Symbolic Interactionism Between Students and Caregivers in *Pesantren*

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Abstract

Amidst the current wave of modernization, challenges arise in preserving the traditional values that form the foundation of *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) education. This study aims to examine how symbolic interactions between students and caregivers at the *Pesantren* Darullughah Wadda'wah (Dalwa) in Pasuruan contribute to the formation of the students' character and identity. Using a qualitative approach with descriptive-analytical methods, data were obtained through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. The results of the study indicate that symbolic interactions manifested through symbols such as the call "Abuya," gestures of respect, and daily rituals shape the social world of students based on five main values: sincerity, honesty, devotion, togetherness, and wisdom. These values are reproduced consistently through daily practices and become pillars of character education based on Islamic values. This study contributes to the development of the sociology of Islamic education through symbolic interactionism between students and caregivers in *pesantrens*, while also emphasizing the relevance of *pesantrens* as educational institutions that are adaptive but still rooted in tradition and the meaningfulness of education.

Keywords: *Pesantren, Symbolic Interactionism, Abuya, Santri Values, Symbolic Communication.*

INTRODUCTION

As a country with the largest Muslim population in the world, Indonesia has a unique experience in the field of Islamic education, namely the *pesantren*, a system that has existed since before independence.[1] The *pesantren* is considered a great tradition in the study of religious knowledge for Muslims in the archipelago.[2] Public trust in *pesantrens* (Islamic boarding schools) has also increased sharply.[3] One of the pillars of

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[1] Muhammad Zuhdi, "Modernization of Indonesian Islamic Schools' Curricula, 1945–2003," *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 10, nos. 4–5 (2006): 415–27, https://doi.org/10.1080/13603110500430765.

[2] Martin Van Bruinessen, "Pesantren and Kitab Kuning: Maintenance and Continuation of a Tradition of Religious Learning," *Texts from the Islands. Oral and Written Traditions of Indonesia and the Malay World [Ethnologica Bernica, 4]. Berne: University of Berne*, 1994, 121–45.

[3] Akhmad Fauzi Hamzah and Barlian Fajri, "Pesantren Ramah Perempuan Dan Anak Di Indonesia: (Studi Pada Pondok Pesantren Bahrul Ulum Tambakberas, Jombang, Jawa Timur Dan Boarding School Education

the *pesantren* is the *Kiai*, who plays a crucial and strategic role in maintaining the balance and dynamics of the Pesantren.[4] The *Kiai* functions as a role model who demonstrates the strength and authority of the *pesantren*.[5] The *Kiai* also determines the institution's policies and direction. A good *Kiai* leader must be able to balance their dual roles as a "school leader" and "educational leader."[6] The *Kiai* has the absolute authority to determine the path and progress of the *pesantren* in accordance with Islamic values.[7]

The community's respect for the *Kiai* is not solely based on his role and function, but also on his position as a religious leader and guide for the people in the socio-political and economic dynamics of society, both since the time of traditional Javanese kingdom rulers and the present.[8] This is because, individually, the figure of the *Kiai* generally shows his quality and capacity, both in mastering religious knowledge and in his moral quality (high morals, diligence in carrying out worship), as well as his dedication to religion and society.[9] The height of his knowledge and nobility of character are reflected in the *Kiai*'s simple life and his openness to society with the hope of helping to solve people's problems, both those related to religious and social issues.[10]

The prominence of the *Kiai* in the *pesantren*, in addition to his excellence in knowledge and personality, is also due to his function as a supervisor and coordinator of social life from a religious perspective, holding an important position in society.[11] The *Kiai* is even the owner or endower of the *pesantren* itself, a result of hard work and sacrificing everything he has, which is not limited to knowledge, energy, time, and so on.[12] This is one of the reasons why the *Kiai* is an important factor in the *pesantren*. It is

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Mu'allimat, Muhammadiyah, Yogyakarta)," *Ta'wiluna: Jurnal Ilmu Al-Qur'an, Tafsir Dan Pemikiran Islam* 5, no. 2 (2024): 399–418, https://doi.org/10.58401/takwiluna.v5i2.1828.

[4] Miftachul Huda et al., "Investigating Respect in Learning as Character Education: A Review of al-Zarnūjī's Taʻlīm al-Mutaʻallim," *Nazhruna: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 7, no. 2 (2024): 209–32, https://doi.org/10.31538/nzh.v7i2.4187.

[5] Dwi Istiyani et al., "Challenges and Opportunities in Early Childhood Religious and Moral Education: A Perspective from the Evaluation of Logical Models," *Nazhruna: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 7, no. 2 (2024): 233–49, https://doi.org/10.31538/nzh.v7i2.4843.

[6] Muhniansyah Arasyid Mahani et al., "How the Values and Authentic Leadership Patterns of Kiai in Islamic Boarding School?," *EDUKASIA Jurnal Pendidikan Dan Pembelajaran* 6, no. 1 (2025): 1, https://doi.org/10.62775/edukasia.v6i1.1395.

[7] Wawan Gunawan, "Kepemimpinan Kharismatik Kiai Dalam Implementasi Nilai-Nilai Pendidikan Pesantren Di Era Revolusi Industri 4.0," *Tadris: Jurnal Manajemen Pendidikan Islam* 2, no. 1 (2023): 1.

