

## **Kyai Leadership in the Effort for Pesantren Education Innovation (A Study of Kyai Ahmad Umar's Leadership at Pondok Pesantren Salaf Al- Khudlary Cigasong Majalengka)**

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### **Abstract**

This research examines the leadership style of Kyai Ahmad Umar Al-Khudlary in the innovation and management of the Salaf Al-Khudlary Islamic Boarding School (Pondok Pesantren) in Cigasong, Majalengka, as well as its implementation in developing the educational institutions under its auspices. Salaf pesantren often face internal issues such as inadequate management, curriculum, and facilities, which shift the role of conventional pesantren. *In this context*, this study addresses a research gap by highlighting how leadership behavior directly shapes institutional innovation in salaf pesantren, *a dimension rarely explored in previous studies*. Through a descriptive qualitative approach, it was found that Kyai Ahmad Umar implements a transformational-situational leadership style, characterized by four indicators: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. The innovations implemented include an integrated curriculum (integrating the Lirboyo with the Kaliwungu curriculum), the use of modern technology-based learning media (laptops/in focus for bahtsul masail and Android phones for study teleconferences), and a system for paying syahriyah (monthly fees) via e-banking. The implementation of this leadership is also strengthened by the Kyai's charisma, which is colored by a democratic style through deliberation (musyawarah) in managing the institution. This effective innovation and management enable the Al-Khudlary pesantren to compete and become a public choice.

**Keywords: Kyai Leadership, Education Innovation, Salaf Pesantren, Transformational-Situational, Al-Khudlary.**

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Islamic educational institutions, such as pesantren, madrasah, and Islamic schools, initially received less attention from the upper-middle class society. The problem was that these educational institutions had not yet accommodated the interests of the community regarding the development of their children in preparation for their future lives. Islamic educational institutions, especially salaf Islamic boarding schools or madrasah for example, also experienced internal problems, as stated by Fadjar as quoted by Marno and Triyo Supriyatno, that the problems of salaf Islamic boarding schools or madrasah encompass their entire education system, especially low management systems and work ethic, inadequate quality and quantity of teachers, ineffective curriculum, and inadequate physical facilities and infrastructure. These factors led to Islamic education, such as salaf Islamic boarding schools or madrasah, being abandoned by the community and receiving less response from the upper class.

In addition to the internal pesantren problems above, Rohadi Abdul Fatah also argues that pesantren, as a reflection of the Muslim community's need for an educational institution that can educate and teach their children about Islam and habituate them to a life patterned on Islamic teachings, were almost all built on the self-funding of the santri (students), their parents, and the surrounding community. Nevertheless, this does not mean that funding is not a problem, but it remains one of the pesantren's problems when the need for facilities increases in line with the increasing santri population. Besides funding, there are several other problems faced by pesantren that can be mentioned here: Funding,

Development and Management, Recognition and Legality, Image, Information and Publication, and Politics.

However, the development of pesantren has undergone good progress from time to time, marked, among other things, by the gradual (classical) emergence of various educational forms that are already considered modern and complete. Institutions outside the existing traditional system are present as a way to strengthen the human resources (SDM) of the santri, enabling them to support classic literary works (kitab kuning) as a source of reference for religious issues. Thus, the existence of pesantren has a dynamic that constantly interacts with the constellation of the changing times and can continue to exist.

The development of these educational institutions has subsequently attracted the attention of experts, both domestic and foreign, to conduct comprehensive scientific studies. Now there are many research findings by experts that provide information about the growth and development of pesantren management. The transformation of the potential owned by pesantren, if not accompanied by professional governance and management, may hinder the pace of competition between pesantren and other modern educational institutions, and eventually, they will be left far behind.

