



VISIONARY KYAI LEADERSHIP: AN INTEGRATIVE SOLUTION FOR ISLAMIC TRADITION AND MODERNITY

Misbahul Arifin¹, Jazilurrahman², Norazah Nordin³, Ikhwan Rahman⁴

^{1,2} Universitas Nurul Jadid, Indonesia

³ Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Malaysia

⁴ UIN Imam Bonjol Padang, Indonesia

Email: arifinmisbahul324@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This research explores the role of visionary kyai leadership in integrating Islamic traditions with modernity at Pondok Pesantren Nurul Jadid, Probolinggo, East Java. This tension often creates a dichotomy: on one side, pesantren that exclusively preserve traditions with little adaptation, and on the other side, pesantren that become overly modernized to the extent of diluting their traditional identity. The study aims to analyze how visionary leadership preserves Islamic traditions while simultaneously adopting innovations to strengthen the quality and competitiveness of Islamic education. Using a qualitative approach with a case study design, data were collected through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and documentation, then analyzed with Miles and Huberman's interactive model. The findings reveal that Islamic traditions such as the study of classical texts, religious rituals, and moral values remain the pesantren's foundation, while modern practices like curriculum reform, digitalization, and management innovation are selectively adopted under visionary leadership. The integration of tradition and modernity emerges not as a contradiction but as a synergy, creating an educational model that is both authentic and adaptive. The implications suggest that visionary kyai leadership provides a strategic framework for other Islamic educational institutions to maintain cultural authenticity while effectively addressing contemporary challenges.

Keywords: Visionary Leadership, Islamic Tradition, Modernity

*Corresponding Author: arifinmisbahul324@gmail.com

Received: July 12th 2025; Revised: October 16th 2025; Accepted: December 28th 2025

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.34125/injies.v2i2.32>

Reference to this paper should be made as follows: Arifin, M., Jazilurrahman, J., Nordin, N., Rahman, I. Visionary Kyai Leadership: An Integrative Solution for Islamic Tradition and Modernity. *INJIES: International Journal of Islamic Education Studies*, 2 (2), 81-92.

E-ISSN: [3063-5489](https://doi.org/10.34125/injies.v2i2.32)

Published by: INJIES: International Journal of Islamic Education Studies

INTRODUCTION

Pesantren in Indonesia represent one of the oldest Islamic educational institutions that remain resilient and continue to play a vital role in preserving Islamic traditions while also facing the challenges of modernity (Sadali, 2020). The presence of the *kyai* as the central leader of the pesantren determines the direction of educational policies, the guidance of students (*santri*), and the sustainability of Islamic traditions amid societal

change ([Muntaha & Asyhari, 2025](#)). In the context of globalization and the Fourth Industrial Revolution, pesantren are confronted with a significant dilemma: how to preserve their Islamic identity deeply rooted in tradition while simultaneously opening themselves to technological advancements, scientific knowledge, and the demands of modern society ([Yazmi et al., 2025](#)). According to Azra (2020), the leadership of a *kyai* functions not only as a spiritual figure but also as a social transformation agent capable of responding to change ([Khofi & Furqon, 2024](#)). This aligns with the theory of visionary leadership, which emphasizes the leader's ability to integrate traditional values with future-oriented perspectives. Hence, research on visionary *kyai* leadership becomes highly relevant and significant, as it embodies the dialectics between well-established Islamic traditions and the evolving modern world.

The main problem arising in the dynamics of pesantren education lies in the tension between tradition and modernity ([Mujahid, I., 2021](#)). Many pesantren still adhere strictly to the traditional curriculum based on *kitab kuning* (classical Islamic texts), while society increasingly demands that pesantren graduates possess global competencies relevant to the digital era ([Zahroh & Fahmi, 2025](#)). This tension often creates a dichotomy: on one side, pesantren that exclusively preserve traditions with little adaptation, and on the other side, pesantren that become overly modernized to the extent of diluting their traditional identity. Alavi and Syukur (2021) emphasize that the challenge of Islamic educational leadership in the modern era lies in maintaining the authenticity of tradition while adopting new approaches in teaching and institutional management ([Tripitasari, 2024](#)). Consequently, the critical issue addressed in this study is how visionary *kyai* leadership can serve as an integrative solution that harmonizes Islamic traditions with the demands of modernity within pesantren education.