[8] Muhammad Turhan Yani et al., "Advancing the Discourse of Muslim Politics in Indonesia: A Study on Political Orientation of Kiai as Religious Elites in Nahdlatul Ulama," *Heliyon* 8, no. 12 (2022): e12218, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2022.e12218.

[9] Masturin Masturin, "The Power of Two Learning Strategy in Islamic Religious Education Material Shaping Character Student," *Nazhruna: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 7, no. 2 (2024): 250–69, https://doi.org/10.31538/nzh.v7i2.4678.

[10] M. Syamsul Huda, "Kultus Kiai: Sketsa Tradisi Pesantren," *Teosofi: Jurnal Tasawuf Dan Pemikiran Islam* 1, No. 1 (2011): 113–30.

[11] Lu'luil Mukarromah et al., "The Kyai Langgar as an Agent of Islamic Education: A Study on the Transformation of Roles in Ngepoh Village," *Halaqa: Islamic Education Journal* 8, no. 2 (2024): 147–60, https://doi.org/10.21070/halaqa.v8i2.1696.

[12] Nur Agus Salim et al., "Fostering Moderate Character of Santri: Effective Hidden Curriculum Strategy in Islamic Boarding Schools," *Nazhruna: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 7, no. 2 (2024): 357–72, https://doi.org/10.31538/nzh.v7i2.4676.

therefore not surprising that the *santri* (students) and the community place their trust in him and make him an elder and a *marja'* (a place to return to) for various problems.[13]

Several studies written by researchers such as Assa'idi,[14] Ma'arif,[15] Firmansyah et al.,[16] Haryanto,[17] Putro et al.,[18] Izzaturrosyidah,[19] Pramitha,[20] and other researchers show that the leader of the *pesantren* is a role model in various fields within the *pesantren*; every behavior, style, and symbol is deeply interpreted by the students. Without exception, the Pesantren Darullughah Wadda'wah (Dalwa) has its own unique way of interpreting the leader of the *pesantren*, including the use of the term "Abuya," which means "my father," replacing the common term "*Kiai*" for the leader. This term is not just a linguistic symbol but reflects a deep affective, spiritual, and cultural relationship between the students and the *pesantren*'s leader.[21] This relationship goes beyond mere administrative or structural ties, as it contains a value system that shapes the entire social order of the *pesantren*.[22]

From the perspective of symbolic interactionism, every form of communication, behavior, and social symbol used in the *pesantren* contains meaning that is formed through a process of repeated social interaction.[23] The term "Abuya," respectful attitudes, the way students and the leader communicate, and the method of conveying knowledge all become part of the mechanism for character and spiritual education that is not found

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[13] Mohammad Arief and Ridhatullah Assya'bani, "Eksistensi Manajemen Pesantren Di Era Digital," *Al Qalam: Jurnal Ilmiah Keagamaan Dan Kemasyarakatan* 16, no. 6 (2023): 2548–67, https://doi.org/10.35931/aq.v16i6.1541.

[14] Sa'dullah Assa'idi, "The Growth of Pesantren in Indonesia as the Islamic Venue and Social Class Status of Santri," *Eurasian Journal of Educational Research*, ANI Publishing Company, 2021, https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1300132.

[15] Syamsul Ma'arif, "Education as a Foundation of Humanity: Learning from the Pedagogy of Pesantren in Indonesia," *Journal of Social Studies Education Research* 9, no. 2 (2018): 104–23.

[16] Firmansyah et al., "Symbolic Meanings in the Social Interaction of Santri in the Pesantren Environment," *Al-Hayat: Journal of Islamic Education* 8, no. 3 (2024): 1086–102, https://doi.org/10.35723/ajie.v8i3.698.

[17] Sugeng Haryanto, "Persepsi santri terhadap perilaku Kepemimpinan Kiai di Pondok Pesantren: Studi Interaksionisme Simbolik di Pondok Pesantren Sidogiri–Pasuruan" (doctoral, Universitas Islam Negeri Maulana Malik Ibrahim, 2011), http://etheses.uin-malang.ac.id/10128/.

[18] Ahmad Agung Yuwono Putro et al., "New Tradition of Pesantren in Character Education," *Journal of Physics: Conference Series* 1254, no. 1 (2019): 012002, https://doi.org/10.1088/1742-6596/1254/1/012002.

[19] Fatimah Izzaturrosyidah, "Perspektif Interaksi Simbolik Pengasuh Dan Santri Terhadap Kedisiplinan Mengikuti Pengajian Kitab Ta'lim Muta'allim Di Pondok Pesantren An-Nuriyah Ngronggo Kota Kediri" (undergraduate, IAIN Kediri, 2020), https://etheses.iainkediri.ac.id/2719/.

[20] Devi Pramitha, "Revitalisasi Kepemimpinan Kolektif-Kolegial Dalam Membangun Efektifitas Komunikasi Organisasi Pesantren (Studi Interaksionisme Simbolik Di Pondok Pesantren Jombang)," *Journal EVALUASI* 4, no. 1 (2020): 45, https://doi.org/10.32478/evaluasi.v4i1.355.

[21] Syarif Syarif et al., "Multiculturalism among Students in Madrasah: Knowledge, Challenges, and Social Capital," *Nazhruna: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 7, no. 2 (2024): 390–408, https://doi.org/10.31538/nzh.v7i2.4710.

