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## Multiculturalism in *Pesantren*: The Dialectic of Islamic Education between Tradition and Modernity

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### Abstract

*This study examines multiculturalism in pesantren by exploring the dialectical relationship between traditional Islamic education and modern educational demands. Employing a qualitative research approach with a case study design, data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis involving kyai, teachers, and santri from diverse cultural backgrounds. The findings reveal that pesantren function as multicultural educational spaces where diversity in ethnicity, language, and regional origin is integrated into daily religious and social practices. Multicultural values are cultivated through communal living, inclusive pedagogical strategies, and leadership grounded in Islamic ethics. Furthermore, strong leadership and institutional support play a crucial role in sustaining multicultural practices, while the negotiation between tradition and modernity enables pesantren to remain relevant without losing their religious identity. This study concludes that pesantren contribute significantly to the development of inclusive and moderate Islamic education by transforming cultural diversity into moral and social capital. The findings offer important insights for strengthening multicultural education within Islamic educational institutions in plural societies.*

**Keywords:** Multiculturalism, Pesantren Education, Islamic Education, Tradition and Modernity, Inclusive Leadership.

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## INTRODUCTION

Pesantren as one of the oldest Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia has long functioned not only as a center for transmitting classical Islamic knowledge but also as a social space where cultural, ethnic, and regional diversity interact. In recent scholarly discussions, pesantren are increasingly recognized as important agents of multicultural education, as they accommodate students from diverse backgrounds and cultivate values such as tolerance, mutual respect, and social harmony (Azra, 2019; Hefner, 2020). The daily life of santri, which emphasizes communal living, discipline, and ethical interaction, provides a fertile ground for internalizing multicultural values within an Islamic framework (Raihani, 2021).

In the context of modernization and globalization, pesantren face a dynamic tension between maintaining traditional Islamic educational practices and responding to the demands of modern education. Traditional elements such as kitab kuning, sorogan, and bandongan remain central to pesantren identity, while modern pedagogical approaches, formal curricula, and global perspectives are increasingly adopted (Zarkasyi, 2020; Lukens-Bull, 2022). This dialectical relationship reflects pesantren's adaptive capacity in negotiating tradition and modernity without losing their religious and cultural foundations. Recent studies indicate that this integration has enabled pesantren to promote inclusive and moderate Islamic values while remaining relevant to contemporary societal challenges (Madjid, 2019; Nilan, 2021).

Furthermore, contemporary research highlights that multiculturalism in pesantren is not merely a curricular discourse but is embedded in social interactions, leadership styles of kyai, and institutional culture. The authority of kyai as moral and spiritual leaders plays a crucial role in shaping inclusive attitudes and fostering intercultural understanding among santri (Dhofier, 2019; Fahmi & Mulyadi, 2023). Through this lived educational experience, pesantren contribute significantly to the development of Islamic education that bridges tradition and modernity,

positioning themselves as strategic institutions for nurturing multicultural awareness and social cohesion in plural societies (Hefner, 2020; Raihani, 2021).

An Islamic boarding school (pesantren) in East Java accommodates students from diverse ethnic, cultural, and regional backgrounds, including Acehese, Minangkabau, Javanese, Madurese, Bugis, and students from Eastern Indonesia. This diversity initially generated minor social tensions, particularly in daily communication and interpersonal interaction. Differences in speech patterns, body language, and cultural norms led to misunderstandings among students, especially between those accustomed to direct communication styles and those from more indirect cultural traditions. Such conditions reflect common challenges in multicultural educational environments where diversity is not yet fully mediated through shared values (Banks, 2019; Raihani, 2021).

To address these challenges, the pesantren leadership, including the kyai and teachers, implemented an educational approach grounded in Islamic values and multicultural principles. Regular halaqah sessions were organized to discuss Qur'anic teachings on human equality (al-musawah), brotherhood (ukhuwwah), and respect for diversity as part of God's design (sunnatullah) (Dhofier, 2019; Hefner, 2020). In addition, the pesantren established Indonesian as the primary language of communication in formal and communal settings, while still allowing students to use their local languages in informal interactions. This policy aimed to foster inclusivity and mutual understanding without suppressing cultural identities, aligning with multicultural education principles that emphasize both unity and diversity (Banks, 2019; Lukens-Bull, 2022).

Multicultural values were further strengthened through daily social practices, such as deliberately mixing students from different regions in dormitory rooms and encouraging collaborative activities, including group discussions, communal work, and student forums. Over time, these practices contributed to the development of empathy, tolerance, and intercultural communication skills among students. Observations by teachers indicated a decline in cultural misunderstandings and an increase in dialogical conflict resolution. This case demonstrates that pesantren function not only as institutions of religious instruction but also as effective sites for lived multicultural education that bridges tradition and modernity within Islamic educational settings (Raihani, 2021; Nilan, 2021).