Previous studies have examined Islamic educational leadership, yet from different perspectives and without comprehensively addressing visionary *kiai* leadership in the pesantren context. Huda, Kartanegara, and Hefni (2020), in the *Journal of Islamic Education Studies*, found that *kyai* leadership plays a crucial role in sustaining traditional pesantren values ([Munayah & Ratnaningsih, 2024](#)), but paid little attention to its integration with modernity. Abdullah (2021), in the *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, highlighted the importance of visionary leadership in modern Islamic education ([Imaduddin, 2024](#)), but the research mainly focused on Islamic formal schools rather than pesantren. Meanwhile, Hasan and Mubarok (2022), in *Al-Jami'ah: Journal of Islamic Studies*, examined pesantren modernization through digital curriculum strengthening ([Najib & Khauldi, 2025](#)), but did not place the *kyai* as the central subject of leadership analysis. From these three studies, it is evident that prior research has not specifically investigated the role of visionary *kyai* leadership as an integrative solution between Islamic tradition and modernity in pesantren education.

Thus, a significant research gap exists. Studies on pesantren leadership have largely emphasized either the preservation of tradition or the partial adoption of modernity, but rarely the integration of both within a comprehensive conceptual framework ([Nur Fuad, A. F., 2017](#)). Although research on the modernization of Islamic education has developed, the role of the *kyai* as a visionary leader capable of harmonizing tradition and modernity has been minimally explored in depth ([Darmini, A. M. M., 2021](#)).

Therefore, this study seeks to fill this gap by focusing on visionary *kyai* leadership as an integrative actor between tradition and modernity in pesantren education.

The novelty of this research lies in its integrative approach, viewing the *kyai* not only as a guardian of tradition or adopter of modernity but as a visionary figure capable of constructing a dual-character pesantren education model: rooted in Islamic traditions yet adaptive to modernity. While previous studies tended to separate the roles of *kyai*, tradition, and modernity, this research unites the three within a single framework of visionary leadership analysis ([Al Mubarak, M. R., & Imron, M., 2020](#)). The scientific contribution offered is a new perspective on visionary *kyai* leadership as an integrative solution, which can serve as both a theoretical model and practical approach for contemporary Islamic educational leadership ([Alam, N. A. R., 2020](#)). Hence, this research offers high novelty by proposing a pesantren leadership paradigm that is not only reactive to change but also proactive, innovative, and solution-oriented.

Based on this background, the primary objective of this research is to analyze and understand how visionary *kyai* leadership plays a role as an integrative solution between Islamic tradition and modernity in pesantren education ([Basri, M. H., 2022](#)). The study focuses on one critical issue: the identity dilemma of pesantren – whether to preserve tradition or to follow modernity ([Darmini, A. M. M., 2021](#)). By examining the leadership strategies of *kyai*, this research aims to identify patterns, strategies, and practices of leadership relevant to the development of pesantren education in the global era. Ultimately, this study seeks to contribute to the development of Islamic educational leadership theory and pesantren management practices, ensuring that pesantren remain authentic Islamic educational institutions while simultaneously being adaptive to the dynamics of the times.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach with a case study design, as the research focus is directed toward an in-depth exploration of visionary *kyai* leadership as an integrative solution between Islamic tradition and modernity in pesantren ([Kurniadi et al., 2025](#)). The research site is Pondok Pesantren Nurul Jadid, located on Jalan KH. Zaini Mun'im, Karanganyar, Paiton, Probolinggo, East Java. The location was chosen based on the consideration that this pesantren is one of the largest Islamic educational institutions in East Java, consistently preserving Islamic traditions while also being adaptive to modern developments through various educational innovations. Data collection techniques were carried out through three main methods: in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and documentation study ([Daruhadi & Sopiati, 2024](#)). Interviews were conducted with the head of the pesantren bureau, pesantren administrators, and students to obtain comprehensive perspectives regarding patterns of visionary leadership. Participatory observation was carried out by engaging in daily pesantren activities, including learning sessions, classical Islamic text studies, and modern educational programs. Documentation study was conducted by analyzing archives, pesantren policy records, curricula, and official publications related to institutional development. The combination of these techniques is expected to provide rich, in-depth, and triangulated data.