Affandi Mochtar writes that among the researchers of pesantren, both from Muslim and non-Muslim scholars, as researchers of social sciences and Islamic religious sciences. For example, domestic researchers include Zamakhsyari Dhofier, Sudjoko Prasodjo, Mastuhu, Bahri Ghazali, Sukamto, Muhtarom H.M, and foreign researchers include Manfred Ziemek, Kareel A. Steenbrink, Martin van Bruinessen, and other researchers. Their interest in pesantren is certainly based on several reasons, including their view that pesantren is not only a distinctive religious educational institution but also a religious institution that functions as a social control and is even seen as an institution that plays a role in social engineering. Several observations made by these researchers have revealed various findings that point to the encounter of pesantren with variants of educational modernization and various changes in society. As a result, pesantren in their view is a field and an object that cannot be separated from the general development of education in Indonesia.

The radical development in pesantren ultimately also shapes the style of the pesantren in identifying itself, without having to lose its identity as an institution for tafaquh fi al-din (deepening religious knowledge). Therefore, the classic yellow book (kitab kuning) remains a source of intellectual wealth, so the character of pesantren is very relevant to the traditions and culture that have been pioneered since its early inception in the Nusantara region.

One form of progress and modernity of pesantren is the completion of various institutional apparatuses within itself according to its capabilities and needs, especially those related to the interests of the surrounding community. Management includes the management of the pesantren, the student organization (organisasi santri), management or financing, and the management of the kitab kuning curriculum. Gradually, if management is carried out seriously and comprehensively, it will facilitate the pesantren in monitoring or evaluating its own performance.

In the context of education, pesantren has an important role in the process of social implementation in the education sector, specifically it is not always at a constant point but also experiences ups and downs. For example, when pesantren was the only educational center, the role of the educational institution with the kyai (religious scholar/leader) as the informal figure had a very decisive position and role. However, when the world of education became increasingly filled with modern educational institutions that offered the advantages of a system, systematically programmed curriculum, reliable teaching staff SDM, and professional management, the existence of pesantren was increasingly shifted. The role of pesantren was also further reduced by the increasing level of government intervention in working on the development sector in various aspects, as experienced by the government's role during the New Order era with a centralized government system that emphasized political stability, strict security approach, and prioritization of development in the economic sector.

To be able to play its educative role in providing quality human resources, pesantren is required to continuously improve quality and at the same time update its educational model. This is because the pesantren education model based on the conventional or classic system will not be sufficient to help provide human resources with integrative competence in mastering religious knowledge, general knowledge, and technological skills. Yet, these three elements are prerequisites that cannot be ignored

for the context of social change due to modernization. As briefly mentioned in the background, the ideal model of pesantren education that can be developed today appears to be the integration type between the classic education system and the modern education system. The development of this ideal type will not totally change the face and uniqueness of the pesantren education system into a general education model that tends to be reductionistic towards the values contained in the pesantren education system.

Among several Islamic educational institutions in pesantren that show significant progress are Pesantren Kempek Cirebon, Pesantren Buntet Cirebon, Pesantren Gedongan Cirebon, Pesantren Babakan Ciwaringin Cirebon, and Pesantren Salaf al-Khudlary in Majalengka, demonstrating themselves as superior Islamic educational institutions in pesantren and chosen by the community as an alternative option for their children's education. The emergence of these superior pesantren shows that Islamic educational institutions in Pesantren have opened up and are accommodating to the aspirations and demands of the community. Furthermore, the emergence of these superior pesantren cannot be separated from the role of pesantren education practitioners, especially the leader (Kyai) of the pesantren, in conditioning an educational model that meets those community aspirations.

Based on a preliminary observation, as is the case at Pesantren Salaf Al-Khudlary Majalengka, this institution can be categorized as a superior Islamic educational institution in creating educational innovations in pesantren. One example is the innovation in the effective learning of kitab kuning. Its superiority and success cannot be separated from the important role of its pesantren leader, Kyai Ahmad Umar. (Rois et al. 2025) Kyai Ahmad Umar has an important role in carrying out his function as a pesantren leader for the development and innovation of pesantren education at Pesantren Salaf Al-Khudlary. To describe the initial phenomenon the researcher found in the field, Kyai Ahmad Umar is a pesantren leader who is very simple, charismatic, and transformative. Kyai Ahmad began his career in building the pesantren in 1995 under the mandate of his mother who wanted a pesantren in the neighborhood where he lived.

