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Ulama, Islamic Law, and Islamic Education in Indonesia

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Abstract: This article explores the dynamic relationships among ulama, Islamic law, and Islamic education in Indonesia from an anthropological perspective. Drawing on more than two decades of ethnographic and textual research, it analyses how religious scholars and institutions negotiate the tensions between tradition and modernity, local and global influences, and moral authority and bureaucratic regulation. The discussion highlights multiple axes of legitimacy—textual, moral, institutional, and genealogical—through which ulama sustain their authority in diverse contexts. Particular attention is given to the modernisation of pesantren and to debates within state Islamic universities (UIN and IAIN) over the integration of secular and religious knowledge. The study argues that Indonesia's Islamic education system exemplifies a creative synthesis of faith, intellect, and civic responsibility, serving as a vital resource for promoting pluralism and countering radical ideologies. The Indonesian experience demonstrates that Islamic education can remain deeply rooted in tradition while engaging critically with the challenges of global modernity.

Keywords: ulama; pesantren; Islamic education; Indonesia; modernity; tradition; pluralism; Islamic law; globalisation; anthropology of Islam

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Introduction

Indonesia, home to the world's largest Muslim population, offers a complex and dynamic context for the study of Islamic education and the role of ulama (religious scholars). In contrast to Middle Eastern or South Asian models, Indonesia's Islamic landscape is characterized by pluralism, hybrid traditions, and a long history of interaction between local cultures and transnational Islamic discourses. In this setting, the ulama serve not only as interpreters of Islamic law but also as community leaders, educators, and custodians of Islamic morality.

Islamic education, particularly in the form of pesantren (Islamic boarding schools), has historically been a central institution in shaping Indonesian Islam. These institutions have long served as training grounds for the ulama and continue to function as bastions of religious learning and ethical formation. However, the field of Islamic education in Indonesia is far from static. It is marked by a constant negotiation between tradition and modernity, between local practice and global trends, and between spiritual authenticity and bureaucratic standardization.

This paper explores these tensions and harmonies through an anthropological lens, focusing on the intertwined roles of ulama, Islamic education, and Islamic law in contemporary Indonesia. Drawing on over two decades of ethnographic research and textual analysis, it examines how pesantren modernize while maintaining religious authenticity, how state Islamic universities (UIN and IAIN) engage with secular disciplines, and how institutions and individuals respond to globalization, moral anxiety, and radical ideologies. The goal is to understand how the Islamic scholarly community and its educational institutions navigate a rapidly changing cultural and political landscape while preserving continuity with Islamic traditions.

The Role of Ulama

In Indonesia, the ulama—religious scholars trained in Islamic sciences—occupy a multifaceted position. They are not only transmitters of religious knowledge but also moral authorities and socio-political actors. Their legitimacy stems from mastery of religious texts, charisma, piety, and often lineage. In the pesantren world, the ulama are frequently referred to as kyai, a term that denotes a combination of scholarly accomplishment, spiritual depth, and pedagogical leadership.

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Kyai lead pesantren and serve as mentors, guiding not only the intellectual development of students but also their spiritual and moral formation. This mentorship is deeply personal and communal. According to Lukens-Bull,[1] kyai must perform a delicate balancing act: maintaining Islamic authenticity while adapting to the social and political shifts of modern Indonesia. They must navigate a landscape shaped by globalization, democratic reform, and the growing visibility of Islamist movements.

The power of the ulama is not merely doctrinal but performative and symbolic. They serve as models of pious living and as interlocutors between the community and the divine. Their authority is largely unregulated by the state, particularly in the traditionalist pesantren context, which affords them considerable autonomy. Yet many ulama have also entered the formal state religious apparatus, such as the Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI), and thus play influential roles in shaping national religious policy and issuing fatwas.

Importantly, the authority of the ulama is not monolithic. Competing claims to religious authenticity—between traditionalist kyai, scripturalist reformers, university-trained scholars, and Islamic bureaucrats—constitute what Bowen terms "multiple public spheres."[2] These overlapping fields of religious interpretation reflect a dynamic and pluralistic Islamic society in which ulama continue to be central figures.