[22] Widya Masitah et al., "Exploring Religiosity as Mediator of The Association Between Democratic Parenting, Peer Support, and Self-Concept Among Adolescent Moral Literacy," *Nazhruna: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 7, no. 2 (2024): 436–57, https://doi.org/10.31538/nzh.v7i2.5060.

[23] Asril Bijaksana, "Pendekatan Teori Interaksionisme Simbolik Dalam Metodologi Penelitian Kualitatif," *Peshum: Jurnal Pendidikan, Sosial Dan Humaniora* 4, No. 2 (2025): 2244–56.

in the formal education system.[24] Therefore, this research reveals how these values are maintained, reproduced, and passed down through unique symbols and social practices.[25]

Furthermore, this research highlights the cultural resilience of the traditional (*salaf*) *pesantren* amidst the currents of modernization and globalization.[26] At a time when many Islamic educational institutions are undergoing structural transformation, *pesantren* like Dalwa continue to maintain strong social relationship patterns based on deep Islamic values and spirituality. This shows that the *pesantren* is not just a place for learning religious knowledge, but also an arena for shaping the morality, character, and Islamic identity of the students.[27] The scientific relevance of this study lies in its contribution to a deeper understanding of communication in Islamic education and in enriching the study of the sociology of Islamic education with a symbolic interactionist approach.[28]

METHOD

This research uses a qualitative research approach. This choice is based on the researcher's desire to understand the meaning related to the subject. The understanding of the meaning obtained in the field will unravel several important things related to the *pesantren*. This research uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive-analytic method. A phenomenological approach is used to deeply understand the subjects' experiences. The research location is the Pesantren Darullughah Wadda'wah (Dalwa) in Pasuruan, which is a Salafi *pesantren* with a tiered education system and management based on traditional Islamic values. The research subjects consist of five senior teachers.

Data collection was carried out through participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation of *pesantren* activities. Observation was conducted intensively, while interviews were conducted with a semi-structured approach so that informants could speak freely according to their experiences. The data were analyzed through a process of data reduction, symbolic coding, and meaning construction. To maintain the validity of the data, source triangulation and validation by *pesantren* figures were carried out.

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[24] Sarbini Sarbini et al., "The Character Education Model as a Strategic Framework for Nurturing Religious Moderation Within State Islamic Higher Education Institutions in Indonesia," *QIJIS (Qudus International Journal of Islamic Studies)* 13, no. 1 (2025): 1–38, https://doi.org/10.21043/qijis.v13i1.30618.

[25] Sholihan Sholihan et al., "Implementing Global Ethics in Local Context: A Study of Religious Leaders' Perspectives in Central Java Indonesia," *QIJIS (Qudus International Journal of Islamic Studies)* 12, no. 2 (2025): 255–86, https://doi.org/10.21043/qijis.v12i2.22766.

[26] Evi Muafiah et al., "Gendered Pesantren in Contemporary Indonesia: Female Agency, Institution, and Everyday Lives," *QIJIS (Qudus International Journal of Islamic Studies)* 12, no. 1 (2024): 39–74, https://doi.org/10.21043/qijis.v12i1.19859.

[27] Samsul Ma'arif et al., "Pesantren Entrepreneurship: Harmonization of the Theories of Kasb Asy'ariah and Locus of Control on Strengthening Santripreneur," *QIJIS (Qudus International Journal of Islamic Studies)* 11, no. 1 (2023): 31–64, https://doi.org/10.21043/qijis.v11i1.17404.

[28] Abdul Karim, "Integration of Religious Awareness in Environmental Education," *QIJIS (Qudus International Journal of Islamic Studies)* 10, no. 2 (2022): 415–42, https://doi.org/10.21043/qijis.v10i2.14404.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism is an approach in sociology that emphasizes that social action is based on meaning.[29] This meaning comes from social interaction and can be modified through a process of interpretation. This approach was first popularized by Herbert Blumer, who asserted that humans act based on the meanings they assign to the objects, actions, and situations they face.[30] In Mead's terminology, every non-verbal cue (such as body language, physical movements, clothing, status, etc.) and verbal message (such as words, voice, etc.) that is given meaning based on a shared agreement by all parties involved in an interaction is a form of significant symbol.[31] In the context of the Pesantren Darullughah Wadda'wah, symbols such as the Arabic language, gestures of respect, seating positions, and specific greetings become important elements that are inseparable from the interaction process.

The most fundamental proposition of symbolic interactionism is that human behavior and interaction can be distinguished because they are displayed through symbols and their meanings.[32] Seeking the meaning behind sensual reality becomes very important in symbolic interactionism.[33] The theory of symbolic interaction emphasizes the relationship between symbols and interaction, with the individual at the core of this perspective.[34]

In the *pesantren*, it is not only a place for the transfer of religious knowledge but also a social arena rich with symbolic interaction.[35] The hierarchical structure consisting of the leader, teachers, and *santri* (students) becomes an important foundation for understanding the social dynamics within the *pesantren*.[36] Communication among these actors is carried out within a framework of strong religious values and traditions. The use of symbols in daily practices—such as using Arabic for formal communication, showing

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[29] Sardjuningsih Sardjuningsih, "Portrait of Indonesian Religious Communities Attitudes toward the Government Policies Restriction on Congregational Worshipping," *QIJIS (Qudus International Journal of Islamic Studies)* 10, no. 2 (2022): 443–78, https://doi.org/10.21043/qijis.v10i2.8221.

