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The Role of Kyai Leadership and the Social Environment of Islamic Boarding Schools in Forming the Student's Independence Character

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the role of the social environment of Islamic boarding schools and the leadership style of the kyai in shaping students' independence at the Nailul Author Islamic Boarding School. Using a descriptive qualitative approach and case study method, data were collected through observation, in-depth interviews, and review of related documents. The study results indicate that the structured and disciplined social environment of Islamic boarding schools, including practical activities in canteen management and daily routines, plays a significant role in shaping students' independence. These activities not only focus on academics but also teach responsibility and self-management. In addition, the leadership style of the kyai that combines legal-formal, charismatic, transformational, and democratic approaches also strengthens the formation of independent character of students. Kyai acts as a role model who creates a climate that supports the development of student independence, both in daily life and in managing education. Collaborative leadership allows students to learn independently, think critically, and make decisions that impact themselves. This study emphasizes that combining a disciplined social environment and exemplary kyai leadership significantly contributes to shaping students who are independent, confident, and ready to face future challenges.

1. Introduction

Islamic boarding schools are Islamic educational institutions that have a vital role in shaping the character and personality of students, especially in terms of independence. Independence is one of the essential qualities needed in modern life, which is marked by the complexity of social, economic, and cultural challenges. However, the character of independence among students, including students who often face various serious problems, both in formal and informal education. (Neli Maulidiyah, 2023).

Several studies show that many students struggle to form an independent attitude. They tend to rely on teachers, parents, or friends in completing assignments and making decisions. A national survey conducted by the Ministry of Education and Culture revealed that most elementary to secondary school students have been unable to demonstrate learning independence, including managing time and personal responsibilities optimally. (Roch Asih et al., 2021). This phenomenon shows a crisis of autonomy that, if not handled seriously, can impact the younger generation's weak competitiveness in facing global challenges.

In the context of Islamic boarding schools, the challenge of forming an independent character is also inseparable from the influence of parenting patterns, the leadership style of the kyai, and the dynamics of the social environment of the Islamic boarding school. The kyai, as a central figure in the Islamic boarding school, has a very strategic position in instilling the values of independence. The leadership style applied by the kyai, whether authoritarian, democratic, or charismatic, will significantly impact the formation of the student's character. (Alamin et al., 2025). At the Al-Barokah Islamic Boarding School, for example, the kyai applies a democratic leadership style, where students are involved in deliberations and decision-making processes, encouraging them to be active, responsible, and think independently. (Sunardi, 2017).

Meanwhile, the unique social environment of Islamic boarding schools—with daily routines, collective activities, and an integrated coaching system—is also a supporting factor in forming an independent attitude. Research at the Iqra Islamic Boarding School shows that assigning daily responsibilities to students, such as arranging duty schedules, cleanliness, and dormitory management, plays a significant role in forming their independence (Salim, 2023). However, there are still

obstacles, such as a permissive family background, a lack of learning facilities that support the development of individual student potential, and an overly protective parenting style, which can hinder the process of forming this independent character.

On the other hand, a contradictory phenomenon has also emerged in the digital and social media era. Many students are generally more interested in the instant convenience offered by the virtual world than in forging themselves in a disciplined, independent learning process. Dependence on technology for quick answers, such as relying on the internet for assignments without understanding the substance, is a new form of intellectual independence that needs to be watched out for (Republika.co.id, 2022).

Thus, it becomes urgent to investigate more deeply the role of kyai leadership and the social environment of Islamic boarding schools in shaping the character of independent students. This study aims to comprehensively explore how these two aspects contribute to the development of independent student characters and provide recommendations that can strengthen the Islamic boarding school-based character education system.

2. Literature Review

Kyai's Leadership Style

The leadership of the kyai in Islamic boarding schools has a central role in shaping the character and independence of the students. The leadership styles applied by the kyai are diverse, reflecting adaptation to social dynamics and educational needs. One of the dominant leadership styles is the charismatic style, where the kyai leads based on personal authority and exemplary behavior. A strong vision, effective communication, and high commitment to the development of Islamic boarding schools characterize this charismatic leadership. Research by Hidayati & Mamlukhah, (2023) shows that kyai with a charismatic style can develop pesantren through an inspiring approach and profound personal influence. Likewise, a study by Ahmadi, (2023) At the Lirboyo Kediri Islamic Boarding School, it was found that the charismatic leadership of the kyai contributed significantly to the student's motivation to learn and active participation in Islamic boarding school activities.