Therefore, this study is conducted under the title "Multiculturalism in Pesantren: The Dialectics of Islamic Education between Tradition and Modernity" to examine how pesantren negotiate cultural diversity while preserving Islamic educational traditions amid the growing demands of modern education. By focusing on the dialectical relationship between tradition and modernity, this study seeks to contribute to the discourse on Islamic multicultural education and to highlight the strategic role of pesantren in fostering inclusive values within plural societies.

## RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative research approach to explore multiculturalism in pesantren and to understand how Islamic educational institutions negotiate cultural diversity while maintaining traditional values in the context of modern educational demands. Qualitative research is particularly appropriate for this study because it allows for an in-depth understanding of social phenomena, meanings, and educational practices as experienced by participants within their natural settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). By using this approach, the study captures the perspectives of kyai, teachers, and students regarding multicultural values and educational practices in pesantren.

The research design adopts a case study approach, focusing on one pesantren that represents the interaction between traditional and modern Islamic education. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis, which are common techniques in qualitative educational research (Yin, 2018; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2020).

Interviews were conducted with key informants, including pesantren leaders, teachers, and students from diverse cultural backgrounds, to gain rich and nuanced insights into daily practices and institutional policies related to multicultural education.

Data analysis was conducted using a thematic analysis process, involving data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing to identify recurring patterns and themes related to multiculturalism, tradition, and modernity (Miles et al., 2020). To ensure research credibility and trustworthiness, this study applied strategies such as data triangulation and member checking, which are widely recommended in qualitative research to enhance validity and reliability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Through this methodological framework, the study aims to provide a comprehensive and context-sensitive understanding of multicultural practices within pesantren education.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Multicultural Background of Santri

Santri in pesantren generally come from diverse multicultural backgrounds, including differences in ethnicity, regional origin, language, socio-economic status, and educational experiences. This diversity reflects the broader pluralistic context of Indonesian society, where pesantren function as a microcosm of multicultural life. Previous studies emphasize that Islamic boarding schools accommodate students from various cultural identities and social strata, creating a unique educational environment characterized by heterogeneity and interaction across differences (Raihani, 2021; Hefner, 2020).

The multicultural background of santri significantly influences patterns of communication, social interaction, and learning behavior within the pesantren. Differences in language use, communication styles, and cultural norms often shape how santri perceive authority, express opinions, and interact with peers. For instance, students from collectivist cultures may prioritize harmony and indirect communication, while others may exhibit more direct forms of expression. Such diversity, when not properly mediated, can lead to misunderstanding, but it also provides opportunities for intercultural learning and character development (Banks, 2019; Nilan, 2021).

From an Islamic perspective, diversity among santri is not viewed as a barrier but as a divinely ordained reality. The Qur'an explicitly acknowledges human diversity as part of God's design, stating: "O mankind, We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another" (Qur'an 49:13). This verse highlights that cultural and social differences are intended to foster mutual understanding rather than division. In this context, pesantren education plays a strategic role in transforming diversity into a source of moral learning and social cohesion grounded in Islamic values (Dhofier, 2019).

Furthermore, the multicultural background of santri contributes to the formation of inclusive religious attitudes and moderate Islamic perspectives. Daily interactions in shared living spaces encourage santri to negotiate differences, develop empathy, and practice tolerance as part of lived religious experience. Scholars argue that such multicultural encounters within pesantren strengthen social solidarity and reinforce the role of Islamic education in promoting peaceful coexistence in plural societies (Lukens-Bull, 2022; Raihani, 2021).

An example of multicultural background among santri can be observed in a pesantren where students originate from Java, Sumatra, Kalimantan, Sulawesi, and Eastern Indonesia. Initially, differences in language accents and cultural expressions led to stereotypes and social distance among students. Some santri perceived others as unfriendly or disrespectful due to differing communication styles, which occasionally resulted in minor conflicts within dormitory life. This situation illustrates how multicultural diversity, without adequate guidance, may challenge social harmony in educational settings (Banks, 2019).

To address these challenges, pesantren leadership implemented integrative strategies based on Islamic and multicultural principles. These included mixed dormitory arrangements,

structured intercultural dialogues, and religious lessons emphasizing Qur'anic teachings on equality (*al-musawah*) and brotherhood (*ukhuwwah*). By grounding multicultural education in Islamic values and daily practice, pesantren successfully transformed cultural diversity into a learning resource that strengthened mutual respect and collective identity among santri, aligning with the Qur'anic vision of unity in diversity (Hefner, 2020; Raihani, 2021).

