

Between Feudalism and Islamic Boarding School Manners: A Literature Review

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Abstract

Purpose - This research aims to critically examine the use of the term feudalism in describing social relations in Islamic boarding schools and offers a conceptual redefinition that distinguishes between feudal power structures and Islamic ethical systems based on adab.

Design/Methodology/Approach - With a qualitative-descriptive approach through the Systematic Literature Review, this study examines classical literature such as *Ta'lim al-Muta'allim* by Al-Zarnuji and *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* by Al-Ghazali, as well as contemporary research on the social dynamics of Islamic boarding schools.

Findings - The results of the study show that the hierarchical relationship between kiai and santri does not represent a pattern of domination as in feudalism, but a reflection of adab values that emphasize respect, sincerity, and the search for barokah. The social structure of pesantren is moral and pedagogical, not exploitative. In addition, this study emphasizes that adab values are in line with the goals of pesantren education as stated in Pasal 3 UU No. 18 Tahun 2019, That is, to form individuals who are faithful, knowledgeable, independent, and moderate.

Originality/Value - The original value of this research lies in the synthesis of Western social theory and Islamic ethics which produces a new conceptual framework on the social relations of Islamic boarding schools, thus enriching the discourse of Islamic education in the context of modernization and democratization.

Keywords: keyword 1; keyword 2; keyword 3, keyword 4; keyword 5; keyword 6

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I. INTRODUCTION

Moral and ethical education in Indonesia cannot be separated from the role of non-formal educational institutions called pesantren (Aziz & Huda, 2024). Since colonial times, pesantren have played a major role in shaping the character of the nation, not only as a center of religious education, but also as a base for social and political struggle (Ningsih et al., 2023). This historical role is immortalized in the commemoration of National Santri Day every October 22, which refers to the Jihad Resolution event in 1945 as a symbol of the contribution of Islamic boarding schools to the struggle for Indonesian independence (Faizah & Baedowi, 2024).

In essence, pesantren is an educational institution that is oriented towards fostering character and social morality. Students are not only educated scientifically, but also formed to be ready to play an active role in people's lives (Valladares, 2021). In this context, pesantren have a distinctive educational pattern, namely self-government, where social relationships are formed through the structure of shared values and responsibilities (Qowim, 2023). This pattern of interaction reflects a hierarchical order that originates from the social and spiritual contract between kiai and students (Ihsan & Umar, 2020).

However, the social structure and form of respect that applies in Islamic boarding schools are often misunderstood by some people as a form of feudalism (Musnandar et al., 2024). The relationship between the santri and the kiai marked by ethical symbols (such as the tradition of kissing hands, bowing when greeting, or the sitting position of the santri being lower than the kiai) is often considered a feudal practice of the hierarchy of power. In fact, these practices are an expression of manners and respect, not a form of social oppression or subordination (Maghfiroh et al., 2024).

This misunderstanding is getting stronger in the modern era which is characterized by information disclosure and the acceleration of digitalization flows. Social media and online news often show pieces of events in pesantren without the context of the adab values behind them. For example, the accusation against the Lirboyo Islamic Boarding School as an institution that practices

discrimination-based feudalism, or the case of the collapse of the building at the Al-Khoziny Islamic Boarding School which is associated with the practice of community service (roan) of students. This phenomenon shows a reduction in the meaning of the social structure of pesantren and a mistake in understanding the difference between feudalism (as a hierarchical and exploitative system of power and Islamic boarding school manners) as a system of ethics and respect based on Islamic values.

Therefore, it is important to examine in depth how the social hierarchy in pesantren is understood in the context of adab values, not in the framework of feudalism. This research is relevant in the midst of modernization and democratization challenges that have the potential to shift the meaning of the tradition of respect into a symbol of social inequality. Through this literature review, it is hoped that a clearer conceptual understanding of the position of adab in maintaining traditional values of pesantren can be found without being trapped in a feudal structure.

