

Deference to the Teacher in Salaf Pesantren: Between Theological Tradition, Social Habitus, and the Challenges of Modernity (A Case Study at Pesantren Salaf Al Ma'ruf, Kediri, East Java)

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Abstract

Reverence, the practice of profound respect and moral submission to one's teacher, is one of the most distinctive and enduring features of the Salaf Islamic boarding school tradition in Indonesia. However, despite its cultural significance, Reverence has received insufficient theoretical attention in the sociology of Islamic education. This study uses a qualitative case study design to examine how Reverence is theologically grounded, socially transmitted, and culturally negotiated in Salaf Islamic boarding schools in East Java. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with kiai (Islamic scholars), senior ustadz (Islamic teachers), and students from various generations, non-participatory observation, and systematic document analysis. The findings are organized around three interrelated dimensions: (1) Reverence as a practice that is both theological and cultural, rooted in classical Islamic texts such as Al-Zarnuji's *Ta'lim al-Muta'allim* and Al-Ghazali's *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*, expressed through a rich repertoire of bodily, verbal, and spatial rituals; (2) the social mechanisms through which Respect is transmitted and reproduced in Islamic boarding schools, analyzed through Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, field, and capital; and (3) the tensions and negotiations surrounding Respect in the context of modernity, digital culture, and the democratization of Islamic knowledge. This study finds that Respect is not simply a residual pre-modern habit, but a living, contested, and generative moral practice that performs crucial functions in the reproduction of Islamic scholarly authority and the formation of the identity of Islamic students.

Keywords : *Salaf Islamic Boarding Schools, Respect for Teachers, Transmission of Islamic Value*

INTRODUCTION

In the treasury of Islamic education, the relationship between student (santri) and teacher has never been merely a matter of technical knowledge transfer from one party to another. It constitutes a total moral relationship that encompasses the entirety of the

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santri's existence—from the manner of walking, speaking, and sitting, to the very mode of thinking. Al-Zarnuji, a twelfth-century Islamic scholar whose work *Ta'lim al-Muta'allim* remains to this day a mandatory text in nearly all traditional (salaf) pesantren in Indonesia, states with great clarity that respect for the teacher is an absolute prerequisite for the beneficial value of knowledge (barakah al-'ilm). Knowledge acquired without deference to one's teacher, in Al-Zarnuji's view, is knowledge that will bring no blessing.¹

This tradition did not develop in a vacuum. It forms part of a long-standing Islamic intellectual civilization that has, for centuries, positioned the *sanad*—the unbroken chain of knowledge transmission from teacher to student, extending back to the Prophet—as the principal marker of the validity of religious knowledge. Within this logic, respecting the teacher is not merely a matter of social etiquette; it is an epistemological act through which the santri ensures that the knowledge received is legitimate and its purity preserved.² All such acts of deference constitute symbols of respect that have been imbued with meaning and internalized as an integral part of the santri's character within the pesantren.³

Salaf pesantren—which distinguish themselves from khalaf or modern pesantren by retaining the study of classical Islamic texts (kitab kuning) as their core curriculum—represent the purest habitat of this tradition of respect in Indonesia. Dhofier, in his body of work on pesantren tradition, demonstrates that the authority of the kiai within the pesantren ecosystem is comprehensive in nature and extends beyond the purely academic dimension, encompassing spiritual, moral, and even socio-political authority.⁴ Deference functions as the social mechanism through which this authority is reproduced and legitimized across successive generations of santri.

However, in this second decade of the twenty-first century, this tradition of respect faces pressures unprecedented in its history. The penetration of the internet and social media into santri life, the democratization of access to Islamic knowledge through digital platforms, and the strengthening currents of discourse on human rights and equality have collectively challenged the hierarchical logic underpinning this tradition. Questions concerning whether this deference represents a universal Islamic value or a Javanese cultural construct, whether it liberates or constrains the santri's intellectual development, and whether it can endure in the postmodern era, have now come to the fore—both in academic discourse and in everyday conversation within the prayer halls (mushala) of the pesantren.