[30] Kristin Allergodt et al., "'This Disease Is a Verdict You Must Live With for the Rest of Your Life': Experiences and Perspectives From People Living With Adult-Onset Myotonic Dystrophy Type 1," *Qualitative Health Research*, July 10, 2025, 10497323251356979, https://doi.org/10.1177/10497323251356979.

[31] Erwan Efendi et al., "Interaksionisme Simbolik Dan Prakmatis," *Da'watuna: Journal of Communication and Islamic Broadcasting* 4, no. 3 (2024): 1088–95.

[32] Masturin Masturin et al., "Tawhid-Based Green Learning in Islamic Higher Education: An Insan Kamil Character Building," *QIJIS (Qudus International Journal of Islamic Studies)* 10, no. 1 (2022): 215–52, https://doi.org/10.21043/qijis.v10i1.14124.

[33] Dennis D. Waskul and Phillip Vannini, "Introduction: The Body in Symbolic Interaction," in *Body/Embodiment* (Routledge, 2006).

[34] Achmad Muhibin Zuhri et al., "Chinese Muslims' Ways of Being Nationalist: Combining Islamic Cosmopolitanism, Acculturation and Social Roles," *QIJIS (Qudus International Journal of Islamic Studies)* 9, no. 2 (2021): 279–314, https://doi.org/10.21043/qijis.v9i2.9649.

[35] Siti Nur Hidayah, "Pesantren for Middle-Class Muslims in Indonesia (Between Religious Commodification and Pious Neoliberalism)," *QIJIS (Qudus International Journal of Islamic Studies)* 9, no. 1 (2021): 209–44, https://doi.org/10.21043/qijis.v9i1.7641.

[36] Raudhatuz Zahrah et al., *Islamic Guidance and Counseling Practices for Strengthening Student Adjustment: A Multisite Study in Urban Modern Pesantren of Medan*, n.d.

respect to the *kiai* by kissing their hand, and being present in knowledge assemblies—are all symbolic forms full of meaning.

The Symbolic Meaning According to *Santri* at the *Pesantren*

The symbolic interactionism theory emphasizes that to understand the relationship between humans and society, one must look at how they exchange symbols and communicate in meaningful ways.[37] Within the *pesantren* environment, communication isn't just about verbal symbols like words; it also involves non-verbal symbols such as body language, facial expressions, clothing, and even the manner of sitting and greeting.[38] At the Pesantren Darullughah Wadda'wah (Dalwa), these symbols hold a powerful and binding meaning for the *santri* (students), especially in shaping the relationship between the students, teachers (*ustadz*), and the leader (*masyayikh*).[39]

At Dalwa, just like in many other traditional (*salaf*) *pesantren*, *santri* view their relationship with the *kiai* or *masyayikh* not just as an academic one between a teacher and a student. Instead, it is a deep spiritual and moral relationship. The *kiai* are seen as spiritual guides, life-direction setters, and a source of blessings (barakah).[40] In practice, the *santri* show symbolic reverence (*takzim*) through their manner of sitting in front of the *masyayikh*, kissing their hands with deep respect, keeping their gaze down, and choosing polite words.[41] All these actions are symbols of respect that have been given meaning and internalized as part of the *santri*'s character at Pesantren Dalwa. As one senior *santri* from Dalwa shared in an in-depth interview:

> "*At Dalwa, we don't just seek knowledge; we also seek barakah. Barakah comes from having adab (good manners) toward the masyayikh. We even believe that knowledge without adab will not be beneficial.*"

This statement reflects the symbolic meaning behind ritualistic actions such as *sowan* (visiting), *khidmah* (serving the *kiai*), and obedience to strict *pesantren* rules. These are not just routines; they are part of a shared spiritual life symbolized through these actions.

The leader at Dalwa often doesn't need to speak at length to convey a message. A

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[37] Sarkowi Sarkowi et al., "Symbolic Interaction of Kyai and Santri in The Perspective of Ethical Leadership Based on Religious Values," *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research of Higher Education (IJMURHICA)* 8, no. 3 (2025): 388–402, https://doi.org/10.24036/ijmurhica.v8i3.292; Lina Zhong et al., "Symbolic Interactionism: Exploring the Experience of Traditional Costume in a Destination," *Current Issues in Tourism* 28, no. 7 (2025): 1100–1115, https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2024.2323161.

[38] Syukri Syukri et al., "Integration of Islamic Values with Environmental Ethics in Pesantren Education: A Case Study at Darularafah Raya Pesantren," *Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 13, no. 1 (2024): 1–12, https://doi.org/10.14421/jpi.2024.131.1-12.

[39] Unun Zumairoh Asr Himsyah and Asep Rahmatullah, "Konsep Pendidikan Hadhari Di Pondok Pesantren Darullughah Wadda'wah Bangil-Pasuruan," *Al-Jadwa: Jurnal Studi Islam* 1, no. 1 (2021): 1–21, https://doi.org/10.38073/aljadwa.v1i1.460.