Various previous studies have reviewed the dynamics of social and cultural changes in the world of Islamic boarding schools. Fuady (2020) explained that the renewal of the pesantren education system occurred gradually, covering institutional, curriculum, and methodological aspects, while the function of pesantren as a moral development institution continued without much change. Research by Achmadin et al. (2024) highlights the challenges of modernization and globalization that encourage Islamic boarding schools to balance between tradition and educational innovation, especially through the emergence of the International Islamic Boarding School (IIBS). From the perspective of social relations, Rofidah & Syam (2021) revealed that the behavior of students, such as the tradition of arranging kiai sandals, represents spiritual respect and the search for the blessings of knowledge, not a form of social subordination. Machmudi (2021) shows that there is a shift in kiai authority due to modernization, where the influence of kiai on students decreases in modern pesantren but remains strong in traditional pesantren. Meanwhile, (Kutsiyah, 2020) highlighted the importance of social capital in the Sidogiri Islamic Boarding School as the foundation of collective values that foster solidarity, discipline, and economic independence of students.

Although these studies have discussed aspects of modernization, social relations, and values in the pesantren education system, there has been no research that specifically dissects the conceptual distinction between "feudalism" and "pesantren manners". In fact, public and academic debates about social hierarchy in Islamic boarding schools often arise due to misunderstandings of the practice of respect which is perceived as feudalism. Thus, this study seeks to fill the gap through an in-depth literature analysis to affirm that the hierarchical structure in pesantren is a manifestation of Islamic manners and ethics, not a feudal power system.

This research offers a conceptual redefinition of the terms feudalism and adab in the context of pesantren. So far, the hierarchical relationship between kiai and santri is often perceived as a form of social inequality that resembles feudalism. In fact, substantively, the social structure of pesantren does not rely on power and subordination, but on the internalization of Islamic ethical values that emphasize respect, sincerity, and devotion. Through the analysis of classical and contemporary literature, this study seeks to present a new perspective that the hierarchy in pesantren is part of the moral and spiritual system, not an exploitative power relationship. Thus, this study confirms that the practice of respect in pesantren is not a feudal symbol, but a reflection of adab as the core of Islamic education.

Departing from this premise, this research asks several key questions: how the concept of feudalism is understood and the extent of its relevance in describing social relations in Islamic boarding schools; what is the meaning and function of adab in shaping the social structure of Islamic boarding schools; and how the fundamental differences between feudalism and Islamic boarding school manners can be explained through the perspective of Islamic literature and the sociology of education. These questions are the basis for formulating the objectives of the research, namely identifying conceptual misunderstandings between feudalism and pesantren adab, explaining the character of adab values as a social ethical system, and developing a new conceptual framework that positions social relations in pesantren as a moral practice, not an oppressive hierarchical system. This approach is expected to open up space for the reinterpretation of Islamic boarding school values in the modern social context without eliminating the noble traditions that are the foundation.

Theoretically, this research contributes to the development of socio-religious studies and Islamic education by presenting a new reading of the social structure of Islamic boarding schools that have often been misinterpreted. Practically, the results of this research are expected to be a reference for pesantren managers, academics, and the wider community to understand the value structure in pesantren proportionally, so as not to be trapped in feudalism bias. Meanwhile, academically, this research provides a foothold for further studies in the fields of Islamic values, educational culture, and leadership, especially those that seek to bridge classical scientific traditions and the demands of

modernity. Thus, this study confirms its main novelty: that hierarchical relations in pesantren are a manifestation of manners and science, not social feudalism.

II. METHOD

This research uses a qualitative-descriptive approach with the main focus on the interpretation of social meaning, ethical values, and relationship structures contained in the context of pesantren as represented through various literature sources (Yaniawati & Indrawan, 2024). This approach was chosen because the issues studied cannot be explained quantitatively, but require a deep understanding of the symbols, values, and social practices that underlie pesantren life (McCall, 1984). Through this approach, the research seeks to uncover the substantive meaning of hierarchical relations in Islamic boarding schools that are often misinterpreted as a form of feudalism, by placing them within the framework of broader Islamic manners and ethics.

To achieve this goal, this study uses the systematic literature review method. This method is carried out through the process of searching, selecting, and critically analyzing various literatures, both classical and contemporary, that are relevant to the themes of feudalism, adab, and pesantren. The literature study approach allows researchers to integrate various views from traditional Islamic literature with the results of modern academic research, thus resulting in a comprehensive understanding of the conceptual position of Islamic boarding school adab in Islamic social dynamics and education. The review process is carried out systematically so that each source used has scientific credibility and strong relevance to the research focus.