The data analysis technique employed in this study follows Miles and Huberman's interactive model, which consists of three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing ([Qomaruddin & Sa'diyah, 2024](#)). In the data reduction stage, information obtained from the field was selected, categorized, and focused on the research themes ([Stapleton, K., & Wilson, J., 2017](#)). Data display was conducted by organizing information into descriptive and thematic narratives to facilitate meaning-making. The final stage is conclusion drawing, which was carried out continuously from the beginning of data collection until the completion of the research, ensuring that the findings comprehensively illustrate how visionary kyai leadership functions as an integrative solution between Islamic tradition and modernity at Pondok Pesantren Nurul Jadid.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Results

Research on visionary kyai leadership as an integrative solution between Islamic tradition and modernity at Pondok Pesantren Nurul Jadid reveals several important findings that demonstrate how the role of the kyai is not limited to being a spiritual symbol, but also a transformative actor capable of harmonizing two major currents: tradition and modernity. These findings were obtained through data triangulation from in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and documentation study, which altogether illustrate the visionary leadership patterns of the kyai in the pesantren. The results highlight three main dimensions: (1) the preservation of Islamic traditions in pesantren life, (2) modernization and innovation in education and institutional management, and (3) the integration of tradition and modernity through visionary kyai leadership.

Preservation of Islamic Traditions

One significant finding of this study is that the kyai remains consistent in preserving Islamic traditions within the pesantren through the practice of *kitab kuning* studies, religious rituals, and classical values that have been passed down for generations. This was reinforced by an interview with the Head of the Pesantren Bureau, Kyai Ahmad Madarik, S.E., who stated, "The kyai always emphasizes that students should never abandon kitab studies, because it is the soul of pesantren, even though now we already have digital classes." This statement indicates that tradition is not merely symbolic but is safeguarded as the fundamental identity of the pesantren ([Husen & Husni, 2025](#)). Observation supports this view, as daily *kitab* studies in the mornings and evenings remain ongoing alongside modern educational activities. This finding is in line with Dhofier (2011), who emphasized that *kitab kuning* constitutes the primary pillar in shaping students' character and maintaining the originality of pesantren ([Fikri et al., 2025](#)).

Modernization and Innovation in Pesantren

In addition to preserving traditions, the kyai at Pondok Pesantren Nurul Jadid actively promotes modernization through the implementation of formal curricula, digitalized administration, and the development of information technology in teaching. One student interviewed remarked, "Now many classes use projectors, and there is even a special application for lesson schedules and student attendance." This statement reflects the integration of technology into the education system, which was previously

managed manually ([Habib, M. N., et al., 2021](#)). Observations confirmed the use of technological devices in classrooms, while documentation showed that the pesantren had launched an internal digital platform as a communication medium between teachers and students. This supports Azra’s (2020) theory of Islamic education modernization, which asserts that Islamic institutions need to develop technological innovations in order to remain competitive in the global era ([Simbolon & Iswanti, 2023](#)).

Integration of Tradition and Modernity through Visionary Leadership

The most crucial finding of this research is how the kyai positions himself as a visionary leader capable of integrating Islamic traditions with modernity without sacrificing either. Ustadz Mujibul Khoir, M.H., a pesantren bureau administrator, stated in an interview, “The kyai always says that tradition must be preserved but we should not be resistant to change. We must be able to combine both.” This statement affirms that the kyai is not only a guardian of traditions but also an architect of the pesantren’s innovative future ([Ulya & Triyuliasari, 2024](#)). Observations further revealed that every educational policy was preceded by deliberations that considered both traditional aspects and modern demands. Documentation showed that the pesantren’s vision explicitly mentions the integration of tafaqquh fi al-din (deep understanding of religion) with “modern knowledge” as its main foundation. This finding resonates with Nanus’ (1992) theory of visionary leadership, which emphasizes the leader’s ability to integrate historical values with future-oriented perspectives ([Maulida et al., 2024](#)).