[40] Oktio Frenki Biantoro and Asep Rahmatullah, "Internalisasi Nilai-Nilai Pendidikan Agama Islam Dalam Pembinaan Moral Siswa Di Sekolah," *Pelita: Jurnal Studi Islam Mahasiswa UII Dalwa* 2, no. 2 (2025): 225–41, https://doi.org/10.38073/pelita.v2i2.3019.

[41] Alfia Miftakhul Jannah et al., "Kepemimpinan Dalam Pesantren," *J-CEKI: Jurnal Cendekia Ilmiah* 1, no. 1 (2021): 42–49.

simple gesture, a look in the eye, or a facial expression is enough for the *santri* to grasp the meaning and adjust their behavior. For example, the leader's smile can be interpreted as a form of acceptance, while their silence might be seen as a sign of disapproval. The *santri* at Dalwa are accustomed to reading this "language of silence" because they are educated in a culture of rich symbolic communication.

Mead stated that the mind is a process of a person having a conversation with themselves. The mind is a social phenomenon that emerges and develops through social processes and is part of the social process itself.[42] The interaction patterns of the *santri* at Dalwa show that the social process in the *pesantren* is the result of internalizing symbols and values, which are then processed in the mind before being manifested in real actions.

Charron, as quoted by Zanki, also mentioned that understanding symbols is an interaction used as representation and communication determined by the people who use them. These people give meaning, create, and change these objects within the interaction. These social symbols can take the form of physical objects (visible items), words (to represent physical objects, feelings, ideas, and values), and actions (done by people to give meaning in communicating with others).[43] Thus, these symbols serve as tools for representing meaning that is created, modified, and understood together within the unique cultural context of the *pesantren*.

The symbolic relationship between the *santri* and the leader does not end when the *santri* completes their studies. *Santri* continue to feel a spiritual connection with the *masyayikh*, which in Dalwa's terms is known as the "*sanad* relationship." There is no such thing as "former *santri*" among Dalwa alumni. Even after graduation, they maintain connections, attend study sessions, visit during special moments like Eid al-Fitr or the masyayikh's *haul* (commemoration), and ask for blessings before making major life decisions.

Severing ties with the *pesantren*'s leader at Dalwa is considered a very serious symbolic violation. It is believed that this can lead to a break in *barakah* and the loss of the benefit of the knowledge gained. Many traditional stories among the *santri* believe that those who do not maintain a relationship with the *kiai* tend to fail in their religious calls, have difficulty finding students, or lose their way in life. Therefore, the symbols of the relationship with the *kiai* are consistently maintained and passed down through generations of *santri*.

The symbolic meaning formed in the Dalwa environment is also evident in unique traditions like the *majelis pengajian kitab* (book study sessions), the recitation of *maulid* (Prophet's birth), and *rotiban* (recitation of certain prayers). In these activities, there are spiritual symbols that are given meaning as a way to draw closer to Allah while strengthening the inner connection with the *masyayikh*. The active participation of the *santri* in these activities is not merely out of obligation but as a form of symbolic devotion to the *pesantren*'s values passed down by the leaders.

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[42] Haritz Asmi Zanki, "Teori Psikologi Dan Sosial Pendidikan (Teori Interaksi Simbolik)," *Scolae: Journal of Pedagogy* 3, no. 2 (2020), https://doi.org/10.56488/scolae.v3i2.82.
[43] Zanki, "Teori Psikologi Dan Sosial Pendidikan (Teori Interaksi Simbolik)."

From a symbolic interactionist perspective, the meaning that the *santri* form toward the figure of the *kiai* does not appear suddenly. Instead, it is a result of a long and intensive process of social interaction. The symbols they perceive from the actions, words, and lifestyle of the *masyayikh* become the basis for interpretation, which then shapes their behavior and attitudes. In this sense, meaning-making is not merely an individual product but a social construction that lives within the *pesantren* community. The interaction between the *santri* and the leader at Dalwa cannot be superficially understood as an authoritative relationship; it is a symbolic construction rich in spiritual, ethical, and cultural values. Every action, gesture, and word within the *pesantren* becomes part of a symbolic system that is given meaning, internalized, and lived out by the *santri*. This aligns with the basic assumption of symbolic interactionism theory: that people act toward the world based on the meanings they hold, and those meanings are born from social interactions experienced directly and symbolically.

Mind and Self-Concept of *Santri* at the *Pesantren*

In the context of the Pesantren Darullughah Wadda'wah (Dalwa), symbolic interactionism can be understood through how *santri* (students) interpret social and religious symbols in their interactions with the *pesantren* leader. Symbolic communication occurs not only through verbal language but also through body language, facial expressions, clothing, and religious rituals such as *rotiban*, *tahlil*, and *majelis ilmu* (knowledge gatherings). These symbols have deep meaning and are part of the formation of the *santri*'s self within the *pesantren* environment.

Santri at Dalwa do not only get to know the leader through direct interaction but first form a perception through a long process of internalization. This process begins when the *santri* hear stories about the leader's sincerity, manners (*adab*), and knowledge from senior students or through the *pesantren*'s religious media, such as sermons and written works. This internalization process creates a representation of the *kiai* figure as a spiritual guide, a parent, and a moral leader.

