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Ulama Regeneration through *Tafaqquh fi al-Din* in *Pesantren* Education

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Abstract

Ulama regeneration through *pesantren* education has become a strategic agenda in responding to the crisis of religious authority and the challenges of the modern era. This study explores the model of ulama cadre development within the *tafaqquh fi al-din* framework in two *pesantren* in Indonesia, focusing on epistemological reconstruction, curriculum innovation, technology integration, and structural and cultural barriers. The research method used is a qualitative approach with a case study design. Data collection techniques include participant observation, in-depth interviews at *Pesantren* Gubuk Taqrib and *Pesantren* Nurul Falah in Bojonegoro, and document analysis, which were analyzed thematically. The results show that the concept of *tafaqquh fi al-din* has expanded its meaning from mere mastery of texts to the ability to contextualize religious knowledge with contemporary social realities. Curriculum innovation combines traditional methods such as *sorogan* and *halaqah* with modern pedagogical approaches such as project-based learning and scientific debate. *Pesantren* also utilizes digital technology to expand the reach of da'wah and strengthen Islamic literacy. However, challenges such as the perceived decline in the prestige of ulama, unclear state policies regarding *pesantren*, and a tendency toward epistemic closure hinder regeneration. This study emphasizes the importance of a new, post-traditional model of ulama: rooted in tradition, open to change, and capable of leading in a complex and pluralistic society.

Keywords: Islamic Education; *Tafaqquh fi al-Din*; Technological Adaptation; Ulama Regeneration.

Abstrak

Regenerasi ulama melalui pendidikan pesantren menjadi agenda strategis dalam merespons krisis otoritas keagamaan dan tantangan zaman modern. Penelitian ini bertujuan mengeksplorasi model pengkaderan ulama dalam kerangka tafaqquh fi al-din *di tiga pesantren terkemuka di Indonesia, dengan fokus pada rekonstruksi epistemologis, inovasi kurikulum, integrasi teknologi, serta hambatan struktural dan kultural. Metode penelitian yang digunakan adalah pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain studi kasus. Teknik pengumpulan data meliputi observasi partisipatif, wawancara mendalam di Pesantren Gubuk Taqrib dan Pesantren Nurul Falah di Bojonegoro dan analisis dokumen, yang dianalisis secara tematik. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa konsep* tafaqquh fi al-din *mengalami perluasan makna dari sekadar penguasaan teks ke kemampuan kontekstualisasi ilmu agama dengan realitas sosial kontemporer. Inovasi kurikulum dilakukan dengan menggabungkan metode tradisional seperti* sorogan *dan* halaqah *dengan pendekatan pedagogis modern seperti pembelajaran berbasis proyek dan debat ilmiah. Pesantren juga memanfaatkan teknologi digital sebagai sarana memperluas jangkauan dakwah dan memperkuat literasi keislaman. Namun, tantangan seperti persepsi penurunan prestise ulama, ketidakjelasan kebijakan negara terhadap pesantren, dan kecenderungan penutupan epistemik menjadi hambatan regenerasi. Studi ini menegaskan pentingnya model ulama baru yang bersifat post-tradisional: berakar dalam tradisi, terbuka pada perubahan, dan mampu memimpin dalam masyarakat yang kompleks dan plural.*

Kata Kunci: *Adaptasi Teknologi, Pendidikan Islam; Regenerasi Ulama; Tafaqquh fi al-Din.*

INTRODUCTION

The regeneration of Islamic scholars (*ulama*) is a crucial and strategic endeavor for sustaining the intellectual and spiritual leadership within the Muslim ummah. In the Indonesian context, *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools) have played a pivotal role in nurturing scholars with deep religious understanding (*tafaqquh fi al-din*), rooted in classical Islamic sciences and ethical-spiritual formation. This concept, which originates from the Qur'anic command *"Falawla nafara min kulli firqatin minhum ta'ifatun liyatafaqquh fi al-din"* (QS. At-Tawbah: 122), underpins the epistemological and institutional foundation of *ulama* formation in *pesantren*.[1] This foundational verse underscores the cognitive depth and the communal responsibility of religious scholars.