Table 1. Visionary Kyai Leadership in Pesantren

Findings Dimension	Islamic Tradition	Modernity	Integration through Visionary Leadership
Practices	Kitab kuning studies, religious rituals	Digitalized learning, formal curriculum	Policies combining classical texts with modern learning
Interview	“Kitab is the soul of pesantren”	“Classes use projectors and digital apps”	“Tradition preserved, modernity accepted”
Observation	Daily kitab studies (morning and evening)	Classroom use of projectors	Policy deliberations balancing tradition and modernity
Documentation	Records of kitab study	Internal pesantren digital platform	Pesantren vision document outlining value integration

Conclusion of Findings

Based on the triangulated analysis, it can be concluded that visionary kyai leadership at Pondok Pesantren Nurul Jadid serves as an integrative bridge that safeguards the authenticity of Islamic traditions while adopting modern educational practices. Tradition and modernity are not positioned as dichotomous, but rather blended through proactive, innovative, and solution-oriented visionary leadership policies.

Thus, the kyai emerges as a key actor in ensuring that pesantren remain both authentic and adaptive in the face of globalization ([Mutawakkil & Barizi, 2024](#)).

Discussion

Islamic Tradition: Preservation and Assertion of Identity

The findings reveal that Islamic traditions such as classical kitab studies, religious rituals, and moral values are consistently preserved as the moral and spiritual foundation of the pesantren. These traditions are not merely seen as cultural heritage, but also serve as sources of legitimacy and normative references in policy-making. The study “Preserving Tradition Amid Disruption: A Systematic Literature Review of Pesantren Development in Indonesia” by Akhmad (2024) emphasizes that many pesantren in the 2020–2024 literature actively preserve traditions as a key strategy to face globalization ([Sunardi & Halimatuzzahrah, 2025](#)). Similar to this study’s findings, the systematic review underscores that tradition is not abandoned during modernization but becomes an anchor to maintain value continuity. However, in Pondok Pesantren Nurul Jadid, the visionary leadership of the kiai turns tradition into an active component in formulating modern policies, not merely a symbolic ritual. This demonstrates that tradition remains relevant and does not necessarily hinder modernity ([Yusuf & Ali, 2025](#)), in contrast to some studies that portray tradition as an obstacle to educational innovation.

These findings reinforce and extend Azyumardi Azra and Dhofier’s views that Islamic tradition is not only an object of preservation but also an active ingredient in shaping Islamic educational leadership ([Romadhon & Mustafidin, 2025](#)). In this context, visionary leadership places tradition in a productive dialogue with modernity, rather than positioning it defensively.

Modernity as Innovation and Adaptation

From the perspective of modernity, this study finds that educational and managerial innovations (formal curriculum, digital classrooms and administration, and the use of technology in learning) are not merely tolerated but selectively adopted to enhance educational effectiveness. Interestingly, each modernization decision is examined through the lens of tradition to ensure the preservation of students’ spiritual values ([Mahmoudi Farahani, L., et al., 2018](#)). This resonates with “Hybrid Pesantren in Indonesia: Analyzing the Transformation of Islamic Religious Education in the Digital Age” by Mustofa, Mas’ud, and Zulfa Elizabeth (2023), which shows that hybrid pesantren (offline and online integration, use of digital media) maintain traditional practices such as kitab studies in new formats, with the kiai acting as a “cultural creator” of digital tradition ([Mustofa et al., 2023](#)). This research expands upon such findings by showing that Pondok Pesantren Nurul Jadid does not merely reformat tradition but integrates modernity into its institutional vision, ensuring that innovation is achieved without losing its religious roots.

Similarly, “Modernisasi Pondok Pesantren Salafi: Kepemimpinan dan Pembelajaran Transformasi dalam Pendidikan Agama Islam” by Nurdin and Samudi (2022) finds that Salafi pesantren in Banten modernized leadership and learning despite cultural resistance ([Samudi, 2021](#)). This study also found cultural resistance, yet it was

overcome through visionary leadership that bridged conservative groups with those more open to innovation. Hence, modernity can be integrated more smoothly when guided by visionary leadership, unlike situations where modernity is perceived as a threat ([Amini, 2023](#)).