> "*I first got to know the kiai not through direct interaction, but from the stories of senior santri. How he sold his belongings for the needs of the santri and the pesantren, how he was very humble and generous. That's what made me respect him even before I had a direct conversation.*"

This impression is then reinforced when the *santri* begin to interact directly in forums like *pengajian kitab* (book study sessions), *majelis dzikir* (remembrance gatherings), or when they *sowan* (visit) to ask for advice. These interactions are not ordinary; they become sacred and symbolic moments that are deeply meaningful to the *santri*.

> "*When I sowan (visiting) for the first time, I didn't talk much. I just sat with my head bowed, kissed his hand, and listened. But from that moment, I felt like I had found a direction for my life. His guidance, though brief, seemed to shake my heart.*"

Symbols of proper manners like kissing hands, bowing when speaking, not sitting higher than the *kiai*, and speaking only when necessary are forms of non-verbal communication that are consistently practiced. All of this shows how the *santri* reflect on their roles and adjust their behavior to the symbols that have been collectively interpreted within the *pesantren* community.

George Herbert Mead argued that humans are reflective beings who act based on a social definition of themselves and their environment. This is highly evident in the behavior of the *santri* at Pesantren Dalwa, who not only adjust their actions based on rules but do so out of a complete awareness of shared values. The *santri* define themselves as seekers of knowledge who must live within a framework of proper manners, discipline, and spiritual submission to religious authority.

> "*A santri at Pesantren Dalwa is an obedient one. If the kiai says not to leave the pesantren, we obey. Because we know that it's not just a rule but for the sake of barakah. If we break it, it could hinder our own knowledge.*"

The life of a *santri* at Dalwa is heavily colored by symbols that reflect a unique value structure and social hierarchy. For instance, the use of a *gamis*, *imamah*, sarong, and *peci* is not just clothing but a symbol of the *santri*'s identity. Similarly, seating positions in a *majelis*, the order of serving food to the *kiai*, and even the rhythm of their voices when reciting books or *shalawat* all carry symbolic meaning.

> "*From the way we dress to the way we live our lives, there are rules for everything. But it's not because we're forced; it's because we want to practice what the Prophet Muhammad taught, and our leader does these things with great meaning and in line with the sunnah (tradition).*"

As symbolic beings, humans think, feel, and behave in symbolic expressions. Within a certain culture, people use symbols without much thought, spontaneously using them in their relationships with others, and their meaning and intent are immediately understood.

Symbols can be expressed both implicitly and explicitly. According to Edward Tylor, the power of using words is a way to express thoughts. In this case, sound is not directly related to this expression, because the symbol acts as a mediator, representing the highest level of human's special ability to use language, and its presence unites all of humanity into a substantial mental unity.[44]

Thus, the symbolic meaning that forms within the *santri* at Pesantren Dalwa is the result of a complex symbolic interaction where every action, symbol, and language has a meaning that is co-constructed within the community. This shapes the *santri*'s 'social self' as an individual who not only learns religion cognitively but also lives a spiritual and social life based on meaning that continuously evolves through experience and

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[44] Aidil Haris and Asrinda Amalia, "Makna Dan Simbol Dalam Proses Interaksi Sosial (Sebuah Tinjauan Komunikasi)," *Jurnal Dakwah Risalah* 29, no. 1 (2018): 16–19.

interaction.

Education in the *pesantren* is not just about transferring knowledge; it's also about transmitting meaning and values through living and meaningful symbols. This understanding aligns with the concept of symbolic interactionism, which places meaning at the core of social action. In the context of Dalwa, this meaning becomes the soul of education, strengthening the spiritual, social, and cultural relationship between the *santri* and the *kiai*.

Social Interaction of *Santri* at Pesantren Darullughah Wadda'wah (Dalwa)

The atmosphere of a *santri*'s life at the Pesantren Darullughah Wadda'wah (Dalwa) is steeped in a sense of family and spirituality. The relationship between the *santri* and the leaders, or masyayikh, is more than just a connection between a student and a teacher; it is similar to the relationship between a child and a parent. The *kiai* and leaders at Dalwa are consistently central figures in the lives of the *santri*—a place to ask questions, report problems, and seek life inspiration.

This closeness is built through a routine of intense interaction, whether in study sessions (*pengajian*), traditional book circles (*halaqah kitab kuning*), or informal activities within the *pesantren* environment. One *santri* expressed:

> "*I personally feel like I have a second parent at Dalwa. When I sowan (visit) the masyayikh, they don't just give advice; they truly know our condition. Even though there are thousands of santri, he can still recognize the faces of the santri who actively study. Sometimes he even mentions the name of our father and our hometown, which makes us emotional.*"

The approach used by the *kiai* at Dalwa reflects humility (*tawadhu'*) and openness. The leaders do not build barriers in their social relationships with the *santri*. They present an egalitarian figure while still maintaining their authority and serving as role models. The interaction between the *santri* and the *kiai* is also based on strong manners (*adab*) and respect (*takzim*). Another *santri* added:

> "*When we talk to the leader, we naturally use polite language and speak in a gentle tone. We also watch our tone of voice and don't interrupt Abuya (the leader).*"

This social interaction reflects a key principle in George Herbert Mead's theory of symbolic interactionism: that social relationships are formed through the exchange of symbolic meaning. In this context, symbols such as language, body gestures, and even glances become important.