The data sources in this study consist of two main types, namely primary sources and secondary sources. Primary sources include the classic yellow book, works of Islamic boarding school scholars, and traditional Islamic literature that directly discusses the concepts of manners, morals, and the system of social relations in Islamic education. Meanwhile, secondary sources include academic books, scientific journal articles, theses, dissertations, and previous research that examines the issue of feudalism, pesantren culture, kiai-santri relations, and the process of modernizing Islamic educational institutions. These two types of sources are combined to obtain a complete picture of the construction of values and social practices that form the adab system in the pesantren environment.

The data collection process was carried out through a structured literature review by tracing various scientific sources using keywords such as "feudalism", "adab", "pesantren", "socio-religious relations", and "scientific authority". The researcher selects these sources based on their thematic relevance, academic validity, and contribution to the formation of the conceptual framework of the research. Each literature is then analyzed in depth to identify the suitability between the concepts discussed and the focus of the research, namely the distinction between feudalism and pesantren manners.

Data analysis was carried out using the Miles & Huberman (1994) interactive model, which includes three main stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawn. Data reduction is carried out to select and simplify information from relevant literature, while data presentation is carried out by organizing the results of the study in the form of thematic categories that facilitate the interpretation process. The final stage, namely drawing conclusions, is carried out by interpreting the conceptual and relational meaning between feudalism and pesantren manners based on the results of literature synthesis. To ensure the validity of the analysis results, triangulation of sources and concepts was carried out by comparing the results of interpretations from various types of literature, both classical and modern. Thus, the findings of this research are expected to have a strong theoretical foundation and be able to provide a new explanation of social relations in Islamic boarding schools within the framework of Islamic adab values.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

Definition of Feudalism and Islamic Boarding School Manners

The study of the concepts of feudalism and Islamic boarding school manners shows that these two terms have very different epistemological and historical foundations, although in social practice they are often perceived as similar because they both involve hierarchical structures and authoritative relationships. Feudalism, as formulated by classical Western thinkers such as François-Louis Ganshof, Marc Bloch, and Karl Marx, is a socio-economic system rooted in the relationship of power and land ownership between the ruling class and the subordinate people (Heirbaut & Masferrer, 2005; Marx, 2024). In this system, the relationship between "masters" and "vassals" is based on the exchange of power, loyalty, and economic rewards. On the other hand, the manners of Islamic boarding schools as described

in classical Islamic literature such as Ta'lim al-Muta'allim by Al-Zarnuji, Ihya' Ulumuddin by Al-Ghazali, as well as the results of Zamakhsyari Dhofier's study in the Islamic Boarding School Tradition, are an ethical value system oriented towards spirituality and morality (Al-Ghazali, 2020; Zainal & Ansar, 2022). Adab in the context of pesantren is not a form of social submission, but an ethical practice and respect rooted in the principle of the blessing of knowledge (barokah) and sincerity in seeking knowledge.

Table 1 Differences between Feudalism and Islamic Boarding School Manners

Aspects	Feodalisme (Ganshof, Bloch, Marx)	Islamic Boarding School Manners (Al-Zarnuji, Al-Ghazali, Dhofier)
Philosophical Foundations	Materialistic – based on land ownership and economic power.	Spiritual – based on moral values, ethics, and a blessing orientation.
Social Relations	Hierarchical and contractual: lord-vassal-serf in a system of power exchange.	Hierarchical but ethical: kiai-santri in the framework of ta'dzim and khidmah.
Motives of Obedience	Loyalty due to economic and political obligations.	Obedience is due to respect and the search for the blessings of knowledge.
Main Orientation	Domination of resources and reproduction of social power.	The formation of morals and purification of the soul as a prerequisite for the acceptance of knowledge.
Forms of Dependency	Structural coercion and labor exploitation.	A spiritual relationship that is voluntary and faith-based.
Institutionalization	It was formed through the feudal system (lordship, manor, serfdom).	It was formed through the traditional Islamic education system (pesantren).
Final Destination	The continuation of social class and feudal power.	The sustainability of the scientific sanad and the spiritual legitimacy of the kiai.

Table 1 shows the fundamental differences between feudalism and Islamic boarding school manners in terms of ontology, social structure, and value orientation. If feudalism emphasizes the dominance of power and economic dependence that is coercive, then the manners of pesantren emphasize respect and moral awareness that are internal and voluntary. The relationship between kiai and santri that appears to be hierarchical is not a form of social subordination as in the feudal system, but a symbolic expression of the Islamic value system that places knowledge, teachers, and blessings as the center of morality. Thus, the fundamental difference between the two lies in the relational paradigm: feudalism operates in the logic of worldly power, while the manners of pesantren operate in a spiritual and ethical logic. This distinction is the argumentative basis for this research in rejecting the simplification of pesantren social relations as a form of feudalism.

