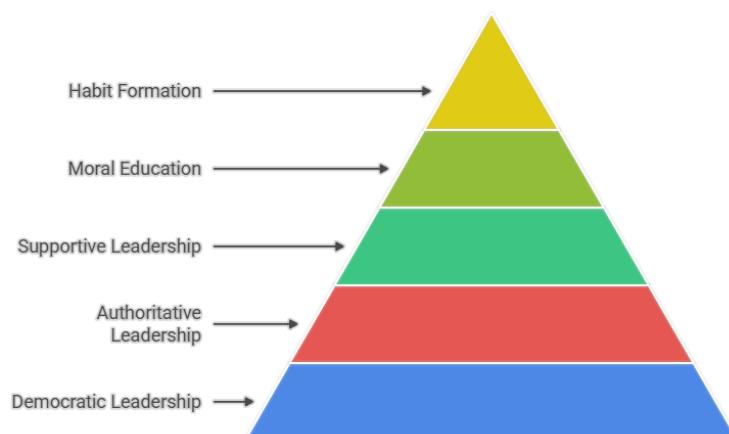
The leadership style of the kiai at Al Mubarok Miftahul Ulum Islamic Boarding School is reflected in the dynamic interaction between the kiai and the teachers, administrators, and students in various situations. Leadership style is not singular, but is formed from the kiai's response to the conditions faced in fostering the students' character. In practice, this style is evident in the way the kiai communicates, makes decisions, gives directions, and builds relationships that influence the behavior of the pesantren members. The variety of situations that arise in pesantren life requires the kiai to be able to analyze the situation and adjust their leadership style accordingly.

The results of the study show that, in general, kiai apply a democratic leadership style in guiding the moral development of santri. Kiai open up space for deliberation, accept input from teachers and administrators, and involve them in decision-making related to moral guidance activities. However, in certain conditions that require firmness, kiai also demonstrate an authoritative and disciplined attitude. This combination shows the flexibility of leadership styles that are adapted to the demands of the situation in the pesantren environment. This flexibility is in line with the normative leadership model, which emphasizes that no single leadership style is effective in all situations. The kiai demonstrates the ability to assess conditions before determining the approach to be used, especially in decision-making related to moral guidance. In situations that require joint participation, the kiai tends to be democratic, while in conditions that demand order and discipline, the kiai is more assertive and focused.

In addition, this study found the application of supportive leadership style in the leadership of kiai. This can be seen from the kiai's attention to improving teachers' competence through continuous training and guidance. Kiai are open, approachable, and provide support to teachers so that they can carry out their moral guidance duties optimally. This approach creates a harmonious relationship between leaders and members, thereby creating a conducive working atmosphere in the pesantren. One teacher said in an interview, "The kiai never makes decisions on his own. He usually invites us to discuss things first, especially when it comes to santri activities." Observations show that the kiai is often seen chatting casually with teachers on the porch of the mosque after congregational prayers, discussing the santri's daily activities. The cultivation of moral character among students is realized through various pesantren activities that are deliberately aimed at internalizing moral values. Activities such as reciting Surah Al-Waqi'ah before lessons, giving advice during ceremonies, and conveying moral messages at every learning opportunity serve as a means of instilling moral character. Although not all students show the same enthusiasm, these activities are consistently carried out as part of the moral education strategy at the pesantren.

Overall, moral education at this pesantren demonstrates the application of a continuous habit-forming method. Moral values are instilled through daily routines until they become ingrained habits in the students. These findings show that the flexible, supportive, and contextual leadership style of the kiai plays an important role in the success of moral character building, and is in line with experts' views on the importance of habit formation in moral education.

Picture, 1
Kiai's Leadership Cycle Pyramid



Discussion

The findings indicate that the kiai's leadership at Al Mubarok Miftahul Ulum operates as a value centered system that integrates managerial control, moral exemplarity, religious habituation, and structured task distribution to sustain students' moral formation. This confirms that leadership in pesantren is simultaneously organizational, pedagogical, and cultural. The kiai's continuous presence in worship and learning activities illustrates what (Lukens Bull, 2001) describes as the kiai's moral authority as the core of value transmission in pesantren life, where ethics are lived rather than merely taught. Thus, leadership becomes a medium for cultivating a moral climate that shapes daily behavior.