In Indonesia, *pesantren* are the most enduring and organic institutions for *ulama* formation. With their roots extending back to the 17th century, *pesantren* have provided a localized and culturally embedded framework for Islamic learning.[2] These institutions rely on a pedagogical triad: the personal mentorship of the *kiai* (religious leader), the transmission of *turath* (classical texts), and the immersive learning environment of *halaqah* and *bandongan*. In this context, *tafaqquh fi al-din* is not merely academic, but a holistic process encompassing intellectual, spiritual, and moral cultivation.[3]

However, the dynamics of the contemporary era, marked by digital disruption, religious extremism, commodification of Islamic knowledge, and a decline in interest among youth toward pursuing religious scholarship, pose serious challenges to *pesantren* as centers of *ulama* regeneration.[4] While traditional methods such as *sorogan*, *bandongan*, and *halaqah* remain essential, they often do not respond to current epistemological and pedagogical shifts. Moreover, *pesantren* face pressure to integrate formal education systems, digital media, and societal demands without compromising their identity and mission.[5]

Traditional pedagogies, while foundational, are often insufficient to address contemporary epistemological shifts. The *sorogan* (individual recitation), *bandongan* (collective reading), and *halaqah* (discussion circle) models continue to be valuable but are increasingly pressured to adapt. For instance, they lack structured assessments, are not integrated with

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[1] Azyumardi Azra, *Islam Nusantara: Jaringan Global Dan Lokal* (Mizan, 2006).

[2] Lukman Hakim, "Pesantren as the Identity of Islamic and Cultural Education in West Java," *AL-ISHLAH: Jurnal Pendidikan* 15, no. 4 (2023): 4578–86, https://doi.org/10.35445/alishlah.v15i4.3369.

[3] Jemeela Jalaldeen and Dawood Al-Hidabi, "Al-Ghazali's Framework of Teachings Professional Values: Analyzing the Pedagogical Principles in Islamic Education," *Al-Burhan Journal of Qur'ān and Sunnah Studies* 9, no. 1 (2025): 27–46, https://doi.org/10.31436/alburhn.v9i1.363; Kusaufan Kusaufan, "Reinterpreting Classical Theological Foundations: Modern Approaches to Usul al-Din in Islamic Scholarship," *The Journal of Academic Science* 2, no. 2 (2025): 522–31, https://doi.org/10.59613/qth1yy76.

[4] Dairina Yusri et al., "Minimizing the Scarcity of Ulama in The Disruption Era: Existence and Strategy of Islamic Higher Education Institutions in Preparing Ulama," *Al-Fikru: Jurnal Ilmiah* 18, no. 1 (2024): 80–100, https://doi.org/10.51672/alfikru.v18i1.141; Zainal Berlian, "MABIT Program as a Cadreization of Ulama in Pesantren: Study of Management," *Ta'dib: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 27, no. 1 (2022): 15–27, https://doi.org/10.19109/td.v27i1.13410.

[5] Asep Muizudin Muhamad Darmini, "Internet and the Public Sphere in the Indonesian Islamic Boarding Schools (Pondok Pesantren) : Power, Piety, and the Popular" (phd, University of Warwick, 2021), http://webcat.warwick.ac.uk/record=b3755522; Suwendi Suwendi et al., "Roles and Challenges of Pesantren Intellectual Networks," *Jurnal Ilmiah Islam Futura* 24, no. 2 (2024): 453–70, https://doi.org/10.22373/jiif.v24i2.23134; Florian Pohl, "Islamic Education and Civil Society: Reflections on the Pesantren Tradition in Contemporary Indonesia," *Comparative Education Review* 50, no. 3 (2006): 389–409, https://doi.org/10.1086/503882; Dodik Harnadi et al., "Pesantren and the Preservation of Traditional Religious Authority in the Digital Age," *Masyarakat, Kebudayaan Dan Politik* 34, no. 3 (2021): 272–80, https://doi.org/10.20473/mkp.V34I32021.272-280.

broader academic disciplines, and seldom incorporate digital or analytical tools.[6] Meanwhile, the Indonesian government's push to formalize Islamic education through the *Pesantren Law* (UU No. 18/2019) brings both opportunities and tensions. While it offers institutional support, it challenges the *pesantren's* autonomy and unique epistemology.