Studi Literature

This study uses the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) model to trace and analyze literature related to the dynamics of social relations, modernization, and value transformation in Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia. The goal is to identify how the concepts of hierarchy, scientific authority, and adab values are understood in various previous studies, as well as to find research gaps that require a conceptual redefinition between feudalism and Islamic boarding school manners. The literature studied consists of academic works in the form of journal articles, both in Indonesian and English, which are relevant to the topic of social relations and values in Islamic boarding schools. The analysis was carried out on the research objectives, the type of literature, the main focus, and the socio-cultural context raised by each author.

Table 2 Systematic Literature Review

Purpose	Types of Literature	Title & Author	Description
Identifying forms of reform in the pesantren education system	Scientific Journal Articles	<i>Reform of the Education System in Islamic Boarding Schools</i> – Ahmad Syaumi Fuady (2020)	Explain the process of adapting pesantren to the changing times while maintaining traditional values. It was emphasized that the renewal occurred in the institutional, curriculum, and methodological aspects, but the function of the pesantren as a tafaqquh fiddin institution still survived.
Analyze the relationship between tradition and modernization of pesantren education in the context of globalization	International Journal Articles	<i>The Future of Pesantren: Reconciling Tradition with Global Educational Trends</i> – Balya Ziaulhaq Achmadin et al. (2024)	Examining the impact of the emergence of International Islamic Boarding School (IIBS) on the existence of traditional Islamic boarding schools. The results show the need for a balance between educational innovation and the preservation of traditional Islamic values.
Revealing symbolic motifs in the relationship between students and kiai	Scientific Journal Articles	<i>The Phenomenology of Santri-Kiai Relations in Islamic Boarding Schools: Nata Sandal Motifs Among Students</i> – Lailatur Rofidah & Nur Syam (2021)	Using Schutz's phenomenological theory to explain that the behavior of arranging kiai sandals is a form of manners and the search for blessings, not a subordinate relationship. This study emphasizes the symbolic and spiritual value in the social relations of Islamic boarding schools.
Analyzing changes in kiai authority and patron-client relations in the era of pesantren modernization	International Journal Articles	<i>Modernization and Changes in Kiai-Santri Relations in Three Pesantrens in Java</i> – Yon Machmudi (2021)	It shows that modernization has led to a decline in the authority of kiai in Islamic boarding schools that adopt a modern education system. However, traditional pesantren still maintain a strong and hierarchical kiai-santri relationship.
Explaining the transformation of social capital in the Sidogiri Islamic boarding school	Scientific Journal Articles	<i>Social Capital and Its Transformations in Sidogiri Islamic Boarding School</i> – Farahdilla Kutsiyah (2020)	It was found that social capital in the Sidogiri Islamic boarding school plays an important role in strengthening the value of togetherness, economic independence, and social network. The relationship between kiai and students is based on love, discipline, and the spirit of solemnity lil ma'had as a form of collective manners.

Table 2 illustrates the spectrum of previous research that focused on social dynamics and pesantren values from various perspectives. Most studies highlight the adaptation of Islamic boarding schools to modernization (Fuady, 2020; Achmadin et al., 2024) and kiai-santri relations in the context of authority and spirituality (Rofidah & Syam, 2021; Machmudi, 2021). Meanwhile, Kutsiyah's research (2020) shows how the social capital of Islamic boarding schools transforms without losing the foundation of its religious values. However, there has been no research that explicitly dissects the conceptual differences between feudalism and Islamic boarding school manners philosophically and sociologically. Therefore, this research is here to fill this gap through a more integrative literature analysis, placing adab as a system of Islamic ethical values that is distinct from feudalism in the social context of Islamic boarding schools.