The initial development of the pesantren only consisted of the kyai's house and one complex of kobong (student dormitory) as a place for the santri to live, and the number of santri was relatively small. Learning activities were also still centered at the kyai's house. Gradually, the development of Pesantren Salaf Al-Khudlary began to show, which includes the addition of santri complexes in line with the increasing number of santri from year to year, the presence of a mushola (prayer room), pesantren facilities and infrastructure (learning hall, library, warung (shop), bathrooms, toilets, computers, administrative office, and others), beginning to be known by the public, the formation of the student association (jam'iyah santri), and importantly, the learning system is already madrasah-based (classical) and applies extracurricular systems such as ngaji sorogan (individual study), ngaji mingguan (weekly study for santri and alumni), ngaji pasaran (intensive study during the months of Sya'ban, Ramadhan, Syawal), and the annual student festival (festival santri).

This shows that the pesantren under the leadership of Kyai Ahmad Umar experienced quite rapid development, both physically and non-physically, and academic and non-academic achievements were attained, as seen today. (Jannah and Fatmawati 2023) Due to Kyai Ahmad Umar's ability as the leader of Pesantren Salaf Al-Khudlary in managing the human resources in the Islamic educational institution, he was apparently able to improve the quality of its education. This is evidenced, for example, by one of Kyai Ahmad Umar's santri named Mohammad Aminullah who won the first place in the Elimination Round of the National Level Kitab Kuning Musabaqoh (Competition) held at PP. Assalafie Babakan, Ciwaringin, Cirebon in 2016.

Based on the record of success achieved by Pesantren Salaf Al-Khudlary, Cigasong, Majalengka, it is assumed that the occurrence of educational innovation at Pesantren Salaf Al-Khudlary, such as the innovation in kitab kuning learning in the pesantren, is highly determined by the behavior and active role of its leader, namely Kyai Ahmad Umar. Therefore, the figure of Kyai Ahmad Umar as the pesantren leader is interesting to study, research in depth and comprehensively, especially his leadership behavior in the innovation of Islamic educational institutions. The urgency of this research is intended so that the figure of Kyai Ahmad Umar becomes a treasure trove (khazanah) of success in Islamic educational institution innovation that he has carried out, and furthermore, so that it can be used as a reference or role model for managers of Islamic educational institutions, especially salaf pesantren, in managing and leading an Islamic educational institution. (Ainunajip, Astuti, and Abbas, n.d.)

## II. METHOD

### A. Approach and Type of Research

This research uses a qualitative approach, which emphasizes the socially constructed nature of reality and the close relationship between the researcher and the subject. The type of research employed is field research that is descriptive qualitative. It is a non-experimental method aiming to describe existing phenomena.

### B. Data Sources and Sampling

- Sampling Technique: Purposive sampling, where data sources are selected based on specific considerations, such as being the person most knowledgeable about the expected information.
- Primary Data Sources: Kyai Ahmad Umar, his family, pesantren administrators, students (santri), alumni, and the Kyai's friends.
- Secondary Data Sources: The surrounding community, students' parents/guardians, documents, archives, books, articles, journals, and relevant print/electronic media.

### C. Data Collection Techniques

- Observation: Using the participant observation model, where the researcher is involved in the activities of the observed subjects (Kyai Ahmad Umar's learning activities and the activities of the students/administrators).
- Interview: Using depth interview techniques, characterized by high skepticism and the use of probing.
- Documentary Study: Recording past activities or events from relevant literature, the Kyai's writings, KBM activities (photos, recordings, videos), and administrative archives.