### **Multicultural Practices in Pesantren Education**

Multicultural practices in pesantren education are embedded in both formal and informal learning processes. Formally, pesantren integrate multicultural values through religious instruction that emphasizes Islamic teachings on tolerance, justice, and equality, while informally, these values are cultivated through daily communal life in dormitories and shared activities. Scholars note that pesantren function as living educational environments where multicultural learning occurs naturally through interaction, cooperation, and shared religious practices among students from diverse backgrounds (Raihani, 2021; Hefner, 2020).

Pedagogically, multicultural practices in pesantren are reflected in inclusive teaching methods and curriculum adaptation. Teachers encourage dialogical learning, group discussions, and collaborative tasks that involve santri from different cultural and regional backgrounds. Such approaches foster mutual understanding and critical reflection, enabling students to appreciate cultural differences within an Islamic ethical framework. This aligns with the principles of multicultural education that promote inclusivity and respect for diversity without undermining shared values (Banks, 2019; Lukens-Bull, 2022).

From an Islamic perspective, multicultural practices are legitimized by Qur'anic teachings that emphasize diversity as part of God's wisdom. The Qur'an states: "And among His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth and the diversity of your languages and colors" (Qur'an 30:22). In pesantren education, this verse is often used to reinforce the idea that cultural differences are not obstacles but opportunities for learning and spiritual growth. Consequently, pesantren play a strategic role in translating theological principles into practical educational practices that support social cohesion and religious moderation (Dhofier, 2019; Raihani, 2021).

An example of multicultural practice in pesantren education can be observed in collaborative learning activities where santri from different regions are grouped together to study classical Islamic texts (*kitab kuning*) and contemporary subjects. In these mixed groups, students are encouraged to share perspectives shaped by their cultural backgrounds, while teachers facilitate respectful dialogue and mutual learning. This practice not only enhances academic understanding but also strengthens intercultural communication skills and solidarity among santri (Banks, 2019).

Despite these positive practices, pesantren sometimes face challenges in implementing multicultural education effectively. Differences in language proficiency, cultural sensitivity, and prior educational experiences can lead to miscommunication and unequal participation in classroom discussions. Additionally, some santri may initially resist multicultural approaches due to strong regional identities or limited exposure to cultural diversity before entering the pesantren (Nilan, 2021; Hefner, 2020).

To address these challenges, pesantren have adopted several strategies. First, teachers receive training in multicultural pedagogy to enhance their ability to manage diverse classrooms. Second, pesantren establish clear institutional guidelines that promote inclusivity and mutual respect in both academic and social settings. Third, religious instruction is intentionally linked to Qur'anic values of diversity, justice, and brotherhood, reinforcing multicultural awareness as an integral part of Islamic education. These strategies have been shown to strengthen multicultural practices and foster harmonious relationships within pesantren communities (Raihani, 2021; Lukens-Bull, 2022).

### **Leadership and Institutional Support**

Leadership plays a central role in shaping multicultural education in pesantren, particularly through the moral authority and vision of the kyai. As the highest religious and institutional leader, the kyai not only determines educational policies but also serves as a role model whose attitudes and behaviors are closely observed and emulated by santri. Studies indicate that inclusive leadership grounded in Islamic ethics significantly influences the development of tolerance, mutual respect, and social harmony within pesantren communities (Dhofier, 2019; Hefner, 2020).

Institutional support further strengthens multicultural practices by translating leadership values into concrete policies and programs. Pesantren that institutionalize multicultural values through written regulations, curriculum guidelines, and student activities tend to create more consistent and sustainable inclusive environments. Such institutional frameworks help ensure that multicultural education is not dependent solely on individual leaders but becomes an integral part of the organizational culture (Raihani, 2021; Lukens-Bull, 2022).

From an Islamic educational perspective, leadership and institutional support are closely linked to the Qur'anic principle of justice and moral responsibility. The Qur'an states: "Indeed, Allah commands justice and good conduct" (Qur'an 16:90). This verse is often cited in pesantren leadership discourse to emphasize that fairness, inclusivity, and ethical governance are religious obligations. When pesantren leadership aligns institutional policies with these values, multicultural education becomes both a moral and organizational commitment rather than a symbolic ideal (Banks, 2019; Raihani, 2021).

An example of effective leadership and institutional support can be seen in a pesantren where the kyai explicitly promotes inclusivity through regular sermons, institutional policies, and personal interaction with santri from diverse backgrounds. The pesantren establishes student organizations and extracurricular activities that intentionally mix santri from different regions and cultures. Teachers are encouraged to address cultural issues openly in classrooms, creating a supportive environment where diversity is acknowledged and respected (Hefner, 2020).

Despite these efforts, challenges may arise when multicultural values are not consistently reinforced across all levels of leadership. Some teachers or administrators may hold more traditional or homogeneous perspectives, leading to uneven implementation of inclusive practices. Additionally, the absence of formal institutional guidelines can result in multicultural initiatives relying heavily on individual leaders, making them vulnerable to leadership changes (Lukens-Bull, 2022; Nilan, 2021).