Despite these tensions, *pesantren* have shown adaptive resilience. Many have begun integrating modern disciplines such as sociology, environmental ethics, and Islamic economics into their curriculum. Others are experimenting with digital technology, using digital platforms to extend scholarly authority through online lectures, social media da'wah, and interactive applications for *kitab kuning* learning.[7] This transformation is particularly evident in *pesantren*, which have embraced the *maqasid al-shari'ah* approach,[8] prioritizing ethical objectives and public welfare over textual literalism.[9] This way, *tafaqquh fi al-din* is reimagined as both tradition-bound and future-oriented.

Nonetheless, there remains a research gap in understanding how *pesantren* reconcile the epistemic foundations of *tafaqquh fi al-din* with modern educational demands. Much of the existing literature focuses on institutional transitions, such as the introduction of formal accreditation or state funding, without analyzing the underlying shifts in knowledge production and scholarly identity.[10] There is little systematic investigation into how *pesantren* frame their pedagogical innovations within Islamic intellectual frameworks, nor how they define the qualifications of a contemporary *alim*.

Recent studies have addressed the transformation of *pesantren* in facing modernization.[11] Yet few have specifically explored how these institutions develop sustainable *tafaqquh fi al-din*-oriented *ulama* regeneration strategies in response to contemporary challenges. Many focus on the formal institutionalization of *pesantren*,[12] or their digital adaptation,[13] but rarely delve into the epistemological continuity of *tafaqquh fi al-din* and its relevance in Today's pluralistic and globalized society.

This study seeks to fill that gap by investigating the models, strategies, and innovations in *ulama* regeneration undertaken by selected *pesantren* in East Java, which have a strong tradition in classical Islamic sciences yet actively engage with modern pedagogical approaches. The research also examines how *pesantren* maintain their epistemological integrity while adopting

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[6] Amin Abdullah, "Dimensi Epistemologis-Metodologis Pendidikan Islam," *Jurnal Filsafat* 1, no. 1 (2007): 9–18, https://doi.org/10.22146/jf.31567.

[7] Z. Muttaqin, "The Ngaji Online: Transforming Islamic Learning for Moslem Communities in the Digital Age," paper presented at Proceedings of the 19th Annual International Conference on Islamic Studies, AICIS 2019, 1-4 October 2019, Jakarta, Indonesia, February 4, 2020, https://eudl.eu/doi/10.4108/eai.1-10-2019.2291734; Mahmud Yunus Mustofa et al., *Hybrid Pesantren in Indonesia; Analyzing the Transformation of Islamic Religious Education in the Digital Age | Al-Tadzkiyyah: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam*, October 3, 2023, https://ejournal.radenintan.ac.id/index.php/tadzkiyyah/article/view/16928.

[8] Saiful Jazil et al., "Pesantren and the Economic Development in the Perspective of Maqashid Al-Shari'ah," *Jurnal Pendidikan Agama Islam (Journal of Islamic Education Studies)* 9, no. 1 (2021): 83–102, https://doi.org/10.15642/jpai.2021.9.1.83-102.

[9] Ali Muhdi Ali and Fachrizal Halim, "The Role of Pesantren and Its Literacy Culture in Strengthening Moderate Islam in Indonesia," *Edukasia Islamika* 8, no. 2 (2023): 205–26, https://doi.org/10.28918/jei.v8i2.1729.

[10] Nurcholish Majid, *Bilik-bilik Pesantren: Sebuah Potret Perjalanan* (Paramadina, 1997).

[11] Mutammam et al., "Adaptation and Transformation of Pesantren Education in Facing The Era of Muslim Society 5.0," *Nazhruna: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 7, no. 3 (2024): 705–26, https://doi.org/10.31538/nzh.v7i3.114.

[12] M. Ali Sibram Malisi et al., "Institutionalizing Educational Reform: Balancing Tradition And Modernity at Pesantren," *Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 10, no. 2 (2024): 363–74, https://doi.org/10.15575/jpi.v10i2.24636.