The consistent supervision, performance evaluation, and control of teachers and administrators reflect the logic of Fiedler's Contingency Leadership Theory, where effectiveness depends on aligning leadership control with situational demands. In this pesantren, control is directed not toward administrative productivity but toward maintaining the consistency of moral programs. This supports (Robbins and Coulter's, 2018) argument that situational alignment determines organizational success and shows how contingency principles operate within a religious educational context. The kiai's application of *Ibda' bi Nafsik* (starting from oneself) demonstrates the practice of transformational leadership as conceptualized by (Bass and Riggio, 2006; Faruq, et.al., 2022) Discipline, integrity, and consistency create voluntary respect and obedience among teachers and students. This finding reinforces studies by (Supriani, 2023; Sholehah, and Suwadi, 2024) which show that the kiai's personal example exerts stronger moral influence than formal regulations in shaping santri character.

Religious routines embedded in daily pesantren life align with Al Ghazali's concept of moral habituation, where character is formed through repeated practice until it becomes an internal disposition. Regular worship, advice, and discipline form a moral ecosystem that supports value internalization. This is consistent with findings by (Aminullah & Barizi, 2025; Jannah, 2023; Hepni, 2022) who emphasize that moral internalization in pesantren occurs through everyday practices rather than theoretical instruction.

The distribution of roles based on competence and clear job descriptions illustrates the application of House's Path Goal Theory. The kiai facilitates teachers and administrators by providing direction and removing obstacles so they can contribute effectively to moral guidance (Indriani et al. 2024; Silvia, 2025). As noted by Ivancevich, Konopaske, and Matteson, leaders must align followers' capacities with organizational goals; here, the goal is explicitly moral formation. Regarding leadership style, the kiai demonstrates democratic, firm, and supportive tendencies depending on situational needs. This flexibility corresponds to the Vroom Yetton normative decision model, which argues that no single leadership style fits all contexts. Supportive leadership is evident in training, approachability, and informal discussions with teachers, creating a harmonious environment conducive to character education. The consistent implementation of moral activities, such as reciting Surah Al-Waqi'ah and moral advice during ceremonies, further illustrates Al-Ghazali's habituation principle in practice.

Compared with previous studies (Supriadi; Ikhnsani & Zunaidah; Karim & Ashoumi; Hair), this research contributes a more detailed explanation of the micro-mechanisms through which kiai leadership operates: daily supervision, lived example, religious habituation, and

structured organizational support. The integration of contingency, transformational, religious, path goal, democratic, and supportive patterns shows that kiai leadership is adaptive to modern challenges while remaining rooted in Islamic values. This integrated model explains how pesantren respond to contemporary moral crises without losing their traditional identity and confirms that the kiai's leadership is the central determinant of sustainable moral development among santri.

CONCLUSIONS

The kiai leadership model demonstrates an integrated approach to character building that combines moral authority, managerial control, religious habituation, and adaptive leadership styles. Leadership is enacted through exemplary conduct, continuous supervision, structured task distribution, and value based influence on teachers and students. The application of contingency, transformational, religious, path goal, democratic, and supportive patterns enables consistent implementation of moral programs within daily pesantren life. Religious routines and habituation strengthen internalization of values, while participatory and firm decision making ensures organizational effectiveness. This integrated model confirms that the kiai's leadership is the central factor sustaining students' moral development and preserving pesantren identity amid contemporary educational challenges.

Pesantren need to strengthen the integrated leadership style of kiai through the reinforcement of exemplary behavior, continuous supervision, and consistent religious practices in daily activities. Programs to improve the competence of teachers and administrators must be directed towards supporting systematic moral guidance. Clear competency-based job descriptions need to be developed so that every element of the organization can contribute optimally. In addition, regular deliberations between kiai, teachers, and administrators are important to maintain the harmony of moral and institutional goals. Documenting good practices in kiai leadership is also recommended as a model for the development of sustainable Islamic boarding school leadership in various Islamic educational contexts.

Theoretically, these findings enrich the study of Islamic educational leadership by demonstrating the integration of contingency, transformational, religious, and path-goal models in the context of Islamic boarding schools. Practically, the results of this study emphasize the importance of kiai role models, religious habits, and competency-based task distribution in fostering the moral character of students. This model can be used as a reference for other Islamic boarding schools in developing adaptive, contextual, and character-building leadership strategies.

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