

From Religious Authority to Economic Actor: Exploring the Kiai's Strategic Role in the Economic Empowerment of *Pesantren* Communities

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Abstract:

This study aims to reveal the strategic role of the kiai in developing and managing community-based economic activities within Islamic boarding schools. Previous research has predominantly emphasized the religious aspects of *pesantren*, leaving a gap in understanding the role of the kiai as a driver of community-based economic development. The study employs a descriptive qualitative approach, with data collected through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and document analysis. Data were analyzed thematically through stages of reduction, categorization, and interpretation to achieve a comprehensive understanding. The findings reveal a significant transformation in the role of the kiai from being solely a religious authority to becoming an economic actor who integrates spiritual values with modern management principles. Leadership strategies include optimizing local potential such as productive land, the labor of students, and social networks; establishing clear role distributions within organizational structures; and engaging both students and the community in all stages of the value chain, from planning to distribution. This model not only fosters the economic independence of the *pesantren* but also strengthens its social function as a center for community empowerment. The synergy between religious values and managerial strategies creates a sustainable and inclusive business ecosystem deeply rooted in local culture. These findings highlight the great potential of *pesantren* as drivers of community-based economic development that is both productive and morally grounded.

Keywords: *Kiai, Economic Empowerment, Economic Self-sufficiency*

Abstrak:

Penelitian ini bertujuan mengungkap peran strategis kiai dalam mengembangkan dan mengelola kegiatan ekonomi berbasis komunitas di pesantren. Selama ini kajian tentang *pesantren* lebih menekankan aspek keagamaan, sehingga masih terdapat kesenjangan dalam memahami peran kiai sebagai motor penggerak ekonomi berbasis masyarakat. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif dengan pengumpulan data melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi partisipatif, dan analisis dokumentasi. Data dianalisis secara tematik melalui tahapan reduksi, kategorisasi, dan interpretasi untuk memperoleh pemahaman yang komprehensif. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan adanya transformasi signifikan peran kiai, dari otoritas keagamaan murni menjadi aktor ekonomi yang memadukan nilai-nilai spiritual dengan prinsip manajemen modern. Strategi kepemimpinan yang diterapkan meliputi optimalisasi potensi lokal seperti lahan produktif, tenaga kerja santri, dan jaringan sosial; pembagian peran yang jelas dalam struktur organisasi; serta pelibatan aktif santri dan masyarakat dalam seluruh rantai nilai usaha produktif, mulai dari perencanaan hingga distribusi. Model ini tidak hanya mendorong kemandirian ekonomi pesantren, tetapi juga memperkuat fungsi sosialnya sebagai pusat pemberdayaan masyarakat. Sinergi antara nilai agama dan strategi manajerial membentuk ekosistem usaha yang berkelanjutan, adaptif terhadap perubahan pasar, serta berakar kuat pada budaya lokal. Temuan ini menegaskan potensi besar pesantren sebagai motor penggerak pembangunan

ekonomi berbasis komunitas yang produktif, inklusif, dan bernilai moral.
Kata Kunci: *Kiai, Pemberdayaan Ekonomi, Kemandirian Ekonomi*

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INTRODUCTION

Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) in Indonesia have significant potential to serve as centers for local economic empowerment, functioning not only as religious educational institutions. This potential is evident from the institutional capacity of *pesantren* to mobilize human resources, social networks, and cultural capital. However, the reality shows that most *pesantren* still rely on donations, waqf, or external institutional assistance, meaning that full economic independence has not yet been achieved (Buanaputra et al., 2021; Insawan, 2023). This condition indicates a gap between the potential possessed and the optimal implementation of productive economic practices. Theoretically, functionalist structure literature emphasizes that religious institutions have a role in maintaining the socio-economic stability of society (Al Fozaie, 2023; Hariram et al., 2023). However, there is still no theoretical framework that specifically explains the role of the kiai as a driver of productive economic activity within the systematic and measurable institutional context of *pesantren*.

Several previous studies show that charismatic and democratic leadership of the kiai can enhance santri motivation in developing economic enterprises (Wakit et al., 2022; Dika Kurniawan et al. 2023). Entrepreneurship education and business training in *pesantren* have also been shown to contribute to improving operational independence (Rahmati et al., 2023; Irfan et al., 2024; Izzetillah et al., 2024; Zaki et al., 2022). Santri participation in *pesantren* cooperatives encourages the establishment of economic self-reliance, although challenges such as internal management and market competition remain significant barriers. On the other hand, entrepreneurship-based empowerment programs for *santri* have proven effective in developing economic skills and adaptive attitudes (Ghafar, M. 2023; Fatah et al., 2023). Nevertheless, most of these studies focus more on technical operational aspects and program implementation, with less attention given to the strategic dimension of the kiai's role as the principal architect of community-based *pesantren* economic models.