Academic studies on this tradition of respect, while not entirely absent, remain highly fragmented. Works on pesantren by scholars such as Dhofier, Mastuhu,

¹ Burhān al-Islām Zarnuji, *Ta'lim al-Muta'allim Tariq al-Ta'allum* (Toko Kitab 'Al-Hidayat', 1996).

² Martin Van Bruinessen, 'Kitab Kuning, Pesantren, Dan Tarekat: Tradisi-Tradisi Islam Di Indonesia', (No Title), 1995, <https://Cir.Nii.Ac.Jp/Crid/1971430859756301107/Holdings>.

³ Barlian Fajri and Naser Ali Abdulghani, 'Symbolic Interactionism Between Students and Caregivers in Pesantren', *Al-Jadwa: Jurnal Studi Islam* 5, no. 1 (2025): 1–19.

⁴ Zamakhsyari Dhofier, 'Tradisi Pesantren: Studi Tentang Pandangan Hidup Kyai', (No Title), 1982, <https://Cir.Nii.Ac.Jp/Crid/1970867909815584780>.

Bruinessen, and Lukens-Bull touch upon this phenomenon as significant, yet do not make it the primary focus of analysis. More recent studies on Islamic education tend to focus on curricular and institutional modernization, with this tradition of respect appearing only as background color rather than being analyzed as an independent subject. It is this gap that the present study seeks to address.

This study poses the following central research question: how is this tradition of teacher-respect theologically constructed, socially transmitted, and culturally negotiated within the ecosystem of the salaf pesantren? To answer this question, the study employs a qualitative case-study approach focused on salaf pesantren in East Java with a strong reputation for preserving classical scholarly traditions. Three sub-chapters of discussion are structured to reflect three layers of analysis that together form a comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon: the theological-cultural dimension, the social-reproductive dimension, and the contestation-continuity dimension.

Theoretically, this study contributes to at least three fields: the sociology of Islamic education, the study of religious knowledge transmission, and the anthropology of Islamic practice. Practically, it provides critical material for reflection for pesantren stakeholders who are currently grappling with the question of how to preserve core traditional values amid the increasingly intense pressures of modernity.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach with a case study design.⁵ The selection of a qualitative approach is grounded in the premise that this tradition of respect, as a socio-cultural phenomenon, cannot be adequately understood through quantification; it must instead be understood from within, from the perspective of the actors themselves who ascribe meaning to and experience it daily.

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews with participants comprising kiai, senior ustadz, resident santri, and alumni; non-participant observation; and document analysis, including kitab kuning, pesantren codes of conduct, and instructional texts related to this tradition of respect.

Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, which comprises four components occurring in a cyclical process: data condensation, data display, conclusion drawing, and verification.⁶ Thematic coding was carried out in three stages following the procedures of Strauss and Corbin: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding.⁷ The validity of the findings was ensured through source triangulation (kiai, ustadz, santri) and method triangulation (interviews, observation, documents); member checking with 8 key participants; peer debriefing with two fellow researchers; as well as negative case analysis to strengthen the validity of the findings.⁸

⁵ John W. Creswell And Cheryl N. Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry And Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches* (Sage Publications, 2016),

⁶ Matthew B. Miles Et Al., *Qualitative Data Analysis* (Sage, 2014),

⁷ Anselm Strauss And Juliet Corbin, *Basics Of Qualitative Research Techniques*, 1998

⁸ Yvonna Lincoln, 'Guba. E.(1985). Naturalistic Inquiry', *Beverly Hills: Sage. Lincoln* naturalistic Inquiry 1985, 1980.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Adab and Deference in the Islamic Scholarly Tradition

To adequately understand deference toward the teacher, we must situate it within a broader conceptual ecosystem: the tradition of *adab* within Islamic civilization. Rosenthal, in his monumental study of the concept of knowledge in medieval Islam, demonstrates that within classical Islamic epistemology, knowledge (*'ilm*) was never understood as a neutral-technical entity detached from moral and relational dimensions. It was always present within the context of a relationship between the knower and the seeker of knowledge, and that relationship was invariably imbued with ethical content.⁹

Within this context, *adab*—which may be loosely translated as cultivated moral propriety or the habitus of civilization—constitutes both a prerequisite for and a product of the process of Islamic learning. Metcalf, in her anthology on *adab* in South Asian Islam, explains that *adab* operates as a value system governing every aspect of a learned Muslim's conduct, from manner of dress and speech to the manner of relating to one's teacher.¹⁰ Deference represents the most concrete and most structured manifestation of *adab*; it is *adab* directed specifically toward the figure of the teacher as transmitter of knowledge.