Axes of Legitimacy

The authority of the ulama in Indonesia rests on several axes of legitimacy that intersect and vary across time and place. These include textual authority (mastery of classical Islamic texts), moral authority (personal piety and spiritual charisma), institutional authority (affiliation with pesantren, universities, or state institutions), and genealogical authority (descent from a saintly lineage or notable religious figure).

Lukens-Bull[3] identifies how these axes function in the pesantren context: a kyai may derive legitimacy from his command of classical Islamic texts such as the *kutub al-turath*, but his credibility is often reinforced by his moral behavior and perceived *baraka* (blessing). In contrast, university-

[1] Ronald A. Lukens-Bull, *A Peaceful Jihad: Negotiating Identity and Modernity in Muslim Java* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

[2] John R. Bowen, *Islam, Law, and Equality in Indonesia: An Anthropology of Public Reasoning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

[3] Lukens-Bull, *A Peaceful Jihad.*

trained scholars, especially those affiliated with institutions like UIN (Universitas Islam Negeri), may prioritize academic credentials and publication over spiritual charisma.

These axes are not necessarily in conflict; rather, they are weighted differently in different settings. In rural Java, a kyai's charisma and familial reputation may carry more weight than his formal degrees. Meanwhile, in urban academic circles, credentials and participation in global scholarly networks are often more significant.

This multiplicity allows for flexibility and contestation. It enables figures from divergent backgrounds—traditional pesantren, reformist circles, and state bureaucracies—to claim religious authority. However, it also leads to competition, especially as Islamic institutions seek to define orthodoxy in a pluralistic society.

Thus, understanding the Indonesian ulama requires attentiveness to these multiple, context-dependent forms of legitimacy. Rather than a unified clerical class, we find a constellation of religious authorities navigating different institutional logics and community expectations.

Pesantren as Traditional Islamic Education

The pesantren, Indonesia's traditional Islamic boarding school, is one of the most enduring institutions of Islamic learning in Southeast Asia. With roots dating back to the 16th century, pesantren have served as centers for the transmission of Islamic knowledge, particularly through the study of classical Arabic texts (*kitab kuning*), under the tutelage of a kyai. These schools are typically located in rural areas and are distinguished by their emphasis on religious learning, spiritual development.

The educational system within pesantren is structured around a direct teacher-student relationship. Students, or santri, often live on the school grounds, forming close-knit communities centered on prayer, study, and service. The kyai, as both spiritual guide and headmaster, plays a pivotal role in shaping the ethos of the institution. He may deliver daily lessons (*pengajian*), lead communal prayers, and offer guidance on personal and spiritual matters.

Pesantren are not merely educational spaces; they are also spiritual and cultural institutions. Many are connected to Sufi orders and incorporate mystical practices such as dhikr (remembrance of God), *wirid* (devotional litanies), and communal rituals. This intertwining of religious, spiritual,

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and communal life produces a holistic approach to Islamic education that emphasizes moral character and pious conduct as much as intellectual mastery.

As Lukens-Bull[4] has argued, pesantren function as sites of "lived Islam," where religious knowledge is embodied and enacted in daily life. The moral regulation of behavior within pesantren extends beyond formal instruction to include dress codes, etiquette, and everyday practices. The santri are thus socialized into a particular mode of pious Muslim subjectivity, one that aligns with Javanese cultural norms as well as Islamic teachings.

Despite critiques from reformist Muslims who question the adequacy of pesantren pedagogy, traditional pesantren continue to thrive. Their enduring popularity suggests that many Indonesians view them as authentic and morally grounded institutions capable of preserving Islamic tradition while responding to the challenges of the modern world.

Modernization of Pesantren

While pesantren have preserved many aspects of traditional Islamic education, they have also undergone significant modernization in recent decades. This transformation has taken multiple forms: curricular expansion, administrative restructuring, infrastructural development, and engagement with state and international actors. These changes reflect the adaptive capacity of pesantren and their responsiveness to shifting socio-political and educational landscapes.