Integration of Tradition and Modernity: Synergy and Challenges

The essence of this study is how the integration of tradition and modernity is executed through visionary leadership. The findings indicate that integration does not merely juxtapose the two elements but creates a mutually reinforcing relationship ([Hoffmann, W., et al., 2018](#)). Pesantren are not forced to choose between tradition or modernity; instead, they develop a hybrid model that combines the moral-spiritual consistency of tradition with the relevance and competitiveness of modernity.

Previous literature partially supports this concept. “Visionary Leadership of Kyai in Enhancing the Quality of Islamic Education at Islamic Boarding Schools in Jambi Province” by Musthofa, Marwazi, and Jamaluddin (2022) shows that kiai leadership in Jambi pesantren integrates diniyah and general curricula and collaborates with external stakeholders to improve educational quality ([Hifasoh et al., 2024](#)). The findings of this study align with those conclusions but further add that visionary leadership not only integrates curricula but also bridges traditional values in management, institutional culture, and future orientation ([Nor & Aslamiah, 2025](#)).

Similarly, “Educational Management Strategies: Integrating Tradition and Modernity” at Madrasah Aliyah Hidayaturrahman by Qusairi, Fikri, and Akbar (2023) finds that collaborative management, teacher training, and student-centered learning facilitate integration between academic values and traditional character values ([Alistriana et al., 2025](#)). This study strengthens these findings by emphasizing that visionary leadership is not solely top-down but also involves teachers and students in shaping the vision and integrative strategies ([Christensen, R., et al., 2018](#)).

However, a key difference emerges. The quantitative study “Exploring Visionary and Transformational Leadership among Islamic Leaders and Its Impact on Job Satisfaction in Indonesian Pesantren” by Kurniawan, Syarifudin, and Zohriah (2024) finds that transformational leadership significantly affects job satisfaction, whereas visionary leadership has no direct significant impact ([Wartono et al., 2025](#)). This suggests that the influence of visionary leadership is more indirect or contextual. In this study, its impact is evident in shaping institutional identity and educational quality through the integration of tradition and modernity, rather than in job satisfaction alone. Thus, visionary leadership appears more prominent in shaping values and culture than in operational aspects ([Lase et al., 2025](#)).

CONCLUSION

This study highlights that visionary leadership of the *kyai* at Pondok Pesantren Nurul Jadid successfully integrates Islamic tradition with modernity in a synergistic manner. The most important insight gained is that tradition should not be perceived as a barrier to innovation but rather as a moral foundation and source of legitimacy in shaping adaptive educational policies in the face of global change. The strength of this research lies in its theoretical contribution, as it expands the perspective on visionary

leadership by showing that it does not only project the future but also creatively engages tradition in constructing educational policies. Practically, the study offers a model of leadership that other pesantren may adopt – grounded in tradition while remaining open to innovation – ensuring that identity is preserved while enhancing institutional relevance.

Nevertheless, this research has limitations as it focuses only on a single case, namely Pondok Pesantren Nurul Jadid, and applies a qualitative approach that emphasizes in-depth contextual description. As a result, the findings cannot be generalized across pesantren with different socio-cultural contexts. In line with these limitations, further research is required with broader coverage and the use of mixed methods to obtain a more comprehensive picture. Such efforts are crucial to provide a stronger basis for more precise policy formulation in the development of pesantren education in Indonesia.

As a recommendation, pesantren leaders should continue to cultivate visionary leadership that balances tradition and modernity, for instance, by enhancing digital literacy among teachers and students while maintaining the centrality of classical Islamic texts. Scholars and researchers are encouraged to pursue further studies through cross-case analyses and diverse methodological approaches to enrich the theoretical discourse on Islamic leadership. Meanwhile, policymakers in Islamic education – both at the governmental and community levels – should provide regulatory and programmatic support to ensure that pesantren can transform innovatively without losing their Islamic identity.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The researcher sincerely extends gratitude to the leadership of Pondok Pesantren Nurul Jadid, especially the *kyai* and teachers, for their openness and support during the research process. Appreciation is also given to the santri who willingly shared their experiences, as well as to colleagues and academic mentors whose guidance and constructive feedback enriched this study. Finally, heartfelt thanks are directed to the family and friends who continuously provided encouragement and motivation throughout the completion of this research.

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