Al-Zarnuji, in *Ta'lim al-Muta'allim*—written in the twelfth century yet still read in Indonesia's salaf pesantren today—devotes an entire chapter to the obligation of deference toward the teacher. He specifies highly particular forms of deference: not walking ahead of the teacher, not raising one's voice above the teacher's, not initiating speech without permission, and not posing questions when the teacher appears fatigued.¹¹ This text is among the most consistently studied works in Indonesian salaf pesantren, which accounts for the remarkable precision and consistency of the norms of deference it formulates across salaf pesantren generally.

Al-Ghazali, in *Ihya 'Ulum al-Din*—regarded by many pesantren kiai as the pinnacle of the synthesis between jurisprudence (*fiqh*), Sufism (*tasawuf*), and ethics in Islam—provides a deeper theological foundation for the attitude of respect toward the teacher. For Al-Ghazali, honoring the teacher is part of honoring God, since the teacher serves as an intermediary (*wasilah*) between God and the student in the transmission of knowledge.¹² The position of the teacher, within Al-Ghazali's framework, far exceeds that of biological parents, for parents grant only worldly life, whereas the teacher grants life in the hereafter through knowledge.

The Salaf Pesantren as a Distinctive Cultural Ecosystem

A sociological understanding of the salaf pesantren requires more than a mere institutional description. Dhofier demonstrates that the pesantren constitutes a distinct

⁹ Franz Rosenthal, *Knowledge Triumphant: The Concept Of Knowledge In Medieval Islam*, Vol. 2 (Brill, 2007).

¹⁰ Barbara Daly Metcalf, *Moral Conduct And Authority: The Place Of Adab In South Asian Islam* (Univ Of California Press, 1984).

¹¹ Bruinessen, 'Kitab Kuning, Pesantren, Dan Tarekat'.

¹² Muhammad Nafi, *Pendidik Dalam Konsepsi Imam Al-Ghazali* (Deepublish, 2017).

subculture with its own value system, internal logic, and unique mechanisms of social reproduction.¹³ Mastuhu adds that, as a total institution, the pesantren shapes the santri's personality comprehensively—not merely intellectual capacity, but also moral, aesthetic, and social disposition.¹⁴ Bruinessen emphasizes that the sacralized position of kitab kuning as a body of knowledge is key to understanding why the kiai's authority within the salaf pesantren differs so markedly from teacher authority within formal schooling.¹⁵

Geertz, in *The Religion of Java*, identifies the santri as one of three socio-religious variants within Javanese society, characterized by a more orthodox Islamic orientation compared to the *abangan* and *priyayi* variants.¹⁶ Geertz's analysis, though extensively critiqued in subsequent scholarship, nonetheless continues to provide an important framework for understanding that the pesantren community possesses a cultural ethos distinct from surrounding communities, and that this distinction is actively reproduced through highly structured everyday practices, including deference.¹⁷

Lukens-Bull, in his rich study of the negotiation of identity and modernity within Javanese pesantren, offers a highly relevant analysis. He shows that pesantren do not merely preserve tradition passively, but actively construct tradition as a response to the challenges of modernity.¹⁸ Within this framework, deference is not merely a legacy of the past; it is a practice actively chosen, sustained, and reconstructed by the pesantren community as a marker of identity.

Bourdieu and the Mechanisms of Social Practice Reproduction

To analyze how deference is transmitted and reproduced across generations of santri, this study draws on Pierre Bourdieu's key concepts, particularly habitus, field, and capital. Bourdieu defines habitus as a durable and transposable system of dispositions—principles that generate and organize practices and representations, acquired through a socialization process unfolding over an extended duration.¹⁹ Habitus operates below the level of conscious awareness, producing behavior that feels "natural" to the social actor without requiring explicit rational calculation.