[13] Muhamad Arif et al., "The Existence of Madrasah Ibtidaiyah Based on Pesantren: Challenges and Opportunities in The Digital Era," *Munaddhomah: Jurnal Manajemen Pendidikan Islam* 5, no. 4 (2024): 367–82, https://doi.org/10.31538/munaddhomah.v5i4.1401.

technology, responding to contemporary issues, and shaping leadership for the Muslim community in Indonesia and beyond.

Therefore, this research contributes to the academic discourse on Islamic education, particularly in preserving and revitalizing *tafaqquh fi al-din* through pesantren-based *ulama* regeneration. It also responds to the urgent call to reconstruct the Islamic scholarly tradition in an authentic, contextual, and transformative way. The novelty of this study lies in its focus on the intersection of tradition and innovation in *pesantren* education, offering insights into sustainable models for *ulama* development amid socio-religious transitions.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach with an exploratory case study design to investigate the implementation and development of *tafaqquh fi al-din*-oriented *ulama* regeneration in selected *pesantren*. This approach allows an in-depth understanding of the complex socio-religious phenomena within their contexts.[14] The research sites were two *pesantren* in East Java chosen through purposive sampling based on the criteria of (1) having a structured *ulama* regeneration program, (2) integrating classical Islamic texts (*kitab kuning*) and contemporary issues, and (3) adopting digital or pedagogical innovations.

Data was collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. Key informants included *kiai*, *pesantren* leaders, senior teachers, and advanced students actively involved in the regeneration program. Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia and Javanese. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Observations were performed over 3 months (February–April 2025) with field notes documenting classroom dynamics, interactional patterns, and pedagogical content. Documents were collected through both public sources and internal *pesantren* records. There are five informants in this study: *Kiai at Pesantren Gubuk Taqrib, curriculum developer at Pesantren Gubuk Taqrib, senior female teacher of Pondok Pesantren Nurul Falah, final-year student of Pondok Pesantren Nurul Falah, and Pesantren Leader of Pondok Pesantren Nurul Falah.*

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis.[15] This process involved three stages: (1) initial coding to categorize recurring concepts, (2) axial coding to identify interrelationships among pedagogical, epistemological, and technological elements, and (3) selective coding to synthesize key themes that aligned with the research objectives. Triangulation across data sources and methods was employed to increase validity and reliability, along with member checking by returning summaries of interpretations to participants for feedback and verification. This study's triangulated and grounded design supports a nuanced and credible understanding of how *pesantren* function as contemporary spaces for intellectual, spiritual, and ethical leadership development.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Reconstructing *Tafaqquh Fi al-Din*: From Textual Mastery to Contextual Relevance

The regeneration of *ulama* in *pesantren* Today is not limited to the mere transmission of canonical texts (*turath*). Still, it involves a paradigm shift toward producing scholars capable of

[14] John W Creswell and J David Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 5th edition (Sage Publication, Inc, 2018).
[15] Matthew B. Miles and Michael Huberman, *An Expanded Sourcebook Qualitative Data Analysis* (Sage Publications, 1994).

engaging with contemporary epistemic challenges. That indicates that the concept of *tafaqquh fi al-din* is conceptualized not only as deep mastery of Islamic sciences but also as the ability to contextualize religious knowledge within the realities of the ummah. As per the interview results with the *kiai*,

> "For us, *tafaqquh fi al-din* is not just about memorizing texts. A true ulama must be able to contextualize classical teachings with the realities of Today's society. We now encourage our senior students to participate in social research, interfaith dialogue, and community development projects."

Moreover, a Senior Female Teacher from pesantren pointed out the significant progress in including female students, noting, *"In the past, female students were rarely prepared to become ulama. But now we intentionally include them in tafsir discussions, critical fiqh sessions, and even technology-based da'wah training. They need to be able to preach and lead, too, in their communities."* The pesantren's female leader also pointed out: *Leadership is part of our regeneration program. We assign santri to lead Friday discussions, manage pesantren finances, and organize social service projects. Knowledge without leadership and social sensitivity is incomplete."*

This finding confirms and extends Al-Attas' concept of *ta'dib*, the holistic integration of adab (ethics), knowledge, and action, as a basis for knowledge cultivation.[16] For example, students are no longer evaluated solely based on their ability to recite or comment on *kitab kuning* but on their public communication skills, critical thinking, and participation in community problem-solving. That aligns with Abdullah's transformative model of Islamic education, where epistemology is not a closed system but dialogues with social sciences, humanities, and lived experience.[17]