In addition, the transformational leadership style is also applied by some kyai in managing Islamic boarding schools. This style involves providing inspiration, motivation, and individual attention to students and encouraging innovation in the

educational process. Bashori (2019) identified four main dimensions in the transformational leadership of *kyai*: charismatic leadership, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individual consideration. This approach allows *kyai* to foster students holistically and adaptively to the changing times.

Democratic leadership style is also found in the leadership practices of *kyai* in Islamic boarding schools. In this style, *kyai* involves students in decision-making and encourages active participation in Islamic boarding school activities. Prayogi and Ashari (2023) found that the democratic leadership style of the *kyai* had a positive effect on the learning motivation and understanding of the students' *nahwu* knowledge, indicating that the involvement of students in the learning process improves educational outcomes.

Furthermore, Fikroh et al. (2023) emphasize that *kyai* often combine leadership styles, including personal and cultural approaches, to shape students' character. This approach includes religious teaching, discipline, and role models, all of which contribute to the formation of independent and noble character of students.

In the context of developing Islamic boarding schools, Suryana et al. (2021) noted that the *kyai*'s leadership has evolved from a charismatic style to a more participatory and democratic style. This change reflects the *kyai*'s ability to adapt to developments in society and the national education system and manage Islamic boarding schools more effectively and inclusively.

Social Environment of Islamic Boarding School

The social environment of the Islamic boarding school has a fundamental role in shaping students' independence through a series of unique social, cultural, and educational mechanisms. As a total institution of man (1961), Islamic boarding schools create an ecosystem isolated from the outside world, where students must adapt to strict norms, routines, and hierarchies. Research by Nafi (2018) revealed that Islamic boarding schools function as mini societies that not only transfer religious knowledge but also instill values of independence through structured communal life. The dormitory system requires students to take care of personal needs and manage time between studying, worship, and daily tasks, thus training practical independence. (Zuhriy, 2011).

Social interaction in Islamic boarding schools is also essential in character formation. The relationship dynamics between *kyai*, *ustadz*, and students are

hierarchical but remain egalitarian, where exemplary behavior (*uswah hasanah*) is the key to motivation. Kyai acts as a teacher and a figure who encourages students to be independent through the *tarbiyah* method (character education), which emphasizes individual responsibility. (Bruinessen, 2015). Meanwhile, the relationship between students in the peer group system creates a competitive and collaborative environment where they motivate each other to learn independently and resolve daily conflicts. (Mastuhu, 1994b).

Collective activities such as social work, *bahtsul masail* (discussion of religious issues), and leadership training (*muhadharah*) also contribute to developing independence. Research by Arifin (2019) shows that such activities train students to think critically, take initiative, and manage resources independently. In addition, research by Faiqoh (2020) found that the Islamic boarding school environment, which is full of the values of simplicity (*zuhud*) and self-resilience (*tawakkal*), strengthens the psychological independence of students in facing challenges.

Thus, the *pesantren*'s social environment operates as a laboratory of independence that integrates structural, relational, and spiritual aspects. The students' independence is not only formed through strict supervision and discipline but also through the internalization of values that are strengthened by emotional and cultural ties within the *pesantren* community.

The Character of Student Independence

Independence is the ability of an individual to manage their personal life, complete tasks, and face challenges without relying on others. Independence includes making the right decisions, managing time efficiently, and solving problems independently. In addition, independence also involves self-control in dealing with various difficulties, a sense of responsibility for oneself and the environment, and good emotional management. Independence is not just the ability to work without the help of others but also involves the process of internalizing values such as self-confidence, discipline, and initiative in dealing with every situation. In the context of education, especially in the Islamic boarding school environment, independence is an integral part of a student's learning process and character development, leading to the formation of individuals with integrity, responsibility, and mature life skills (Sholikhin, 2019).