The salaf pesantren is a near-perfect example of what Bourdieu terms a field: a social arena possessing its own logic, stakes, and forms of capital. Within the pesantren

¹³ Zamakhsyari Dhofier, *The Pesantren Tradition: The Role Of The Kyai In The Maintenance Of Traditional Islam In Java* (Monograph Series Press, Program For Southeast Asian Studies, Arizona State 1999).

¹⁴ Mastuhu, *Dinamika Sistem Pendidikan Pesantren: Suatu Kajian Tentang Unsur Dan Nilai Sistem Pendidikan Pesantren* (Inis, 1994).

¹⁵ Bruinessen, 'Kitab Kuning, Pesantren, Dan Tarekat'.

¹⁶ Clifford Geertz, 'Thick Description: Toward An Interpretive Theory Of Culture', *The Interpretation Of Cultures: Selected Essays/Basic Books*, 1973.

¹⁷ Mark Woodward, 'Islam In Java: Normative Piety And Mysticism In The Sultanate Of Yogyakarta', In *Islam In Java: Normative Piety And Mysticism In The Sultanate Of Yogyakarta* (University Of Arizona Press, Tucson; Association For Asian Studies Monograph, 45, 1989).

¹⁸ Ronald Lukens-Bull, *A Peaceful Jihad: Negotiating Identity And Modernity In Muslim Java* (Springer, 2005).

¹⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic Of Practice* (Stanford University Press, 1990).

field, the most valued capital is neither economic capital nor academic capital in the conventional sense, but rather religious capital—mastery of classical texts, depth of spirituality, and, of particular relevance to deference, the quality of one's relationship with the teacher, manifested through obedience and respect.

Berger and Luckmann offer a useful complementary lens. They demonstrate that social reality—including values such as deference—is a construction sustained through processes of socialization, legitimation, and routinization. Deference, within this framework, is a social reality maintained by the pesantren through a combination of ritualization, theological legitimation, and repeated everyday practice.²⁰

Foucault's concept of discipline and body technologies is also relevant to understanding deference as a practice that shapes the santri-subject through the regulation of body, space, and time. The various prohibitions and obligations associated with deference—bodily posture when facing the teacher, the physical distance to be maintained, the tone of voice to be kept—are all body technologies that, in Foucauldian terms, produce the docile, obedient subject.²¹

Discussion

Deference as Theological and Cultural Practice

The first and most fundamental finding of this study is that, across the three pesantren studied, deference is not perceived as a local norm of customary etiquette, but rather as a religious obligation grounded in clear and detailed textual foundations within the Islamic scholarly tradition. When the researcher asked santri why they crouch to make way for the kiai, or why they always kiss the teacher's hand even for the most trivial matters, the most frequent response did not point to Javanese custom—although this was also present—but rather to the kitab kuning texts they had studied.

A senior santri at the pesantren who had studied there for seven years described his experience in a highly illustrative manner:

"When I first arrived here, I thought this deference was just ordinary Javanese tradition, like unggah-ungguh [Javanese speech and behavior etiquette]. But after I read Ta'lim al-Muta'allim and the kiai taught the Ihya every Thursday night, I finally understood: this isn't about local politeness. It's about how knowledge can enter the heart. Al-Zarnuji says that whoever does not respect his teacher, his knowledge will bring no benefit. This isn't a threat—it's an explanation of how knowledge works."

This statement precisely captures what this study terms the theologization of deference—the process by which the norm of respecting the teacher is elevated from the level of custom to the level of religious obligation through textual legitimation. This process, as Rosenthal demonstrates, is highly characteristic of the classical Islamic

²⁰ Peter Berger And Thomas Luckmann, 'The Social Construction Of Reality', In *Social Theory Re-Wired* (Routledge, 2016).