Moreover, the shift toward contextualization also indicates a departure from the dichotomy between *naqli* (transmitted) and *'aqli* (rational) sciences. *Pesantren* increasingly affirms the necessity of *ijtihad maqashidi* (higher objective-based reasoning) to solve modern dilemmas, from climate change to bioethics and interfaith tensions.[18] Thus, *tafaqquh fi al-din* is being redefined as an inward journey of spiritual depth and an outward capacity for societal relevance, marking a significant epistemological evolution from past generations of *ulama*.

Curricular and Pedagogical Innovations as Strategic Responses

A striking finding from the field is the deliberate reengineering of *pesantren* curricula to align classical Islamic knowledge with contemporary pedagogical tools. The *pesantren* examined combining *sorogan* and *halaqah* with project-based learning, seminars on global Islamic thought, and public da'wah campaigns. One *pesantren*, for instance, holds regular debates in Arabic and Indonesian on contemporary topics such as democracy, gender equity, and technological ethics, grounded in Islamic jurisprudential reasoning.

In modern Islamic education, the pedagogical emphasis is shifting away from a solely teacher-centered approach, with teachers (*kiai*) now serving as facilitators of inquiry rather than just unilateral transmitters of knowledge. As one curriculum developer from *pesantren* emphasized:

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[16] Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, *Islām and Secularism* (International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization, 1993).

[17] Abdullah, "Dimensi Epistemologis-Metodologis Pendidikan Islam."

[18] Anna M. Gade, "Islam and the Environment: Pluralism and Development," in *Muslim Environmentalisms: Religious and Social Foundations* (Columbia University Press, 2019), https://www.degruyterbrill.com/document/doi/10.7312/gade19104-003/html.

> "We still teach *kitab kuning*, but combine it with contemporary Islamic thought and current affairs. Students must relate what they learned from *Fathul Mu'in* weekly to modern issues, like the environmental crisis or digital ethics. This way, their religious knowledge is not isolated from the world."

It resonates with the term "neo-traditionalism," where *pesantren* refuse to abandon the traditional corpus but creatively repackage it for modern sensibilities.[19] Importantly, this approach resists the binary framing of 'traditional' vs 'modern'; instead, it forges a third path, a hybrid epistemology, where sacred knowledge informs real-world action and is simultaneously interrogated through a critical, reflective lens.

This innovative approach ensures that religious teachings are relevant and applicable to contemporary societal challenges. It resonates with Vygotsky's socio-constructivist theory[20] and Freire's concept of dialogical pedagogy.[21] In this way, the *ulama* regeneration process sustains authority and decentralizes knowledge, allowing *santri* to become co-constructors of meaning within their interpretive tradition.

Digitalization as Expansion, Not Erosion, of Tradition

Integrating digital platforms into *tafaqquh fi al-din*, though initially resisted by some *pesantren*, has become essential to *ulama* regeneration. This study found that the *pesantren* utilized technology in three strategic ways: (1) archiving classical texts and lectures, (2) expanding outreach via social media da'wah, and (3) creating interactive virtual learning environments. A final-year student of *pesantren* emphasized this shift, stating, *"In our pesantren, we don't just learn fiqh and Arabic grammar. We also have media classes where we produce Islamic content for YouTube and Instagram. It's part of our da'wah training. Our ustadh said, 'Today's ulama must speak the language of the people, including digital language."*

Such uses illustrate a form of technological adaptation, whereby technology is not merely instrumental but becomes part of the interpretive ecosystem of Islamic learning. That aligns with research results, wherein digital media are used not to dilute religious authority but to extend its reach.[22] By curating content on YouTube, Instagram, and Islamic learning apps, *pesantren* are cultivating a new generation of ulama who are digitally fluent and media-savvy without losing scholarly depth. However, this transformation also introduces tensions, particularly the risk of performative religiosity or populist da'wah that lacks epistemological grounding. As such, *pesantren* must maintain rigorous quality control over digital content to protect the *tafaqquh* ethos from being reduced to infotainment.

