

# Revitalizing Pesantren Education to Foster Religious Moderation in Indonesia

**Abdul Hadi**

As-Syafiiyah Islamic University, Jakarta, Indonesia

[abdulhadi.fai@uia.ac.id](mailto:abdulhadi.fai@uia.ac.id)

**Ishak Syairozi**

Jakarta Islamic University, Jakarta, Indonesia

[ishak@uid.ac.id](mailto:ishak@uid.ac.id)

**Marliza Oktapiani**

As-Syafiiyah Islamic University, Jakarta, Indonesia

[Marlizaoktapiani.fai@uia.ac.id](mailto:Marlizaoktapiani.fai@uia.ac.id)

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## Abstract

Pesantren education, as a cornerstone of Indonesia's educational system, plays a significant historical and cultural role in shaping religious understanding and national character. However, its role as an agent of change in promoting civility and humanity remains underexplored. This qualitative case study investigates how the transformation of pesantren education, particularly through curriculum integration, fosters religious moderation. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation at pesantren in West Java, Indonesia, and analyzed thematically. Findings reveal that the integration of national and local curricula significantly enhances students' moderate attitudes across four dimensions: national commitment, tolerance, anti-violence, and respect for local culture. This study contributes to understanding how pesantren can adapt to modern challenges by aligning traditional Islamic education with inclusive and pluralistic values, thus strengthening their role in creating a harmonious society.

**Keywords:** *transformation, integrated curriculum, religious moderation, pesantren*

## INTRODUCTION

Pesantren have long been important educational institutions in shaping character and religious understanding in Indonesia. As institutions deeply rooted in Islamic tradition, pesantren not only teach religious knowledge but also play a

significant role in forming social and cultural values among students and the surrounding community.<sup>1</sup> However, with the rapid development of the times and social changes, pesantren face the challenge of adapting and transforming to remain relevant in a modern context. Amid increasingly complex global dynamics, the importance of religious moderation becomes more apparent. Religious moderation, or wasathiyah, refers to an approach that emphasizes principles of balance, tolerance, and inclusive understanding in religious practice.<sup>2</sup> This approach is considered a solution to address extremism and radicalization often arising from narrow and rigid religious interpretations.

Transforming pesantren education is a strategic starting point for achieving religious moderation. This process involves adjusting the curriculum to support more inclusive learning oriented towards national and diversity values. This approach is expected to produce a generation that not only has a deep religious understanding but also contributes positively to a pluralistic society. In this context, it is important to explore how the transformation of pesantren education can be effectively implemented to support religious moderation. This includes assessing the challenges faced, identifying successful practices, and formulating strategies that can be widely adopted to create adaptive, inclusive, and moderate pesantren.<sup>3</sup>

This study will discuss the transformation of pesantren education in terms of curriculum development, which collaborates between national and local curricula. Through this analysis, it is hoped to provide clear answers to the following question: How can pesantren with an integrated curriculum that combines national and local curricula contribute to the formation of a harmonious and tolerant society in the modern era?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Transformation of Pesantren Education

Pesantren is derived from the word "santri" with the affix "pe" and "an," and the pronunciation of "an" has changed to "en," resulting in "pesantren," which means a boarding house or dormitory. The term "santri" itself comes from "cantrik," which refers to a disciple of a sage who typically lives in a place called a "padepokan". In the Indonesian Dictionary, it is defined as (1) a person who studies Islam; (2) someone who is earnest in performing worship; (3) someone who studies deeply at a place far away like a pesantren, among others. Pesantren shares similarities with "padepokan" in

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<sup>1</sup> Abdul Hadi, "Membangun Pengetahuan dan Kreativitas," *Al-Risalah* 10, no. 2 (9 Agustus 2019): 128–44, <https://doi.org/10.34005/alrisalah.v10i2.408>.

<sup>2</sup> Zakariyah Zakariyah, Umu Fauziyah, dan Muhammad Maulana Nur Kholis, "Strengthening the Value of Religious Moderation in Islamic Boarding Schools," *Tafkir: Interdisciplinary Journal of Islamic Education* 3, no. 1 (29 Januari 2022): 76, <https://doi.org/10.31538/tijie.v3i1.104>.