### D. Data Analysis and Credibility Testing

- Data Analysis: Descriptive qualitative data analysis. The process follows the Miles and Huberman model, including three stages:
- Data Reduction: Summarizing, selecting key points, and focusing the data.
- Data Display: Presenting the reduced data clearly to facilitate conclusion drawing.
- Data Verification: Drawing conclusions systematically based on data reduction and display.
- Data Credibility Testing: Using the triangulation method, which involves checking data from various sources using multiple collection techniques and different times (source, technique, and timetriangulation).

## III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### A. Kyai Ahmad Umar Al-Khudlary's Leadership Style

Kyai Ahmad Umar's leadership style is categorized as transformational-situational, assessed based on four transformational behavior indicators:

- Idealized Influence (Charisma): The Kyai is seen as charismatic, but his practice is marked by a democratic style through deliberation (musyawarah) in managing the institution.
- Inspirational Motivation (Inspirational Motivation): He tends to absorb subordinates' aspirations and provides motivation, such as "Iso ora iso, faham ora faham, sing penting ngaji lan getol ibadah" (Able or unable, understanding or not understanding, the important thing is diligently studying and worshipping).
- Intellectual Stimulation (Intellectual Stimulation): He promotes innovation, seen in the adoption of an integrated curriculum and modern technology in teaching.
- Individualized Consideration (Individualized Consideration): He is committed to considering subordinates' needs, creating a trusting and respectful atmosphere, and involving subordinates (like the teacher council) in decision-making and program planning.

### B. Education and Pesantren Management Innovation

As an innovator, Kyai Ahmad Umar implements proactive and adaptive changes:

- Curriculum Innovation: Integrating the curriculum of Lirboyo and Kaliwungu pesantren into an integrated curriculum to reduce difficulty in understanding classic books (kitab kuning) and enhance quality.
- Teaching System Innovation: While retaining traditional methods (bandongan, sorogan, musyawarah), he incorporates modern technology-based learning media, such as laptops/in focus for bahtsul masail and Android phones for teleconference weekly and seasonal studies (pasarani).

- Financial and Administrative Innovation: Payment of syahriyah (monthly fees) and new student registration is done through e-banking. Administrative tasks increasingly use laptops, and new student registration is conducted via WhatsApp for easy communication.
- Student Organization Innovation: Student organizations (jam'iyah) utilize social media groups (WhatsApp and Facebook) to communicate, disseminate study results (videos/recordings of Kyai Ahmad Umar's recitations), and promote the pesantren's existence to the public.

### C. Leadership Implementation

The transformational-situational leadership style of Kyai Ahmad Umar is proven effective in transforming the institution's potential into actual energy to improve the quality of education. His charisma is used as a symbol of struggle, reinforced by the democratic principle of deliberation.

Although functional leadership is delegated to administrators, the overall pattern remains centralistic with Kyai Ahmad Umar as the central figure. However, the division of management tasks into five specific fields (education, facilities and infrastructure, public relations, business, and women's empowerment) indicates a shift towards a more formal organizational pattern.

A perceived weakness is the existence of informality in work procedures and authority among leadership structures, which may lead to overlapping duties. This suggests a need for clear Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs). Nevertheless, this weakness is minimized by the Kyai's strengths, including an emotional approach and provision of rewards (salaries, facilities) to subordinates. Strict discipline (ta'zir) is also maintained to preserve pesantren values.

## IV. CONCLUSION

- Kyai Ahmad Umar Al-Khudlary's Leadership Style is transformational-situational, effectively driving innovation. This is demonstrated by absorbing subordinates' aspirations, empowering administrators, providing individual consideration, and exercising leadership that is charismatic yet democratic, centered on consensus through deliberation.
- Innovation and Management efforts include an integrated curriculum (Lirboyo-Kaliwungu), adoption of modern technology (Android for teleconference studies, e-banking for payments), and use of social media for communication and institutional promotion.
- Implementation of this leadership, while retaining informal elements in work procedures, has led the organization toward a formal pattern with specific division of tasks into five key fields. This leadership successfully positioned Pondok Pesantren Salaf Al-Khudlary as an excellent and time-adaptive educational institution.

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