One major aspect of modernization is the incorporation of general education subjects into pesantren curricula. Many pesantren now offer formal schooling that aligns with national education standards, including instruction in mathematics, science, social studies, and English. This integration allows students to obtain recognized diplomas (*ijazah*) and access higher education and employment opportunities beyond the religious sector. The pesantren thus serve dual functions as both religious and general education institutions.

Another form of modernization is institutional. Pesantren have adopted more formal bureaucratic structures, with clear administrative hierarchies, budgetary planning, and strategic development goals. Some pesantren

[4] Ronald A. Lukens-Bull, "Two Sides of the Same Coin: Modernity and Tradition in Islamic Education in Indonesia," *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 32, no. 3 (2001): 350–372.

have established foundations (*yayasan*) to manage assets, oversee fundraising, and coordinate outreach activities. This professionalization enhances their capacity to compete for state funding and philanthropic support, especially from Gulf-based donors and Indonesian corporate zakat foundations.

Technological advancement has also played a role. Many pesantren now maintain websites, offer online classes, and utilize digital platforms for communication and administration. These innovations have become especially salient during times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which accelerated the adoption of distance learning tools across Indonesia's educational sector.

Despite these changes, pesantren leaders are careful to frame modernization as consistent with Islamic values. As Lukens-Bull[5] notes, kyai often portray reform as a return to the true spirit of Islam rather than a capitulation to Westernization. This rhetorical strategy enables them to innovate without alienating traditional constituencies or undermining their religious legitimacy.

Ultimately, the modernization of pesantren exemplifies the broader theme of Islamic authenticity in flux. By reimagining educational practices while reaffirming their religious commitments, pesantren demonstrate that tradition and modernity are not mutually exclusive but can be creatively synthesized within the framework of lived Islam.

Higher Islamic Education: UIN, IAIN, and the Islamic Knowledge Debate

Indonesia's system of higher Islamic education, comprising institutions such as the State Islamic University (UIN) and the State Institute for Islamic Studies (IAIN), represents a significant evolution from the pesantren model. These institutions emerged in the post-independence era to professionalize Islamic scholarship, integrate secular knowledge, and produce Muslim intellectuals capable of engaging with modern challenges. They are centrally administered by the Ministry of Religious Affairs and have been important centers for the development of Muslim intellectuals in Indonesia.

The expansion of UIN and IAIN has brought about intense debates regarding the integration of secular disciplines into Islamic education. Advocates argue that including subjects such as sociology, economics, and political science fosters a more holistic understanding of Islam's relevance in the contemporary world. Critics, however, fear that such integration

[5] Lukens-Bull, *A Peaceful Jihad*.

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may dilute the religious essence of these institutions and subordinate Islamic knowledge to Western epistemologies.

One central controversy revolves around the epistemological status of religious knowledge. The question is whether Islamic knowledge (*ilmu agama*) should be treated as an autonomous system with its own logic and methodologies or as one knowledge system among many. Some reformist thinkers support the idea of an integrated curriculum (*integrasi-interkoneksi*), where Islamic sciences are studied alongside and in conversation with secular disciplines. Others prefer the dual-track model, preserving the traditional separation between religious and secular knowledge to maintain theological integrity and institutional identity. This model appeals to those who fear that integrating secular subjects may erode the sanctity of religious scholarship and blur the boundaries between divine and human knowledge.

Faculty and students at UIN and IAIN must thus navigate complex ideological terrains. While these institutions offer new opportunities for critical engagement and upward mobility, they also generate tensions around religious authenticity, academic freedom, and institutional identity. As Lukens-Bull notes, even within a single university, different departments may reflect divergent orientations—from traditionalist Islamic theology to liberal Islamic thought and secular social science.[6]

These tensions underscore the broader challenge of defining what counts as legitimate Islamic knowledge in a pluralistic, postcolonial nation-state. UIN and IAIN serve as laboratories for negotiating these definitions, illustrating how Indonesia's Islamic intellectual tradition continues to evolve in response to global and local pressures.