Indicators of independence can be divided into several categories that cover various psychological and social aspects. First, the ability to make the right decisions is one of the leading indicators of independence. Independent students can make decisions rationally and responsibly without relying on others. Second, effective time management is another important indicator. Independent students can manage their time to study, worship, and socialize without close supervision. Third, problem-solving ability is a prominent aspect. Independent students can face problems critically and creatively without always seeking help from others. Fourth, a sense of responsibility is also the key to independence. Independent students are responsible for their decisions and actions and carry out their social responsibilities well. In addition, self-confidence is an integral part of independence. Independent individuals believe in overcoming challenges to act more confidently in every situation. The ability to manage emotions also shows the extent to which a person can maintain emotional stability in the face of stress or pressure. Finally, social independence, namely the ability to interact without being too influenced by others, is an essential indicator in determining a person's level of independence.(Zainal & Ahmad, 2020).

Thus, students' independence is the result of integrating various values and skills learned and applied in daily life in Islamic boarding schools. This process includes learning involving decision-making, problem-solving, and time and responsibility management, which are helpful in the context of Islamic boarding school education and can also be applied in their lives outside Islamic boarding schools. Strong independence will produce individuals who excel academically, have integrity and mental resilience, and can contribute positively to society (Mufidah, 2021).

3. Research methods

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach with a case study method to analyze in depth the role of Islamic boarding schools' social environment in shaping students' independence. The qualitative approach was chosen because it can holistically explore the meaning, experience, and social dynamics in the Islamic boarding school environment. (Creswell, 2014). The research location is the Nailul Author Islamic Boarding School which was selected based on the criteria of having a strong tradition in the education of student independence, a social environment with

a unique dormitory system, and a reputation as an Islamic boarding school that actively forms the character of students. The research subjects included five senior students (at least three years living in the Islamic boarding school), three ustadz/caretakers, and one kyai/Islamic boarding school leader who were selected through purposive sampling techniques based on the depth of their experience and role in the Islamic boarding school environment. (Judge et al., 2001).

Data collection was conducted through three main techniques. First, participant observation in which researchers were involved in daily activities of the Islamic boarding school, such as congregational prayer, reading books, and community service for two months to understand social interactions and patterns of habituation of independence. Second, in-depth semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions lead to an understanding of the Islamic boarding school environment's role in shaping students' independence. Third, if available, document studies that analyze historical records of the Islamic boarding school, written regulations, and student diaries. Data analysis was conducted interactively using the Miles and Huberman (1994) model through three stages: data reduction, data presentation, and verification (conclusion drawing) with triangulation techniques to ensure the validity of the findings.(Najmudin et al., 2021).

Data validity testing is carried out through source triangulation, member checks, and peer reviews. The ethical aspects of the research are considered through the application of informed consent, anonymity of informant identities, and data confidentiality guarantees (Najmudin et al., 2021). This study was designed to explore data in depth and systematically on how the social environment of Islamic boarding schools plays a role in forming the character of independent students while still paying attention to academic principles and research ethics.

4. Discussion

History of Nailul Author Islamic Boarding School

Nailul Author is a boarding school located on the border of East Serang Regency and Tangerang Regency, precisely in Kp. Sebe, Ds. Rancasumur, Kec. Kopo Serang Banten. This boarding school is under the auspices of the Nurul Falah Abdul Aziz Islamic Education Foundation. The foundation was established as a development of the Madrasah Ibtidaiyah (MI), which was founded in 1981.

Historically, in 1981 AD, a community figure in Sebe Village named H. Alibasa bin Japati initiated the establishment of an Elementary Madrasah (Elementary School level) by donating the land he owned to build learning facilities for the area's sons and daughters. This was done because H. Alibasa saw the condition of the local sons who had minimal formal religious education.

After H. Alibasa's death, his youngest son, H. Ahlan, S.Pd.I., continued the leadership in 2006 to develop formal religious education. H. Ahlan founded Madrasah Tsanawiyah (MTs) at the Junior High School (SMP) level. In 2009, it was developed to the next level, namely Madrasah Aliyah (MA) at the Senior High School (SMA).

In implementing learning, the Nailul Author Islamic Boarding School applies a combination of three curricula: the curriculum of the Department of Religion, the curriculum of the Gontor Ponorogo Modern Islamic Boarding School, and the Traditional Salafi Islamic Boarding School Curriculum.

In practice, formal education is carried out in the morning, and in the afternoon, yellow books are studied with the sorogan method and general religious studies. The books taught include Ilmu Alat, Ilmu Fiqh, Aqidah, and Sufism. Ilmu Alat, including the books Al-Awamil, Al-Ajrumiyah, 'Imriti, and Alfiyah Ibnu Malik. Also studied are the books of Aqidah and Fiqh based on the Syafi'i school, including Safinatu Naja, Fathul Qorib, and others.