Discussion

Re-orientation of Islamic Boarding School Manners and Feudalism

The synthesis between Western social theories of feudalism and the concept of Islamic ethics about adab is the main key in understanding the character of social relations in Islamic boarding schools. In the classical sociological tradition, feudalism is understood as a hierarchical system rooted in land ownership and the dependent relationship between master and servant as described by Ganshof, Bloch, and Marx (Waqas et al., 2020). These relationships are structural, materialistic, and political—where

power is maintained through economic and military domination. Meanwhile, in the Islamic tradition represented by Al-Zarnuji and Al-Ghazali, hierarchy in social relations is not a product of possession or power, but comes from a spiritual and moral dimension. Adab emphasizes the balance between knowledge, morals, and respect as a prerequisite for blessings, not as a mechanism of social subordination (Rashed, 2020). Therefore, the system of ta'dzim and khidmah in pesantren cannot be equated with feudal structures, because the epistemological foundations are different: one departs from material relations, while the other from the relationship of values and spirituality.

Further analysis of the two concepts shows a fundamental ontological difference. Feudalism places human beings in a layered social structure, where social position is determined by ownership and lineage. This structure is static and exploitative because it maintains a dependency between the lower and upper classes (Jayet, 2023). On the other hand, in the concept of Islamic boarding school adab, hierarchical relations arise not because of power inequality, but because of the moral orientation to the search for knowledge and blessings. The ontology of adab is based on the view of tauhidik—that all forms of respect for teachers (kiai) are part of respect for knowledge and Allah as its source (Yunita et al., 2025). Therefore, the hierarchy in pesantren is functional and pedagogical, not exploitative. The relationship between kiai and santri is a spiritual relationship between murabbi (educator) and muta'allim (seekers of knowledge), where obedience is not a form of submission, but moral discipline in taking the path of knowledge.

The ethical and philosophical framework also finds juridical legitimacy in Pasal 3 Undang-Undang Nomor 18 Tahun 2019 about Islamic Boarding School. In the article, it is emphasized that pesantren is organized with the aim of forming individuals who excel in various fields, understand and practice the values of religious teachings, as well as become individuals who have faith, piety, noble character, knowledge, independence, and moderation (Panut et al., 2021). This goal emphasizes that the orientation of pesantren education is not on the reproduction of oppressive social structures, but on the formation of complete human beings (insān kāmil) who have religious, inclusive, and socially empowered personalities. In addition, Islamic boarding schools are also mandated to build moderate religious understanding, love for the homeland, and encourage harmony between religious communities. This means that the pesantren value system not only directs students to moral obedience to teachers, but also to social and national responsibility that rejects all forms of domination, both political, economic, and cultural.

Thus, the value of adab in pesantren has a transformative role that goes beyond the space of personal relationships between kiai and students. It serves as a basis for social ethics that fosters a collective awareness of the importance of a balance between spiritual obedience and intellectual independence. Epistemologically, pesantren build their authority through the transmission of knowledge, scientific sanad, and the formation of moral character, not through the inheritance of power as in feudalism. Knowledge is understood as a mandate that must be processed with a clean heart and sincere intentions, not as a means of maintaining social status. Therefore, pesantren presents an alternative model for modern education that tends to be secular and materialistic—namely the model of value-based education and blessings (barokah), which harmoniously unites spiritual, intellectual, and social aspects.

IV. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the use of the term "feudalism" to describe social relations in pesantren is a form of conceptual error that needs to be redefined. Based on the analysis of classical and modern literature, the relationship between kiai and santri cannot be equated with the lord-vassal relationship in a feudal system based on economic dominance and power. This relationship is actually a manifestation of adab—an Islamic ethical system that emphasizes respect, sincerity, and the search for blessings (barokah) in the process of seeking knowledge. The ontology of manners is rooted in spirituality and morality, while its epistemology is built on the values of science and purity of heart. Thus, the hierarchy in pesantren is pedagogical and functional, not exploitative. This finding is in line with the views of Al-Zarnuji, Al-Ghazali, and Zamakhsyari Dhofier who place manners as the core of Islamic education and in line with the Pasal 3 UU No. 18 Tahun 2019 which emphasizes that the purpose of pesantren is to form people who are faithful, knowledgeable, independent, and moderate.

Although this research succeeds in providing a conceptual synthesis between Western social theory and Islamic ethics, its limitation lies in its nature, which is based on a literature study without empirical verification of social practices in the field. Therefore, further research with an ethnographic or phenomenological approach is needed to examine how adab values are truly internalized in the daily lives of students and how modern social changes affect the structure of kiai authority. Further research is also recommended to explore the relationship between adab and the formation of Islamic leadership

character in the era of globalization, so that the discourse on pesantren does not stop at the defense of traditions, but develops into an educational paradigm that is adaptive, contextual, and rooted in Islamic moral values.

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