<sup>3</sup> Abdurrohman Abdurrohman dan Huldya Syamsiar, "Pembelajaran Pendidikan Agama Islam (PAI) Model Keberagamaan Inklusif untuk Mencegah Radikalisme Beragama Dikalangan Siswa SMA," *FENOMENA* 9, no. 1 (1 Juni 2017): 100, <https://doi.org/10.21093/fj.v9i1.789>.

terms of having students and teachers, buildings, and learning activities. (Arif Setyawan, 2019) In Javanese, Sundanese, and Madurese traditions, the term "pondok pesantren" is commonly used, whereas in Aceh it is known as "dayah" or "rangkang atu neunasa," and in Minangkabau, it is referred to as "Surau".<sup>4</sup>

Pondok pesantren is typically known as a religious educational institution with a non-classical learning system, where the kiai (Islamic scholar) teaches religious knowledge using classical texts written by scholars from the medieval period, and students reside in the pesantren dormitories. The primary influence of pesantren on community life lies in the interactions that transcend various social barriers, with mutual relationships between pesantren and society. Pesantren guides spiritual and ritual worship and handles civil matters such as marriage and inheritance, while society provides financial support through charity collection and other means.<sup>5</sup>

Improving education in Indonesia towards better outcomes is a priority for all parties involved in education, particularly the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (Kemendikbudristek) and the Ministry of Religious Affairs (Kemenag). The most fundamental change is seen in the shift from previous curricula to the "Kurikulum Merdeka Belajar" (Freedom Curriculum). Educational transformation refers to significant changes in the education system, including curriculum, teaching methods, and management. According to (Fullan, Michael, 2001) educational transformation involves deep and comprehensive changes in educational practices aimed at enhancing the quality and relevance of education. In the context of pesantren, educational transformation involves adjusting the curriculum from focusing solely on traditional religious education to integrating national values and religious moderation. This aligns with the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs' policy emphasizing the importance of strengthening religious moderation through digital transformation, revitalizing Religious Affairs Offices (KUA), and enhancing pesantren autonomy.<sup>6</sup>

Religious moderation, or wasathiyah, is an approach to religion that emphasizes balance, tolerance, and inclusive attitudes in religious practice. According to religious moderation<sup>7</sup> is a response to extremism and radicalization arising from narrow religious interpretations. Religious moderation encourages acceptance of diversity and interfaith dialogue while avoiding intolerant and exclusive attitudes. Moderation is a

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<sup>4</sup> Faris Khoirul Anam, Moh. Padil, dan Mokhammad Yahya, "Building Ahlus-Sunnah wal-Jamaah an-Nahdliyah Character as the Pillar of Islamic Moderation in Islamic Boarding School," *Buletin Al-Turas* 27, no. 2 (31 Juli 2021): 249–64, <https://doi.org/10.15408/bat.v27i2.20062>.

<sup>5</sup> Umma Farida, "Radikalisme, Moderatisme, Dan Liberalisme Pesantren: Melacak Pemikiran Dan Gerakan Keagamaan Pesantren Di Era Globalisasi," *Edukasia: Jurnal Penelitian Pendidikan Islam* 10, no. 1 (27 Maret 2015), <https://doi.org/10.21043/edukasia.v10i1.789>.

<sup>6</sup> Irwan Fathurrochman, Dina Hajja Ristianti, dan Mohamad Aziz Shah Bin Mohamed Arif, "Revitalization of Islamic Boarding School Management to Foster the Spirit of Islamic Moderation in Indonesia," *Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 8, no. 2 (13 Mei 2020): 239–58, <https://doi.org/10.14421/jpi.2019.82.239-258>.

<sup>7</sup> Abdul Hadi, Khalis Kohari, dan Ifham Choli, "Strengthening Moderation of Islamic Education to Overcome Terrorism," *International Journal of Emerging Issues in Islamic Studies* 3, no. 1 (31 Juli 2023): 12–20, <https://doi.org/10.31098/ijeis.v3i1.1237>.

term often present in Islamic thought, serving as a correction to the extreme interpretations of Islam. Discussing Islamic moderation involves examining both left-wing and right-wing extremist interpretations. Referring to the Quran, moderation is explicitly mentioned as "umat wasath," and while this is not debated among Islamic scholars, some small Islamic groups reject the term, arguing it is a negative Western concept intended to identify Muslims willing to submit to Western hegemony. The term "Islamic Moderation" is grounded in theological and ontological concepts.