The Role of the Social Environment of Islamic Boarding Schools in Forming the Independence of Students

Independence in Islamic boarding schools is a necessity that must be internalized by every student, both male and female. In the context of the Nailul Author Islamic Boarding School, this value of independence is manifested through a series of daily activities that are both practical and educational. Students must take care of all their personal needs independently, from preparing food and drinks, washing clothes, and arranging their rooms to managing personal finances. This independence is increasingly visible in time discipline, where all activities - from studying and eating to resting - must follow a strict schedule set by the Islamic boarding school. This phenomenon is based on Goffman's concept (1961) about total institution, where the pesantren create an isolated ecosystem with strict norms and

routines, forcing students to adapt and develop practical independence (Zuhriy, 2011).

An interesting aspect of independence education at Nailul Author can be seen in the canteen management program by senior students who have completed their Aliyah education. They are given full responsibility for the canteen's operation, from shopping for ingredients, processing, and selling to financial records. This practice not only trains the entrepreneurial spirit, but also develops independence in decision-making and resource management. Theoretically, this activity reflects the function of the Islamic boarding school as a mini-society (Nafi, 2018), which instills values of independence through structured communal living. Such activities are also in line with the findings by Arifin (2019) that collective activities in Islamic boarding schools train students to think critically and manage resources independently.

The social dynamics in Islamic boarding schools also strengthen the process of forming this independence. As stated by Bruinessen (2015), the interaction between kyai, ustadz, and santri, which is hierarchical but egalitarian, creates a role model system (uswah hasanah) that motivates santri to be independent. Kyai not only acts as a teacher, but also as a figure who encourages independence through the tarbiyah method. Meanwhile, the relationship between santri in the peer group system creates a competitive and collaborative environment (Mastuhu, 1994a), where they motivate each other to develop independence, both in learning and solving everyday problems.

The values of simplicity (zuhud) and self-resilience (tawakkal) that are characteristic of the Islamic boarding school environment (Faiqoh, 2020) also strengthen students' psychological independence. In facing various challenges, from managing a busy schedule to resolving conflicts with roommates, students learn to rely on their own abilities before asking for help from others. This process shows how the social environment of the Islamic boarding school functions as a laboratory of independence that integrates structural, relational, and spiritual aspects.

Thus, the independence of students at the Nailul Author Islamic Boarding School is not only formed through practical habits in daily activities but also through internalization of values that are reinforced by the entire social ecosystem of the Islamic boarding school. The combination of empirical practices such as canteen management and theoretical foundations on the social mechanisms of Islamic

boarding schools creates graduates who are not only practically independent but also have mental toughness and mature self-management skills.

The Role of Kyai Leadership in Forming the Independence of Students

Kyai in Islamic boarding schools have a very central role, not only as a spiritual leader but also as a character builder and director for students. In the context of the Nailul Author Islamic Boarding School, the role of the kyai is very clearly reflected in the implementation of a leadership system that includes various models, which in turn supports the achievement of educational goals, especially in fostering student independence. Kyai, in this Islamic boarding school, implements a legal-formal leadership system, where a clear organizational structure is formed and regulated by involving various elements. Decisions and policies taken are made through deliberation and collective work, which prioritize the principles of togetherness, vision, and mission that are carried out together. In this case, the kyai acts as a leader who prioritizes collaborative aspects in managing the Islamic boarding school, providing space for all parties to be involved in decision making. This reflects managerial practices based on the theory of planning, organizing, mobilizing, and supervising in the management theory explained by Stoner, (2012), where the goals and targets of Islamic boarding schools can be achieved optimally through the involvement of various elements in the process of continuous evaluation and improvement.

However, even though the legal-formal system is applied, in practice, kyai also show characteristics of several other leadership styles that focus more on personal and charismatic approaches. One of the dominant leadership styles in Islamic boarding schools is the charismatic style. This leadership style is characterized by the personal authority of the kyai, who greatly influences the students, both in decision-making and in daily life. For example, research by Hidayati & Mamlukhah, (2023) shows that kyai with charismatic leadership can provide students deep inspiration and motivation, encouraging them to be more active in various pesantren activities. At the Lirboyo Kediri Islamic Boarding School, a similar thing was found, where the charismatic leadership of the kyai also played an important role in increasing the motivation to learn and the active participation of students in learning and pesantren activities.(Ahmadi, 2023). In this context, the leadership style of the kyai who leads by example, both in simplicity, exemplary

behavior, and high work ethic, creates a climate that shapes students into individuals who are religious, independent, and responsible.