To overcome these challenges, pesantren can adopt several strategic solutions. First, leadership development programs should be implemented to enhance teachers' and administrators' understanding of multicultural education within an Islamic framework. Second, pesantren should formalize multicultural values through institutional policies, codes of conduct, and curriculum integration to ensure continuity. Third, regular evaluation and dialogue forums can be established to monitor multicultural practices and address emerging issues collectively. These measures strengthen leadership capacity and institutional resilience in promoting inclusive and harmonious pesantren education (Banks, 2019; Raihani, 2021).

### **Tradition–Modernity Dialectics in Multicultural Pesantren**

The dialectic between tradition and modernity is a defining characteristic of pesantren education, particularly in the context of multiculturalism. Traditional pesantren practices, such as the study of kitab kuning, sorogan, and bandongan, continue to shape the religious identity and moral formation of santri. At the same time, pesantren increasingly adopt modern educational elements, including formal curricula, contemporary pedagogical methods, and exposure to global knowledge. This coexistence reflects pesantren's adaptive capacity to respond to changing social and cultural contexts while preserving their Islamic educational heritage (Dhofier, 2019; Zarkasyi, 2020).

In multicultural pesantren, this dialectical relationship becomes more complex as traditional values must accommodate cultural diversity and modern pluralistic realities. Modern educational approaches, such as dialogical learning and critical thinking, enable santri from diverse backgrounds to engage constructively with differences. Rather than replacing tradition, modernity functions as a complementary force that enhances the relevance of traditional Islamic teachings in addressing contemporary multicultural challenges (Lukens-Bull, 2022; Raihani, 2021).

From an Islamic perspective, the integration of tradition and modernity aligns with the Qur'anic principle of balance (*wasatiyyah*). The Qur'an emphasizes moderation and equilibrium, stating: "And thus We have made you a just and balanced community" (Qur'an 2:143). This concept provides a theological foundation for pesantren to harmonize classical Islamic scholarship with modern educational demands, ensuring that multicultural education remains rooted in Islamic ethics while open to diversity and change (Hefner, 2020; Nilan, 2021).

An example of this dialectic can be observed in a pesantren that maintains traditional kitab-based learning in the morning while incorporating modern subjects and multicultural discussions in the afternoon. Santri engage in classical Islamic text study using traditional methods, followed by group discussions that relate these texts to contemporary issues such as cultural diversity and social harmony. This approach allows santri from different cultural backgrounds to connect traditional Islamic teachings with modern societal realities, fostering inclusive understanding (Zarkasyi, 2020).

Despite these integrative efforts, pesantren may face tensions when traditional norms are perceived as resistant to modern ideas, or when modern educational practices are seen as threatening religious authenticity. Some santri and teachers may struggle to reconcile classical authority-based learning with participatory and critical pedagogies. These tensions can hinder the effective implementation of multicultural education if not addressed thoughtfully (Lukens-Bull, 2022; Nilan, 2021).

To navigate these challenges, pesantren can adopt several strategic solutions. Curriculum integration should be strengthened by explicitly linking classical Islamic texts to contemporary multicultural issues. The teacher capacity-building programs should be implemented to equip educators with skills to mediate between traditional and modern pedagogical approaches. The institutional dialogue forums involving kyai, teachers, and santri can be established to continuously reflect on and negotiate the balance between tradition and modernity. These strategies help pesantren sustain their Islamic identity while embracing multicultural inclusivity and educational innovation.

## CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that pesantren function as dynamic institutions where multiculturalism is not only acknowledged but actively practiced through daily educational processes. The multicultural backgrounds of santri, encompassing diverse ethnic, cultural, and regional identities, position pesantren as microcosms of plural societies. Through structured learning, communal living, and value-based religious instruction, pesantren provide an effective space for cultivating tolerance, mutual respect, and social cohesion within an Islamic educational framework.

The findings further reveal that multicultural practices in pesantren are strengthened by inclusive leadership and institutional support, particularly through the moral authority of the kyai and the integration of multicultural values into educational policies and curricula. The dialectical relationship between tradition and modernity enables pesantren to preserve classical Islamic learning while adopting modern pedagogical approaches that address contemporary multicultural challenges. Rather than being contradictory, tradition and modernity operate synergistically to reinforce pesantren's role in promoting moderate and inclusive Islamic education.

Multiculturalism in pesantren emerges as a lived educational experience rooted in Islamic ethics and responsive to social change. By balancing tradition and modernity, pesantren contribute significantly to the development of inclusive religious education and the strengthening of social harmony in pluralistic contexts. Future research may further explore comparative studies across different types of pesantren or examine the long-term impact of multicultural education on graduates' social and civic engagement.

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