Jack Seymour, in his book "Mapping Christian Education: Approaches to Congregational Learning," distinguishes between two models of religious education: (1) "In the Wall" education, which focuses solely on one religion without considering others, and (2) "At the Wall" education, which links one's religion with others and uses common terms in public or among adherents of other religions. This phase involves transforming beliefs by studying and appreciating other beliefs and engaging in dialogue with them.<sup>8</sup> Tabita K. Christiana extends this model with "Beyond the Wall" education, meaning applied religious education that helps learners live harmoniously with others despite differing beliefs, fostering peace, justice, and harmony

Pesantren, being a crucial part of religious education in Indonesia among academics and political and religious figures, continues to be a topic of ongoing discourse regarding its role in mainstreaming religious moderation in Indonesia and preventing the rise of radicalism and terrorism. Transformative pesantren, according to the researcher, could produce generations with intellectual, ritual, social capabilities, and the ability to collaborate across religions and cultures.

### Integrated Curriculum

The curriculum is a key component in educational institutions, and the outcomes depend on how the curriculum is designed for students. An integrated curriculum is a system that combines various disciplines or fields of study into a unified framework. The goal is to create a more comprehensive and relevant learning experience for students and to facilitate a better understanding of the relationships between different topics. Ahmad Tafsir recommends that the pesantren curriculum include aspects of spirituality, intellect, and physicality.<sup>9</sup> The subjects taught in pesantren include classical texts and are categorized into knowledge types such as (1) nahwu (syntax) and shorof (morphology), (2) fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence), (3) ushul fiqh (principles of Islamic jurisprudence), (4) hadith, (5) tafsir (Quranic exegesis), (6) tauhid (theology), (7) tasawuf (Sufism) and ethics, and other branches like history and balaghah (rhetoric).

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<sup>8</sup> Laily Fitriani, "Pendidikan Peace Building Di Pesantren: Sebuah Upaya Mencegah Radikalisasi," *ULUL ALBAB Jurnal Studi Islam* 16, no. 1 (10 September 2015): 117, <https://doi.org/10.18860/ua.v16i1.3011>.

<sup>9</sup> Masdar Hilmy, "Whither Indonesia's Islamic Moderatism? A Reexamination on the Moderate Vision of Muhammadiyah and NU," *JOURNAL OF INDONESIAN ISLAM* 7, no. 1 (1 Juni 2013): 90, <https://doi.org/10.15642/JIIS.2013.7.1.24-48>.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative approach with a case study design to explore the transformation of pesantren education in fostering religious moderation. The research focuses on several pesantren in West Java and Banten to capture the diversity and depth of practices within these institutions.

### Data Collection Techniques

**In-depth Interviews:** Conducted with key informants, including pesantren heads, teachers, students, and alumni. A total of 15 participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure their relevance to the study's objectives.

**Observations:** Direct observations of pesantren activities were carried out, focusing on classroom interactions, extracurricular activities, and daily routines that reflect the integration of the curriculum.

**Documentation:** Collected materials include curriculum documents, teaching materials, and policy guidelines related to pesantren education.

### Data Analysis

Data were analyzed thematically using the following steps:

**Coding:** Transcripts from interviews and observation notes were coded to identify key themes.

**Theme Identification:** Recurring patterns related to curriculum integration and its impact on religious moderation were categorized into four dimensions: national commitment, tolerance, anti-violence, and respect for local culture.

**Validation:** Data validity was ensured through method triangulation, comparing interview data with observations and documentation. Peer debriefing was also employed to refine the findings and interpretations.