Islamic Education and Globalization

The globalization of Islamic education in Indonesia is marked by increased flows of people, ideas, and technologies that transcend national boundaries. Students from Indonesia travel to the Middle East, South Asia, and increasingly to Western universities for religious and secular education. Meanwhile, international Islamic discourses—ranging from Salafism to progressive Islam—circulate via books, satellite television, and the internet. These dynamics reshape the landscape of Islamic education, bringing both opportunities for renewal and challenges to established

[6] Lukens-Bull, *A Peaceful Jihad*.

norms. As global influences penetrate deeper into Indonesian institutions, they provoke debates over authenticity, authority, and the future of Islamic identity.

Pesantren and Islamic universities in Indonesia are both affected by and respond to globalization in distinct ways. Some pesantren have established international partnerships, adopted global pedagogical methods, or sent santri abroad to study. Others resist what they see as Westernizing influences, reinforcing traditional practices and indigenous forms of knowledge. The responses are not uniform but reflect the diverse orientations within Indonesia's Islamic education sector.

Lukens-Bull notes that globalization is not simply a matter of external pressure but a site of negotiation.[7] Kyai and Muslim intellectuals selectively appropriate global elements that reinforce their authority while rejecting those deemed incompatible with local values. This "glocalization" strategy allows institutions to present themselves as simultaneously modern and authentic. For example, a pesantren may teach computer literacy alongside Qur'anic recitation, or offer English classes while preserving traditional dress codes and communal prayer routines. In doing so, these institutions craft a hybrid educational model that meets the demands of a globalized world without surrendering their religious foundations.

Globalization also intensifies moral and cultural anxieties, especially around youth behavior, gender norms, and religious commitment. In response, Islamic educational institutions often reassert moral discipline and ethical boundaries. The discourse of "akhlak mulia" (noble character) has become increasingly prominent, signaling a concern with not just knowledge acquisition but also moral formation in a rapidly changing world.

Furthermore, globalization facilitates new forms of Islamic activism and identity. Young Muslims educated in pesantren, UIN, or abroad are engaging in transnational networks, digital da'wa, and social justice movements. These developments complicate older binaries between traditional and modern, local and global, religious and secular. They suggest that Islamic education in Indonesia is not only adapting to globalization but actively shaping its contours.

Tradition and Modernity

One of the central tensions in Islamic education in Indonesia is the

[7] Lukens-Bull, *A Peaceful Jihad*.

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relationship between tradition and modernity. This dynamic plays out not only in institutional structures and curricula but also in broader cultural and theological orientations. Rather than viewing tradition and modernity as mutually exclusive, many Indonesian Muslim educators and intellectuals seek to synthesize the two in ways that preserve religious authenticity while enabling engagement with contemporary realities.

In pesantren, tradition is embodied in the study of classical texts (*kitab kuning*), in the authority of the kyai, and in ritual practices rooted in Javanese Islamic culture. Yet as pesantren modernize—integrating secular subjects, adopting formal administration, and engaging with national education policy—they must justify these changes theologically and socially. As Lukens-Bull notes, this is often done through a rhetoric of *tajdid* (renewal) rather than *bid'a* (innovation), framing modernization as a process of tajdid rather than bid'a.[8] This framing allows religious educators to legitimize change without undermining their connection to classical Islamic values.

This negotiation is also evident in Islamic higher education. UIN and IAIN attempt to balance traditional religious sciences with modern disciplines, often invoking a paradigm of *integrasi-interkoneksi* (integration and interconnection). This model seeks to bridge the epistemological gap between Islamic and Western knowledge systems, positioning Islam as a dynamic and rational tradition capable of contributing to modern academic discourse.

However, not all actors embrace this synthesis. Some traditionalist scholars worry that modernity erodes religious values and community cohesion, while certain reformist groups view tradition as an obstacle to progress. These differing perspectives generate debates over what constitutes authentic Islam, which practices should be retained or reformed, and who has the authority to decide.

Tradition and modernity in Indonesian Islam are not static categories but dynamic fields of practice and interpretation. They are constantly being redefined through institutional reforms, pedagogical innovations, and ideological contestations. The ongoing vitality of Indonesia's Islamic education system lies in its ability to manage this dialectic—not by choosing one over the other, but by weaving them together in contextually meaningful ways.