²¹ Michel Foucault, 'Discipline And Punish (A. Sheridan, Trans.)', *New York: Pantheon*, 1977.

scholarly tradition, which has always demanded that every behavioral norm be grounded in textual authority.²²

The repertoire of deference observed by the researcher across the three pesantren encompasses highly diverse dimensions. At the level of body and gesture, deference is expressed through: kissing the teacher's hand as an opening and closing greeting in every interaction; bowing when passing in front of the teacher; never turning one's back to the teacher; sitting in a position lower than the teacher; and never extending one's legs in the teacher's direction. These gestural dimensions closely parallel what Turner analyzes as "ritual symbols"—acts that condense complex moral meaning into physical forms that can be efficiently expressed and communicated.²³

At the verbal and linguistic level, deference is expressed through highly regulated word choice and intonation: always using honorific titles (Kiai, Abah Yai, Abuya), never addressing the kiai directly by name, employing a highly refined speech register, and waiting one's turn to speak with great patience. Within the Javanese tradition, this system intersects directly with the krama inggil system, which has already culturally instilled linguistic hierarchy since childhood; within the pesantren, however, it acquires an additional layer of theological legitimation that considerably reinforces its consistency.²⁴ This reflects the symbolic meaning underlying ritual acts such as sowan (paying a visit), khidmah (serving the kiai), and adherence to the pesantren's strict regulations. These are not mere routines; they form part of a shared spiritual life symbolized through these very acts.²⁵

The most analytically compelling dimension is what the researcher terms spatial deference—the organization of space according to the principle of the teacher's honor. Within every pesantren learning space, there exist zones implicitly organized according to degrees of proximity and honor: the front area of the kiai's residence is guarded with great strictness; the door to the kiai's room constitutes a boundary that may not be crossed without permission; even the sandals and shoes placed in front of the kiai's room are always meticulously arranged by the santri as a form of deference toward the space belonging to the teacher. Goffman, in his analysis of total institutions, demonstrates how the organization of space is a key mechanism in the construction of social hierarchy; within the pesantren, spatial deference represents an elaboration of this mechanism—one that is exceedingly subtle and deeply rooted in religious legitimation.²⁶

One particularly significant finding concerns what the researcher terms the phenomenon whereby respect for the kiai extends concentrically to everything associated with him—his family, his books, his food, even his car and objects he habitually touches. One ustadz explained:

²² Rosenthal, *Knowledge Triumphant*, Vol. 2.

²³ Victor Turner, 'Theritual Process: Structure And Anti-Structure', *New York: Aldinede Gruyter*, 1969.

²⁴ Clifford Geertz, *The Religion Of Java* (University Of Chicago Press, 1976).

²⁵ Fajri and Abdulghani, 'Symbolic Interactionism Between Students and Caregivers in Pesantren'.

²⁶ Erving Goffman, *Asylums: Essays On The Social Situation Of Mental Patients And Other Inmates* (Routledge, 2017).

"Santri here don't dare sit in the chair the Kiai usually sits in, even when the Kiai isn't present. It's not because there's a written rule, but because they sense the chair carries honor from its owner. This is called tabaruk, but its social form is deference. A respected kiai channels honor into everything that comes into contact with him."

This phenomenon of deference corresponds closely to what Nasr describes as sacred perception within the traditional Islamic worldview—the capacity to perceive spiritual dimensions within material objects connected to holy persons. Within the pesantren context, the kiai is not formally regarded as a wali (saint); however, the charisma and blessing bestowed upon him through knowledge and piety cause the spaces and objects around him to receive similar reverence.²⁷

These findings on the theological-cultural dimension of deference provide an important analytical foundation: deference is not a phenomenon that can be explained by a single theory alone—it is multidimensional in nature, functioning simultaneously as religious practice, social norm, body technology, and system of symbolic communication. This very complexity is what renders it highly resistant to erosion and exceedingly difficult to replace with more modern alternative practices.