### Reliability and Validity

To enhance reliability, all data were cross verified through multiple sources, and member checking was conducted by sharing initial findings with participants for feedback. Triangulation across methods (interviews, observations, and documentation) ensured comprehensive and credible insights.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The study highlights the importance of an integrated curriculum approach in building a more inclusive and harmonious society. Based on the collected and analyzed data, the study finds that pesantren education, which integrates national and local curricula, has a significant impact on students' moderate understanding and attitudes in four key aspects:

### National Commitment:

Santri demonstrate a high level of commitment to national values and the unity of the state. The integrated curriculum of pesantren helps to strengthen love for the homeland and an understanding of the importance of unity in a national context. According to the caretaker of Pesantren MBS Hadi Kusumo Banten, Drs. KH. Ahsin, MA, Allah says in Surah Al-Baqarah 2:30:

**"And (remember) when your Lord said to the angels, 'I am creating a khalifah on earth.'"**

The term "khalifah" should not be understood as a form of government but as the purpose of human creation. In addition to being servants of Allah, humans also have the obligation to be His representatives to protect and cultivate the earth. The commitment to the understanding of nationalism, as opposed to a caliphate, is clearly reflected in the integration of the national curriculum and the Al-Islam and Muhammadiyah curriculum<sup>10</sup>.

Drs. Hj. Nyai Badriyah Fayumi MA similarly emphasizes that the forms of state and caliphate are often contradictory, with various interpretations of a caliphate existing. The political discourse surrounding the caliphate in Islam is a reality that must be understood, but Indonesia's political decisions have already established their own consensus with the concept of a nation-state. The discourse on the caliphate represents a political jurisprudence that is distinct from Indonesia's strong and established political jurisprudence.<sup>11</sup>

Santri with this integrated curriculum do not advocate for a "caliphate" government system, as there is no specific form of state mentioned in the Qur'an or Hadith. Thus, state forms are merely human *ijtihad* that can vary from one place to another. Any system or form of governance can be accepted as long as the concepts of justice and Islamic democracy (*As-Syura*) are upheld.

Students/Santri exhibit a high level of commitment to national values and unity. The integrated curriculum helps strengthen their patriotism and understanding of the importance of national unity.

Regarding their attitude towards the nation, santri with the aforementioned integrated curriculum cultivate a love for both religion and the nation, which are inseparable. Religion and the nation are like two sides of a coin that complement each other, meaning that one's faith is incomplete if they only love their religion and vice versa. The nation is like a palace, and religion acts as its guardian, ensuring that it adheres to established rules. Santri are accustomed to flag ceremonies, and every event typically begins with a recitation of the Qur'an and the national anthem "Indonesia

<sup>10</sup> Hilmy, 100.

<sup>11</sup> Muhammad Arkhanul Khamsi dan Nur Asiah, "Pemikiran Pendidikan Islam Kontemporer Menurut Haji Abdul Malik Karim Amrullah (Hamka)," *Arfannur* 2, no. 2 (23 Desember 2021): 145, <https://doi.org/10.24260/arfannur.v2i2.462>.

Raya," indicating that there is no rejection of activities with national themes or religious nuances.

### **Tolerance:**

The education provided in pesantren, which combines national and local curricula, contributes to fostering a tolerant attitude among santri. They demonstrate a better ability to appreciate differences in religion, ethnicity, and culture, as well as to build harmonious relationships with other groups. This is based on religious teachings and the values of Pancasila, which do not condone intolerance due to differences in religion, ethnicity, or culture. As stated in Surah Al-Mumtahanah 60:8:

**"Allah does not forbid you from being good and acting justly toward those who do not fight you because of religion and do not expel you from your homes. Allah loves those who are just."**

According to Nyai Badriah Fayumi, as citizens of Indonesia, harmony among all religious elements must be maintained. Conflicts among these elements would negatively impact religious and national life. Progress in communal and religious life is hindered by conflict, which has detrimental effects on all faiths. Therefore, we are obligated to promote peace among citizens so that we can compete in goodness to build a peaceful Indonesia. This spirit of flexibility and brotherhood has proven effective in driving out colonizers from the homeland. In the context of national jurisprudence, tolerance applies only to matters that do not relate to doctrinal issues, and it is not meant to imply religious pluralism that suggests all religions are correct in the eyes of Allah. The tolerance encouraged relates to social and cultural issues, ensuring that there is no discrimination against those who differ from us<sup>12</sup>