In symbolic interactionism, people act solely based on their own definitions and interpretations of the objects around them. Phrases like "defining a situation," "reality is in the eye of the beholder," and "when people define something as real, that situation is real" are often used as part of symbolic exchange.[45]

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[45] Stewart L. Tubbs and Sylvia Moss, *Human Communication: Konteks-Konteks Komunikasi*, Remaja Rosdakarya, 2005.

The *santri* understand that bowing their heads, listening without interrupting, and not being the first to start or end a conversation are symbolic forms of showing respect to the *kiai*.

> "*When we sowan to the leader, we just stay quiet at first. If we have a need, we state it briefly. After that, he is the one who talks. We just listen, and sometimes we even forget to ask for permission to leave because we feel so hesitant. But that's the form of adab here*."

The social world of the *santri* at Pesantren Dalwa is a construct of values that develop through continuous interaction. According to George Herbert Blumer, the social world is formed from the process of symbolic interpretation by social actors.[46] In this case, the *santri* give meaning to their social actions based on their interpretation of what is considered appropriate and valuable within the *pesantren* context.

The *santri* at Pesantren Dalwa also develop a collective identity as part of a *pesantren* community that upholds knowledge, manners, and a spiritual closeness with their teachers. This social world becomes a space where the self develops, as explained by Mead—namely, through continuous reflection on the actions and interactions they perform.

> "*At Dalwa, we learn not only how to read texts but also how to behave. We see how the ustadz (teachers) behave toward the masyayikh, and then we imitate them. So, even if it's not taught verbally, we learn by seeing and feeling*."

Thus, the social interaction of the *santri* at Dalwa is not just a routine but part of a symbolic process that shapes the *santri*'s identity and morality. The world of the *pesantren* is a world of meaning, where every gesture and action has value, and all of this is socially constructed in daily practices that reproduce the values of the *pesantren*. The analysis of symbolic interactionism confirms that the meaning of the *santri*'s actions in interacting with the *kiai* is not determined solely by structural or cultural factors but is formed through the *santri*'s subjective interpretation of their environment and the symbols present. Their actions are a reflection of their understanding of their "self" within the unique, meaningful, and etiquette-filled social world of the *pesantren*.

The Social World of *Santri* at Pesantren Darullughah Wadda'wah (Dalwa)

Life at the Pesantren Dalwa in Pasuruan creates a distinct and unique social system. Through the lens of symbolic interactionism theory, this social world is built through the exchange of symbols, shared social actions, and the process of role-taking among the *santri* (students), teachers (*ustadz*), and the leader (*kiai*). Within the daily dynamics of the *pesantren*, symbolic interaction is not just a formality of the teaching-learning relationship, but also instills deep values that shape the character and identity of the *santri*. The researcher identified five dominant values that form the construction of

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[46] Teresia Noiman Derung, "Interaksionisme Simbolik Dalam Kehidupan Bermasyarakat," *SAPA: Jurnal Kateketik Dan Pastoral* 2, no. 1 (2017): 118–31.

the *santri*'s social world at Pesantren Dalwa:

1 Sincerity

Within George Herbert Mead's framework of symbolic interactionism, human actions are a result of "role-taking" towards others in a social interaction structure.[47] The value of sincerity that grows in the Pesantren Dalwa environment is not merely a theological ethical act but is also a result of symbolic construction internalized through repeated social interaction. *Santri* interpret the symbol of sincerity as a moral expression free from external motivations like praise or reward. This is reflected in an informant's narrative, who stated that "even our intention in studying is not to get a grade or a diploma, but to gain Allah's pleasure."

Sociologically, the symbol of sincerity does not stand alone; it is constructed through repeated symbolic practices and becomes part of the *pesantren*'s *habitus*. In the context of Dalwa, the symbol of sincerity is embedded in "invisible labor" actions such as cleaning bathrooms, arranging a teacher's sandals, or maintaining the security and order of vehicle parking. These actions, although not visible or formally appreciated, become an arena for forming the *santri*'s social identity based on spiritual morals. Sincerity at Dalwa has transformed into an autonomous moral act,[48] not just a reflection of religious doctrine, but the result of internalizing meaningful social symbols within the *pesantren*'s communication space.

2. Purity of Intent

From Mead's perspective, purity of intent can be understood as a spontaneous and authentic expression of the self in the *pesantren* space, manifested in unrehearsed social actions. Purity of intent is not a strategic action but a communicative action born from the intersubjective space between *santri* with each other, as well as with teachers and leaders. This aligns with Blumer's argument that meaning comes from social interaction, not from the objects or actions themselves.[49]

Purity of intent is fundamentally relational capital that strengthens the social integration of the *pesantren* community. When a *santri* helps a sick friend or shares food without expecting anything in return, that action becomes a symbol of unwritten social capital that ethically and emotionally binds the community. It is here that the *pesantren* creates a semiotic sphere rich in moral symbols, where purity of intent becomes the key to interpreting the social world of the *pesantren*.

3. Dedication

Dedication in the context of Dalwa is a dominant symbol that governs the long-term relationship among *santri*, teachers, and the *pesantren* itself. From a symbolic interactionist perspective, an act of dedication is not a standalone action but part of a structure of meaning constructed through communication and collective

[47] Aidil Haris And Asrinda Amalia, "Makna Dan Simbol Dalam Proses Interaksi Sosial (Sebuah Tinjauan Komunikasi)," *Jurnal Dakwah Risalah* 29, No. 1 (2018): 16–19.