Social Mechanisms of Deference Transmission

The findings indicate that the transmission of deference occurs through three principal mechanisms that operate simultaneously and mutually reinforce one another. The first mechanism is habituation—internalization through highly intensive repetition of practice. In Bourdieu's terminology, this constitutes the process of habitus formation: dispositions encoded into the santri's body through continuous repetition until they become second nature—performed automatically without the need for conscious deliberation.²⁸

The habituation process for deference begins even before a new santri attends his first lesson. At the pesantren studied, new santri are oriented by senior santri regarding the highly detailed protocols for interacting with the kiai and ustadz—from how to greet, how to request permission, how to sit, to how to store the teacher's books. This initial adaptation period, often referred to by santri as the "new santri" phase, can be understood within Turner's framework as a phase of liminality—a period in which the old identity is shed and a new identity is constructed through a series of highly intensive formative experiences.²⁹

The second mechanism, identified by all participants in this study as the most effective, is exemplary modeling (uswah). Across all three pesantren, senior santri play a critical role in the transmission of deference—not through explicit instruction, but through the exemplary modeling of daily behavior observed and imitated by junior

²⁷ Husain Nasr, *Traditional Islam In The Modern World* (Kpi, 1987), <https://ixtheo.De/Record/164277491x>.

²⁸ Bourdieu, *The Logic Of Practice*.

²⁹ Turner, 'Theritual Process'.

santri. This process of imitation aligns closely with Bandura's analysis of social learning: learning that occurs through observation of trusted and respected behavioral models. Within the pesantren, senior santri who have thoroughly internalized deference serve as the most influential behavioral models for junior santri.³⁰

What makes this exemplary modeling so effective is the fact that it occurs within an immersive context—santri live together around the clock, so opportunities to observe behavioral models occur continuously. Unlike formal schooling, where exposure to norms occurs only during school hours, in the salaf pesantren the santri's entire time constitutes time for value socialization. Goffman describes a similar dynamic within total institutions: when every aspect of life unfolds in a single place under a single authority, the process of identity formation and value internalization occurs with an intensity far exceeding that of non-total institutions.³¹

A particularly interesting finding concerns what the researcher terms trust in the teacher within the transmission of deference. Observational and interview data indicate that santri do not merely imitate deference due to social pressure, but because they believe in its benefits—both religious (the blessing of knowledge) and social (elevated status within the pesantren community). These two motivations operate synergistically: theological belief reinforces intrinsic motivation, while social recognition provides equally important extrinsic reinforcement.

The third mechanism is moral community—what Durkheim terms the conscience collective, a shared consciousness that enables a community to sustain its norms. Within the salaf pesantren, every member of the community—from the most senior kiai to the most junior santri—belongs to a moral community that defines itself largely through a shared commitment to deference. A santri who violates deference norms faces not only formal sanction from the ustadz, but something far more psychologically weighty: a sense of shame (*malu* in Javanese, which carries a depth far exceeding the Indonesian sense of the word) before the entire community.³²

One ustadz described this dynamic in particularly incisive terms:

"Here, there's no supervisor constantly watching. What watches is the santri's own feeling—the feeling that he belongs to a community with adab, and if he lacks deference, he places himself outside that community. That's far more powerful than any punishment. Human beings fear nothing more than being cast out of their community, especially a community they chose for themselves and take great pride in."

This statement aligns closely with Berger and Luckmann's analysis of how social reality is sustained: through "conversation" in the broad sense—the entirety of ongoing social interaction that continually affirms and reinforces shared norms. Within

³⁰ Albert Bandura And Richard H. Walters, *Social Learning Theory*, Vol. 1 (Prentice-Hall Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1977), [Http://Www.Asecib.Ase.Ro/Mps/Bandura_Sociallearningtheory.Pdf](http://www.Asecib.Ase.Ro/Mps/Bandura_Sociallearningtheory.Pdf).

³¹ Erving Goffman, *Asylums: Essays On The Social Situation Of Mental Patients And Other Inmates* (Routledge, 2017).