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[8] Ronald A. Lukens-Bull, "Two Sides of the Same Coin: Modernity and Tradition in Islamic Education in Indonesia," *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 32, no. 3 (2001): 350–372; Ronald A. Lukens-Bull, *A Peaceful Jihad: Negotiating Identity and Modernity in Muslim Java* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

Pluralism, Accommodation, and Anti-Radicalism

A distinguishing feature of Islamic education in Indonesia is its deep engagement with pluralism and accommodation. Unlike many Islamic educational systems that maintain rigid boundaries between religious and secular spheres or between different interpretations of Islam, the Indonesian model—particularly within pesantren and UIN—often promotes tolerance, coexistence, and dialogue. This orientation is both historical and strategic, rooted in Indonesia's multicultural society and its struggles with radical ideologies in a diverse, multi-faith society. Emphasizing tolerance and inclusion, these institutions help to anchor Islam in Indonesia's democratic and multicultural framework.

Pesantren, especially those affiliated with Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), have long practiced a form of inclusive Islam that accommodates local customs and non-Muslim communities. As documented in "Pesantren and Religious Harmony," many kyai actively promote interreligious dialogue, discourage sectarianism, and frame Islam as a peaceful and tolerant faith. They view diversity not as a threat but as part of God's design. This ethos has been essential in preventing the spread of exclusivist ideologies.

The state has increasingly relied on Islamic educational institutions as partners in counter-radicalization. Programs have been developed to promote "moderate Islam" (*Islam Wasathiyah*), emphasizing civic engagement, democratic values, and national unity. Pesantren are seen as bulwarks against radicalism precisely because of their embeddedness in local communities and their pedagogical emphasis on moral character and respect for difference.

However, this accommodationist stance is not without its critics. Some argue that it risks diluting Islamic principles or capitulating to secular nationalism. Others question whether the state's anti-radicalism agenda is more about control than genuine religious reform. These critiques point to the complex entanglements between religion, politics, and education in contemporary Indonesia.

Nonetheless, the commitment of many Islamic educators to pluralism remains strong. As Lukens-Bull and others have shown, pesantren and UIN often cultivate students who are not only knowledgeable in Islam but also civically minded and socially tolerant. This is not merely the result of curriculum content, but of institutional culture, leadership ethos, and lived experience. In a world where religious radicalism is a growing concern, Indonesia's model of pluralistic Islamic education offers important lessons in how faith-based institutions can promote coexistence, democratic

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values, and resilience against extremism—without compromising their religious identity.

Conclusion

The intersections of ulama, Islamic law, and Islamic education in Indonesia reveal a dynamic religious landscape characterized by negotiation, adaptation, and contestation. Far from being monolithic, Islamic authority in Indonesia is plural and multifaceted, rooted in diverse institutions ranging from pesantren to UIN, from charismatic kyai to formal bureaucracies like MUI. These institutions do not merely preserve tradition—they actively shape the ways Islam is lived, taught, and interpreted in a rapidly evolving society. Through their engagement with state policy, global discourses, and local cultures, they redefine the contours of Islamic practice, demonstrating that tradition is not static but continually reimagined in response to contemporary realities.

Pesantren continue to function as moral anchors and training grounds for religious leadership, even as they modernize and adapt to state regulations and global expectations. UIN and IAIN exemplify new forms of Islamic scholarship, grappling with the challenge of integrating religious and secular knowledge. Meanwhile, institutions like MUI seek to articulate Islamic norms in the public sphere, sometimes in ways that provoke controversy and resistance.

Throughout these developments, the question of authenticity looms large. What counts as "true" Islam? Who has the authority to define it? These questions are not answered once and for all but are continually revisited in classrooms, sermons, policy debates, and everyday interactions. Indonesian Muslims, guided by their educators and scholars, navigate these issues in ways that are deeply contextual yet globally resonant.

Ultimately, the Indonesian experience demonstrates that Islamic education is not a relic of the past but a vibrant field of innovation and ethical reflection. It holds crucial insights for the broader Muslim world, particularly in how it reconciles tradition with modernity, pluralism with piety, and local identities with global realities. As such, it demands continued scholarly attention—not only for what it reveals about Indonesia but for what it teaches about the possibilities of Islamic education, Its continued evolution offers a valuable model for balancing religious integrity with societal change.

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