[48] Ivan Th J. Weismann, "Simbolisme Menurut Mircea Eliade," *Jurnal Jaffray* 2, no. 1 (2005): 54–60.

[49] Rukyah Wanulu, "Makna Interaksi Simbolik Pada Proses Upacara Adat Cumpe Dan Sampua Suku Buton Di Samarinda," *Jurnal Ilmu Komunikasi* 4, no. 3 (2016): 265–79.

historical experience. When alumni continue to teach or live at the *pesantren*, they are not just fulfilling a duty; they are affirming their collective identity as part of the *pesantren*'s symbolic system.

In this regard, dedication serves as a mechanism for symbolic reproduction. It transmits the *kiai*'s values, missionary vision, and scholarly tradition from one generation to the next, through symbols that are internalized and socially preserved. This aligns with the concept of the "duality of structure" in Giddens' theory, where agents (*santri* or alumni) are not only controlled by the structure (*pesantren* rules) but also actively reproduce that structure through continuous dedication.[50]

4. Togetherness

The value of togetherness in the *pesantren* cannot be separated from the logic of collectivity that is the foundation of the traditional social system. *Santri* at Pesantren Dalwa live a communal life full of intensive interaction, creating a symbolic space rich with collective meaning. Within the symbolic interactionist framework, every action, such as sharing food, taking care of a sick friend, or studying in a group, is a social symbol that affirms the collective identity of the *pesantren* as a spiritual community space.

Togetherness also plays an important role as a "social therapy" in facing the psychological pressure of being away from family and the harsh *pesantren* routine.[51] The act of strengthening and sharing burdens among fellow *santri* creates a form of collective coping mechanism, which is not only pragmatic but also symbolic. This aligns with Blumer's concept of a "shared definition of the situation," where the meaning of a situation is socially and symbolically co-determined.[52] Togetherness in the *pesantren*'s world is not just a survival tactic but also an articulation of high moral solidarity.

5. Wisdom

The value of wisdom in symbolic interactionism is the pinnacle of the *santri*'s self-construction, which has gone through a long process of meaning internalization, symbolic dialogue, and role-taking. Wisdom is not merely knowledge but a deep understanding gained from active involvement in the *pesantren*'s social world. When *santri* are trained not to judge, to understand context, and to respond to conflicts calmly, they are essentially taking on the role of mature symbolic actors, both socially and spiritually. This value becomes a dominant symbol in attitudes of humility, modesty, and the courage to make decisions based on knowledge.

"*Abuya always teaches us not to judge others. If there's a problem, don't*

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[50] Muhammad Faris Fauzan and Muhammad Zikry Zikrulloh, "Pengaruh Teori Strukturisasi Dalam Kehidupan Sosial," *Gunung Djati Conference Series* 42 (2024): 332–39, https://conferences.uinsgd.ac.id/index.php/gdcs/article/view/2223.

[51] Muskinul Fuad, "Therapeutic Aspects in Shalawatan Tradition (An Ethnographic Study on Shalawatan Communities in Banyumas)," *Ijtimā Iyya Journal of Muslim Society Research* 2, no. 2 (2017): 171–94, https://doi.org/10.24090/ijtimaiyya.v2i2.1636.

[52] Zanki, "Teori Psikologi Dan Sosial Pendidikan (Teori Interaksi Simbolik)."

> *immediately judge, but first understand the context. We are taught to be human beings who are not only knowledgeable but also wise.*"

In this context, wisdom becomes the highest symbol that distinguishes a *santri* as a knowledgeable and virtuous person.[53] It is not born from memorization alone but from the practice of living together that forms ethical sensitivity. Wisdom also becomes a moral foundation for acting outside the *pesantren*. Thus, this value is a symbolic legacy that continues to be reproduced even after the *santri* leave the Dalwa environment. This value also shows that *santri* are not just students but also carriers of moral-spiritual symbols in the wider community.

CONCLUSION

These symbols create a unique and authentic social world for the *santri*, where the values of sincerity, purity of intent, dedication, togetherness, and wisdom are not just taught but are lived out in daily practice. These values become the main pillars that reproduce the *pesantren*'s social system from one generation to the next. The *santri* not only learn religious knowledge but also negotiate the meaning of life, social roles, and identity within the framework of the *pesantren*'s symbolic culture. Amidst the currents of modernization and the transformation of Islamic education systems, Pesantren Dalwa demonstrates remarkable cultural and spiritual resilience. This is because its social relationships are built not on formal contracts but on a deep symbolic bond between the *santri* and the leader. This interaction not only shapes the *pesantren*'s social structure but also plays a vital role in forming the *santri*'s "self" as a moral agent ready to bring the values of the *pesantren* into society.

Thus, this research not only enriches the study of the sociology of Islamic education but also makes an important contribution to understanding how institutions like *pesantren* remain relevant, alive, and thriving within a strong symbolic framework. Pesantren Dalwa, through its symbolic world, is proof that education is not just a matter of curriculum and methods but also a matter of meaning, relationships, and a legacy of values that are continuously reproduced in daily life.

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[53] Abdul Karim et al., "Altruistic Works, Religion, and Corruption: Kiais' Leadership to Shape Anti-Corruption Values in Pesantren," *Cogent Social Sciences* 9, no. 1 (2023): 2238968, https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2023.2238968.

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