In addition to the charismatic leadership style, the transformational leadership theory is also very relevant in the Nailul Author Islamic Boarding School context. Kyai who adopt this style tend to pay more attention to the development of individual students and encourage them to think creatively and innovatively in facing the challenges of the times. This is reflected in the approach of the kyai who not only focuses on religious teachings, but also introduces the values of independence through real practice. The theory of transformational leadership, as explained by Bashori, (2019), identified four important dimensions: charismatic leadership, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individual consideration. Kyai at the Nailul Author Islamic Boarding School wisely combines these dimensions in everyday life, providing motivation and support to students to develop their abilities in religious knowledge and other areas that support their independence in the future.

On the other hand, democratic leadership style is also applied in practice at Nailul Author Islamic Boarding School, although in a more limited form. In this style, the kai involves students in decision-making and encourages them to actively participate in the process of managing the Islamic boarding school. Research Prayogi & Ashari, (2023) shows that this democratic leadership style can increase the motivation of students to learn, especially in the subject of nahwu science, because students feel appreciated and have a role in determining the direction and goals of their learning. In Islamic boarding schools, this is also implemented through a deliberation mechanism that involves students in every strategic decision, so that they are not only recipients of decisions, but also involved in achieving common goals. This approach, although not dominant, greatly supports the creation of a more inclusive atmosphere and strengthens students' sense of responsibility.

The implementation of these principles is clearly seen in the indicators of the success of students' independence at the Nailul Author Islamic Boarding School. As explained in the existing literature, students' independence is measured through several important aspects, such as self-confidence, trustworthy attitude, self-control ability, and seriousness in learning. High self-confidence can be seen from students' creativity in their daily activities, while trustworthy attitude is reflected in their responsibility in organizations and activities at the Islamic boarding school. The

ability to control themselves and communicate positively with others is also an important aspect that reflects their level of independence. This is related to religious learning and their ability to manage their daily lives at the Islamic boarding school. For example, serious learning is the main indicator in measuring students' readiness to face the future, reflecting their understanding that future success is highly dependent on their efforts and independence. By integrating various leadership models such as charismatic, transformational, and democratic, the Nailul Author Islamic Boarding School has not only succeeded in forming students who are competent in the field of religion but also students who have high independence in facing the challenges of their lives in the future.

Overall, the success of the Nailul Author Islamic Boarding School in shaping the character of the student's independence is closely related to the suitability of the leadership theory applied by the Kyai and the practices implemented in the boarding school. Through applying a legal-formal system and an approach combining elements of charismatic, transformational, and democratic leadership, this boarding school has succeeded in creating an environment that supports the holistic development of the student's personal and independent development. It prepares them to face the future with confidence and full responsibility.

5. Conclusion

Based on the discussion above, it can be concluded that the Islamic boarding school's social environment and the kyai's leadership style have a very significant role in shaping students' independence. At the Nailul Author Islamic Boarding School, students are trained to be independent through various daily activities that teach them to take care of personal needs such as cooking, washing, and managing time and finances. In addition, senior students carry out practical activities such as canteen management, giving them responsibility in management and decision making, developing independence in entrepreneurship and resource management. The values of simplicity and resilience taught at the Islamic boarding school also support the psychological independence of students, teaching them to rely on their own abilities in facing life's challenges.

The role of the kyai's leadership at the Nailul Author Islamic Boarding School is also crucial in shaping the students' independence. The kyai not only functions as a religious teacher but also as a role model in everyday life, providing examples in terms of discipline, simplicity, and responsibility. By adopting various

leadership styles, such as legal-formal, charismatic, transformational, and democratic, the kyai creates a climate that supports the students' independence. Leadership that prioritizes collaboration, personal motivation, and active learning allows students to develop in religious knowledge and managing their lives. Integrating a structured social environment and effective leadership forms students ready to face future challenges with complete confidence and independence.

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