The scarcity of literature examining the integration of religious values, the spiritual authority of the kiai, and business strategies in managing *pesantren* business units indicates an academic gap that needs to be bridged. Previous studies have not comprehensively connected religious legitimacy with business management practices such as cooperatives, agribusiness, and *santri*-based industries. This results in a lack of both theoretical and empirical understanding of the mechanisms by which religious authority transforms into economic power. This potential is highly relevant in the context of community-based economic development in Indonesia, especially in *pesantren* that have alumni networks and strong ties with local communities. Therefore, this research positions the kiai as a strategic economic actor who designs

and manages community empowerment models that are independent, integrated, and sustainable.

This research is important because the transformation of the kiai's role from a moral figure to a strategic economic decision-maker has direct implications for business sustainability and the welfare of the *pesantren* community. The integration of religious values with modern management strategies can create a *pesantren* economic ecosystem that is productive, inclusive, and rooted in local culture. This model includes synergy among *pesantren*, *santri*, graduate, and the community in managing productive enterprises such as cooperatives, agribusiness, service businesses, and local sharia-based products (Wahono et al., 2023; Fitriyah, 2024). The religious legitimacy of the kiai strengthens public trust, facilitates the formation of distribution networks, and expands markets. The success of this approach depends on business continuity, community participation, and the strengthening of *santri* capacity as key economic actors.

This study aims to describe the patterns and strategies used by kiai in transforming religious authority into *pesantren* economic power. Specifically, it seeks to identify the mechanisms of interaction between kiai, *santri*, alumni, and the community in economic activities, including institutional structures, *santri* involvement, public-private alliances, and the use of *pesantren* social capital. Through case studies, this research will formulate a conceptual model of kiai transformation as an economic actor capable of integrating the values of moderate Islam with community empowerment. This model is expected to serve as both a theoretical and practical reference for other *pesantren* to build sustainable economic independence, while also strengthening their contribution to the socio-economic inclusion of the wider community (Ariatin et al., 2022; Subaidi et al., 2023; Dian et al., 2024; Bashith et al., 2025).

METHOD

This research originates from the phenomenon of the transformation of the kiai's role in Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*), where they function not only as religious authorities but also as economic actors contributing to community self-reliance and empowerment. This phenomenon is significant to study because *pesantren* possess a unique potential to integrate religious values with community-based entrepreneurial practices. The issue holds both social and academic relevance, as the leadership model of kiai in managing productive enterprises can serve as an inspiration for developing moral value based economic systems. This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach, as it is well-suited for understanding complex and context-rich social phenomena that require deep comprehension from the participants' perspectives. Such an approach enables the researcher to capture meanings constructed by participants rather than relying solely on numerical data. In this method, the researcher serves as the primary instrument, engaging directly in the field to collect, interpret, and make sense of the data (Creswell, J. W., & Poth, 2018).

The data sources for this research consist of the kiai as the primary decision-maker, business unit managers, *santri* (students) directly involved in production processes, and community members who interact with the *pesantren*'s economic activities. The research location was selected purposively, considering contextual relevance and the richness of the information that could be obtained. Ihya'us Sunnah

Al-Hasany Islamic Boarding School was chosen because it has developed productive enterprises, such as upstream-to-downstream robusta coffee cultivation, and has institutionalized entrepreneurial activities. Informants were selected based on their direct involvement and relevance to the pesantren's economic activities. This strategy ensured that the data collected were contextual, in-depth, and representative of the realities on the ground. Consequently, the data sources encompassed the perspectives of leaders, technical implementers, production actors, and direct beneficiaries, allowing the phenomenon to be described comprehensively.

Data were collected through three primary techniques: in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore participants' motivations, strategies, and experiences. Observations were used to directly examine production processes, task distribution, decision-making, and socio-economic interactions within the pesantren environment. Documentation included financial reports, organizational structures, business proposals, marketing brochures, and other records of economic activities. Data analysis was carried out through thematic analysis following the steps outlined by (Creswell, J. W., 2018) repeatedly reading the data, generating initial codes, grouping codes into themes, examining relationships among themes, and weaving them into a coherent narrative. Data validity was ensured through source and method triangulation, member checking, and prolonged engagement to achieve accurate understanding. The entire research process was systematically recorded in the form of an audit trail to guarantee transparency and accountability.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

The findings of this study show that the role of kiai in the context of *pesantren* is no longer limited to the traditional function of being a religious teacher and spiritual guide. This research reveals a significant transformation, in which the kiai actively serves as the main driving force in shaping the *pesantren's* economic direction, formulating long-term visions, and leading strategic decision-making. This is clearly reflected in the stance of KH. Imam Bukhori M.Pd, the caretaker of *Pondok Pesantren Ihya'us Sunnah Al-Hasany*, who emphasizes that every business step begins with a spiritual approach.