### **Anti-Violence:**

Students of Pesantren become more aware and reject violence as a solution to differences or conflicts. The integrated curriculum helps them understand the importance of resolving conflicts peacefully and constructively. Frequently, the attitudes and violent actions of certain groups justify themselves using Surah Al-Fath 48:29:

**"Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah, and those who are with him are severe against the disbelievers and merciful among themselves. You see them bowing and prostrating, seeking bounty from Allah and His pleasure."**

To understand this verse, it cannot be isolated from the context of the entire chapter, which discusses the Treaty of Hudaibiyyah between the Prophet and the polytheists to avoid escalating tensions. This verse was revealed during a time of strained relations between Muslims and polytheists. However, in a state of peace, acts

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<sup>12</sup> Ulya Ulya, "Nyai Badriyah Fayumi : Mufassir Perempuan Otoritatif Pejuang Kesetaraan dan Moderasi di Indonesia," *HERMENEUTIK* 12, no. 2 (12 Desember 2018): 66, <https://doi.org/10.21043/hermeneutik.v12i2.6150>.  
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of violence against non-Muslims are not justified.<sup>13</sup> Islam, with its primary mission as a religion of *Rahmatan Lil'alamin* (mercy for all), does not condone anarchic behavior towards humanity and rejects barbaric actions such as killing individuals for their beliefs, insulting the sanctity of other religions, or damaging their places of worship.

### **Respect for Local Culture:**

Islam can engage in dialogue with the diverse cultures created by Allah, so cultures that do not contradict Islamic teachings can be seen as forms of the actualization of Islamic principles in a local context. According to Nyai Badriyah, tradition serves as the infrastructure of religion. Islam does not only introduce novelty but also adopts cultures that have already been ingrained in pre-Islamic Arab traditions. For example, Aqiqah was an Arab custom before Islam, performed as a form of gratitude for having a son and not for daughters. At that time, the blood of the sacrificed animal was applied to the child's face as a symbol for them to become a warrior.

When Islam arrived, this tradition was adopted but its meaning was modified to convey that Aqiqah is a form of gratitude for the presence of both sons and daughters. With a curriculum that integrates local elements and the national curriculum, santri are more likely to appreciate and preserve local culture while demonstrating a more open attitude and respect for local traditions. The curriculum that combines local and national elements strengthens their awareness of the values of local culture.<sup>14</sup>

Students show greater appreciation and preservation of local culture, demonstrating more openness and respect for local traditions. The curriculum that combines local and national elements enhances their awareness of local cultural values.

Overall, these findings affirm that the integration of national and local curricula in pesantren education plays a crucial role in shaping moderate attitudes and broader understanding among students.

## **CONCLUSION AND FURTHER RESEARCH**

Pesantren education that implements an integrated curriculum combining national and local elements has a significant positive impact on students' moderate attitudes. This curriculum integration effectively enhances national commitment, strengthens tolerance, fosters anti-violence attitudes, and supports appreciation for local culture.

Therefore, pesantren education that merges national and local elements not only enriches students' knowledge but also shapes their character to be more moderate and adaptive to diversity as well as national and cultural values. For research extend is suggested as follows:

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<sup>13</sup> Sidiq Ahmadi, "Perjanjian Hudaibiyah Sebagai Model Kepatuhan Terhadap Perjanjian Internasional Dalam Perspektif Islam," *Jurnal Hubungan Internasional* 4, no. 2 (2015): 85, <https://doi.org/10.18196/hi.2015.0076.162-170>.

<sup>14</sup> Ulya, "Nyai Badriyah Fayumi," 22.



**Exploring the Impact of Integrated Curriculum on Students' Adaptability in the Digital Era:** Future research could explore the effects of the integrated curriculum on other aspects of students' development, such as adaptability to global changes, mental well-being, and leadership skills. This could provide a more comprehensive picture of the benefits of pesantren education with an integrated curriculum.

**Comparing Pesantren with Manual and Integrated Curricula:** Conduct a comparative study between pesantren that adopt national and local curricula and those that follow either the national or local curriculum separately. This could help identify which curriculum elements most significantly influence students' moderate attitudes.

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