Structural and Cultural Constraints in Ulama Formation

Despite these innovations, the study identifies persistent structural and cultural challenges that threaten the sustainability of *ulama* regeneration. Economically, many students opt for formal universities or quick employment over the long, rigorous formation required by *pesantren*.

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[19] Faizal Amin, "The Typologies of Islamic Thought: Mapping The Contemporary Intellectual Movements in Indonesia," *Jurnal Theologia* 35, no. 1 (2024): 15–38, https://doi.org/10.21580/teo.2024.35.1.19551.

[20] L. Semenovich Vygotsky, *Mind in Society: Development of Higher Psychological Processes* (Harvard University Press, 1978).

[21] Paulo Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness* (Continuum, 1973).

[22] Arnis Rachmadhani, "Otoritas Keagamaan Di Era Media Baru: Dakwah Gusmus Di Media Sosial," *Panangkaran: Jurnal Penelitian Agama Dan Masyarakat* 5, no. 2 (2021): 150–69, https://doi.org/10.14421/panangkaran.v5i2.2636; Mutammam et al., "Adaptation and Transformation of Pesantren Education in Facing The Era of Muslim Society 5.0."

Socially, there is a growing perception that *ulama* are less influential compared to professionals or technocrats, leading to a decline in the prestige of religious scholarship.

Institutionally, *pesantren* face regulatory ambiguity despite the *Pesantren* Law (UU No. 18/2019). Many *pesantren* struggle to access government support due to bureaucratic barriers and the risk of compromising autonomy. These issues confirm earlier concerns that Rohman (2022) raised, who emphasized the need for state-*pesantren* synergy without co-optation.

Moreover, there is an internal challenge of *epistemic closure*, where some *pesantren* resist critical thinking or interdisciplinary engagement for fear of doctrinal deviation. This mindset can hinder the emergence of *ulama*, who can lead in complex, plural societies. To overcome this, *pesantren* must embrace a critical pedagogy and conserve theological integrity while encouraging intellectual openness.[23]

Synthesis: The New Archetype of the Ulama

This study reveals a new archetype of the Indonesian *ulama* emerging from *pesantren*: a scholar rooted in classical sources, skilled in contemporary discourses, equipped with technological tools, and committed to ethical leadership. This model deviates from the binary tropes of 'traditionalist' vs 'modernist', offering instead a *post-traditional* synthesis uniquely grounded in local wisdom yet globally relevant. Such a model holds promise for Indonesia and Muslim societies globally, particularly in contexts where Islamic scholarship faces relevance, legitimacy, or fragmentation crises. Thus, pesantren remain a heritage institution and a dynamic laboratory for Islamic intellectual revival.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights a new archetype of ulama that bridges traditionalism and modernism, combining mastery of Islamic classical texts with critical engagement in contemporary contexts. The evolution of *tafaqquh fi al-din* represents a creative re-actualization of tradition, affirming the need for dynamic scholarship to maintain authority. The model of ulama is evolving within Islamic education, emphasizing ethical reasoning and socio-political awareness alongside traditional textual studies. Incorporating *maqasid al-shari'ah* into project-based pedagogy allows students to connect Islamic values with modern challenges, producing scholars who are not only theologians but also community leaders and public intellectuals.

Sustaining this model requires structural support such as policy reform and funding and cultural efforts to value the ulama profession among youth. The regeneration of ulama through *pesantren* presents an opportunity to reconcile religious authenticity with contemporary relevance, making them key figures in shaping the future of the Muslim community. It underscores the necessity for longitudinal studies assessing the impact of policy reforms and funding mechanisms on the effectiveness of *pesantren* in cultivating young ulama. Qualitative research should explore youth perceptions of the ulama profession and how cultural narratives can be reframed to elevate its value. Additionally, comparative studies across regions or countries may offer insights into best practices for aligning traditional religious leadership with contemporary societal challenges, thereby informing strategies for sustainable development within the Muslim community.

[23] Muhamad Yasin and Muhammad Khasbulloh, "Constructing Ethical Critical Thinking at Pesantren," *Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 8 (December 2022): 127–44, https://doi.org/10.15575/jpi.v8i2.19028.

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