"Kopi Bikla started from the intention to channel blessings from the masyayikh (the teachers) into the business and struggles of the santri. The name 'Bikla' itself is an acronym for Barokah Ibrahimy Kopi Lereng Argopuro, which reflects two main philosophies: barokah or blessing, meaning the expectation that blessings will always accompany this business; and Kopi Lereng Argopuro, which shows local wisdom by utilizing the potential of local natural resources, namely coffee from the slopes of Argopuro," (IB).

This statement shows that spirituality is not positioned as a complement, but as the foundation of the entire business planning and management process. In this way, every business decision gains both moral legitimacy and spiritual strength that motivates all parties involved. Beyond a spiritual orientation, KH. Imam Bukhori also promotes the application of professional management in running *pesantren* business units. An organizational structure has been formed involving a General Manager, production manager, finance manager, and marketing manager. The presence of this

system proves that *pesantren* businesses can be managed in an Islamic yet efficient manner. With organized management, the *pesantren* functions not only as an educational institution but also as a business entity capable of competing in the modern market. The kiai stated:

"If everything is done alone, it won't be optimal. That's why I appointed a General Manager, there's a production manager, finance, marketing... each has their own tasks. But still, all major decisions we deliberate together," (IB).

This statement shows that the organizational structure implemented is not merely formal but functions effectively with a clear division of roles. Deliberation and prayer become the mechanisms for decision-making, ensuring that Islamic principles are upheld alongside modern management practices. Observations also revealed that the presence of professional management directly impacts productivity and smooth operations in *pesantren* businesses.

The development of Ihya'us Sunnah Al-Hasany's Islamic Boarding School's enterprises focuses on the local potential of its surrounding environment. Economic units such as Bikla Coffee, handicraft, livestock, and religious tourism are built by utilizing available natural resources, local wisdom, and the skills of the local community. This approach ensures that the businesses maintain strong ties with the socio-economic conditions of the community, so the benefits are directly felt by local residents.

One concrete example is the management of Bikla Coffee, which operates in an integrated manner from upstream to downstream. The General Manager of Bikla Coffee explained, *"We manage everything from coffee seedling cultivation, harvesting, roasting, packaging, to digital marketing and export," (JM).* This well-structured production process ensures consistent product quality at every stage while increasing the added value of partner farmers' yields. In doing so, the *pesantren* connects local agricultural products to wider markets, even reaching the export level.

Field observations show that each business unit follows a well-organized work system. Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) are strictly adhered to, online marketing is carried out consistently, financial reports are compiled transparently, and all business legalities, such as halal certification and trademarks, have been fulfilled. Interestingly, each weekly meeting begins with a joint prayer and ends with an evaluation, affirming that managerial efficiency and spiritual values can coexist without diminishing one another. The integration of religious values and economic management becomes the hallmark of this *pesantren's* business model. The principles of justice, *barokah*, and social benefit form the irreplaceable foundation, ensuring that the enterprise's orientation is not solely on material gain. Each business unit is directed to provide benefits to all parties, from *santri* and surrounding communities to business partners.

The involvement of *santri* in all business processes is an important part of their learning. A senior *santri* shared, *"We are trained from the very beginning, from how to take care of coffee seedlings, to picking, so we know how to do it," (SN).* This statement shows that learning starts from the most basic skills, enabling *santri* to fully understand each stage of coffee production. The training provided covers the core skills needed to run a local-potential-based enterprise, such as plant care, post-harvest processing, drying, and roasting. Each stage is carried out step-by-step under the guidance of experienced personnel, allowing *santri* to master these skills in depth.