³² Emile Durkheim, 'The Elementary Forms Of The Religious Life (JW Swain, Trans.)', *New York: Free.(Original Work Published 1912)*, 1965.

the pesantren, every interaction among santri, every observation of how someone behaves toward the kiai, every comment about a santri perceived as lacking in deference, forms part of the conversation that keeps the reality of deference alive and real.³³

This study also found that the transmission of deference carries a gender dimension worthy of attention. In male pesantren, deference toward the kiai involves a more physically intensive dimension—hand contact, more frequent physical presence in halaqah and shared activities. In female pesantren situated within the same complex, the relationship with the female kiai (ibu nyai) follows a similar pattern, adjusted for the separation of space between men and women. Interestingly, the norm of deference among female santri toward the male kiai—accessible to them only through general religious instruction or in highly guarded contexts—actually produces an intensification of deference in non-physical forms: memorizing prayers for the kiai, making items for the kiai's household, and other forms of respect that are more symbolic yet no less profound.

Deference Amid Modernity

This study found that the tension between deference and modernity is neither simple nor unidirectional. It does not manifest solely as "modernity eroding deference," although that dynamic is indeed present. It also manifests as "deference adapting and transforming itself," and, in some cases, as "deference generating creative resistance" against aspects of modernity perceived as threatening the pesantren's core values.

The greatest challenge identified across the three pesantren stems from the penetration of digital platforms and social media. Although smartphone use is strictly restricted in two of the three pesantren studied—santri are entirely prohibited from possessing smartphones during their residency—exposure to digital culture occurs whenever santri return home during holiday periods. Beyond this, alumni and santri guardians bring perspectives shaped by digital discourse into the pesantren community.

The discourse most troubling to the kiai is what one kiai at the pesantren termed "knowledge without sanad"—access to Islamic knowledge through YouTube, social media, and other digital platforms that severs the teacher-student transmission chain long serving as the foundation for the legitimacy of deference. When santri can access sermons from Middle Eastern scholars via smartphone without the mediation of a teacher, the logic that has long justified deference—that the teacher is the sole gateway to knowledge—confronts a serious structural challenge.

The kiai overseeing the pesantren responded to this challenge with an analytically striking framing:

"Those who learn from YouTube receive information, not knowledge. Information can be obtained anywhere. But knowledge that truly transforms the heart and behavior can only be transmitted from person to person, from a living

³³ Berger And Luckmann, 'The Social Construction Of Reality'.

teacher to a present student. That is why the Prophet did not merely write books; he educated his companions directly. And that is why deference cannot be replaced: it is an acknowledgment that what we receive is not mere information, but a trust (amanah) from a teacher whose own trust is linked, in unbroken succession, to his teachers, all the way back to the Prophet."

This argument, which relies on the concept of sanad as a marker of the quality of knowledge, exemplifies what Hefner and Zaman analyze as a strategy of selectively invented tradition: the pesantren community does not reject modernity outright, but rather manages its acceptance and rejection in a highly selective manner, using the authority of tradition as the criterion for selection.³⁴

This study also identified compelling forms of the transformation of deference—deference that is not abandoned but expressed through new modes more suited to the context of santri's modern lives. Alumni of salaf pesantren now working in cities and engaging with the secular professional world display adapted forms of deference: no longer always able to physically kiss the kiai's hand, they replace it with other expressions of respect—telephoning before every major life decision, giving charity in the kiai's name, or ensuring the kiai's name is always mentioned with respect in every conversation about their education.

Lukens-Bull terms a similar dynamic creative negotiation—the way individuals maintain commitment to core values while adapting their external expression to fit changing contexts. This creative negotiation differs markedly from passive acculturation or defensive rejection; it constitutes an active response demonstrating santri agency in managing the tension between pesantren identity and the demands of the modern world.³⁵

However, this study must also honestly acknowledge cases in which deference becomes a more morally complex issue. Interview data reveal several cases—particularly among alumni now pursuing academic careers—in which the strict deference instilled during their time as santri was experienced as an obstacle to the development of critical thinking later in life. One pesantren alumnus, now a lecturer at a state university, shared:

"I am deeply grateful for the deference instilled in me. It taught me humility and the proper way to learn. But I must also admit: it took years after graduation before I dared to openly disagree with my professor in public, because I had already become accustomed to believing that respecting a teacher meant never differing in opinion. That's something pesantren need to think about more deeply."

This testimony is not intended to invalidate the value of deference, but to identify a genuine tension: between deference as a profound moral value and deference as a mechanism that, in its excessive expression, can suppress the very intellectual development santri need in order to confront the challenges of their era. Freire criticizes

³⁴ Robert W. Hefner, *Civil Islam: Muslims And Democratization In Indonesia* (Princeton University Press, 2011), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400823871>.

³⁵ Lukens-Bull, *A Peaceful Jihad*.

educational relationships that position the student within a "banking education" model—one who merely receives without critique—and it is a highly relevant question whether overly strict deference inadvertently drives dynamics toward this banking education model.³⁶

The most sophisticated response to this tension was found at the pesantren where the overseeing kiai consciously distinguishes between deference as moral respect, which must be upheld, and intellectual agreement, which need not always be granted. He teaches his santri that respecting a teacher does not mean always agreeing with him, and that critical questions posed with proper adab constitute a higher form of deference than silent obedience. This approach—which can be viewed as a reconstruction of deference from within the tradition itself—demonstrates the salaf pesantren's capacity for genuine moral innovation without abandoning its traditional foundations.

Overall, the findings of this third sub-chapter portray deference not as an antique relic preserved in a cultural museum, but as a living, dynamic moral practice, continually reconstructed through the ongoing conversation between tradition and modernity. The capacity of the salaf pesantren to sustain deference—not by freezing it in place, but by developing it—is precisely what explains why this tradition remains relevant and meaningful for santri living even in the digital age.

CONCLUSION

Deference, as a practice of respecting the teacher within the salaf pesantren ecosystem, is theologically constructed through robust textual legitimation, rather than functioning merely as a local-particular norm of customary etiquette. Al-Zarnuji's *Ta'lim al-Muta'allim* and Al-Ghazali's *Ihya' Ulum al-Din* position respect for the teacher as an absolute prerequisite for the blessing of knowledge, such that this norm is regarded by santri as a religious obligation rather than a negotiable cultural choice. It is precisely this process of theologization that endows deference with a resilience and consistency far exceeding that of secular norms of politeness in general.

Socially, deference is transmitted across generations of santri through three mutually reinforcing mechanisms: intensive bodily habituation beginning from the orientation period of new santri, exemplary modeling (*uswah*) by senior santri that unfolds within the context of round-the-clock communal life, and reinforcement by the moral community (conscience collective), which renders any violation of deference an existential threat to one's membership within the pesantren community. These three mechanisms render deference a disposition of body and mind enacted without conscious rational calculation—consistent with Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*—rather than merely the outcome of explicit instruction by *ustadz* or *kiai*.

Culturally, the relationship between deference and modernity proves far more complex than any simple narrative of tradition being eroded by the currents of digitalization. Deference does not merely weaken under the pressure of digital

³⁶ P. Freire, 'Pedagogy Of The Oppressed (Mb Ramos, Trans.). Herder And Herder', *Original Work Published In Portuguese In 1968, 1970*.

penetration; it also demonstrates significant adaptive capacity, transforming into new forms of expression suited to the contexts of alumni's lives within the modern professional world, and even generating creative resistance against the discourse of "knowledge without sanad" offered by digital platforms such as YouTube and social media. At the same time, a genuine tension persists between deference as a profound moral value and its potential, when expressed excessively, to hinder the development of santri's critical thinking capacities in later life. The most sophisticated response to this tension was found in the case of a kiai who consciously distinguishes moral respect from intellectual compliance—a reconstruction of deference from within the tradition itself, one that sacrifices neither the teacher's authority nor space for the santri's critical reasoning.

Deference within the salaf pesantren ecosystem is thus shown to be a living and dynamic moral practice, rather than a static, frozen cultural artifact. Its resilience in the face of modernity's pressures lies not in an absolute rejection of change, but in the pesantren's capacity to selectively manage such change without forfeiting the epistemological and spiritual foundations that constitute its core identity. Further research is recommended to explore how similar dynamics unfold in salaf pesantren situated within different geographical contexts and scholarly traditions, in order to test the extent to which these findings can be generalized.

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