The positive impact of *pesantren* economic development is strongly felt by the surrounding community. A coffee farmer said, *“In the past, we only sold to middlemen at low prices; now the pesantren has become a regular buyer of our coffee at a good price,”* (SK). This change reflects an improved distribution chain and better selling prices for farmers. More than a thousand farmers have now become official partners of the *pesantren*, receiving post-harvest training and securing better market access. Housewives engaged in the handicraft unit also benefit. *“I used to be just a regular housewife. Now I can make products for visiting tourists. I have a steady income,”* said one worker (SU). The head of the *pesantren* explained that:

“Bikla coffee is not merely managed as a commercial enterprise but also serves as a vital support system for sustaining education within the pesantren. A portion of the business profits is allocated to finance students’ education, thereby reducing the financial burden on their families. At the same time, students are provided with entrepreneurial training that covers coffee processing, business management, and marketing skills. With this knowledge, graduates are not only better prepared to face the professional world but are also equipped with startup capital to establish their own businesses, enabling them to achieve economic independence while ensuring the long-term sustainability of the pesantren.”

The management of Bikla Coffee in the *pesantren* is not merely an economic venture but a strategy of empowerment linking education, social, and economic aspects. Profits support students’ education, while entrepreneurship training builds practical skills. Start-up capital prepares graduates to be independent and create new job opportunities.

Despite these many successes, this study also identifies several challenges. One of them is the high dependence on the *kiai* as the central figure of legitimacy and strategic decision-making. Without being balanced by strong leadership regeneration and institutional systems, this dependence could potentially become an obstacle in the future. In addition, limitations in infrastructure, professional human resources, and digital marketing capacity hinder the ability to meet increasing market demand. These challenges highlight the need for greater investment in technology, human resource training, and the expansion of marketing networks.

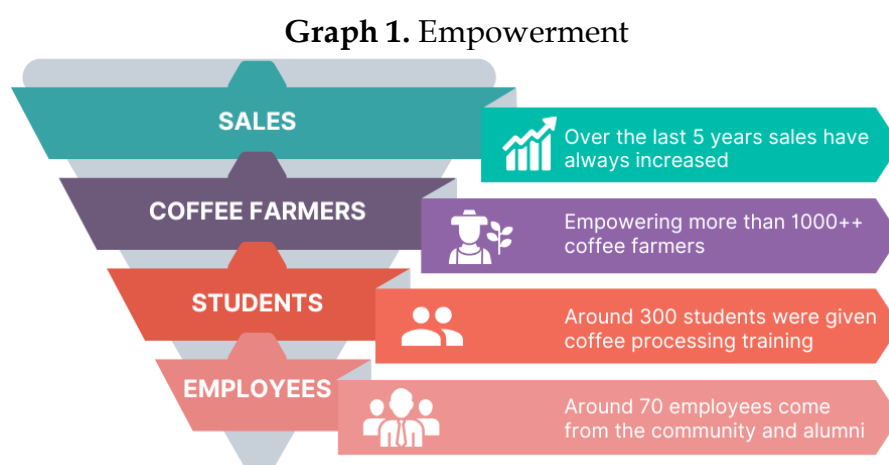
Nevertheless, strong spirituality remains the main asset for this *pesantren* in facing obstacles. Every difficulty is seen as both a test and an opportunity to learn. The team’s spirit, maintained through religious values, becomes the distinguishing factor that allows the *pesantren* to endure and continue to grow despite various challenges.

Table 1. Islamic boarding school business

Business	Status	Narration
Bikla coffee	Belongs to <i>pesantren</i>	Robusta coffee business covering cultivation, processing, packaging, branding, and marketing by the <i>pesantren</i> community. (Islamic boarding school profile, 2025)
Handicrafts	Belongs to <i>pesantren</i>	Producing handmade crafts from natural materials by students and locals to support sustainable economic empowerment. (Islamic boarding school profile, 2025)

Agrotourism	Belongs to <i>pesantren</i>	Agricultural tourism providing educational experiences in planting, harvesting, and processing local crops for visitors. (Islamic boarding school profile, 2025)
Farm	Belongs to <i>pesantren</i>	Manage livestock such as chickens and goats, to provide food and income for the Islamic boarding school. (Islamic boarding school profile, 2025)



Source: Interview





Source: Company profile

The research shows that Bikla coffee management greatly benefits the *pesantren* community. Currently, it employs over 70 people, mostly locals and alumni, and partners with 1,000 farmers who gain training in cultivation, processing, and quality standards. About 300 students receive free education and entrepreneurial skills, supported with savings accounts as startup capital after graduation. This ensures independence through business creation or joining existing ventures. Sales have steadily grown over five years, proving effective marketing, reliable farmer partnerships, and a strong brand image. Overall, *Bikla's* model strengthens the local economy while fostering sustainable education, production, and community empowerment.

Figure 1. Field Findings

Categories	Figure explanation/description	Figure/photo
<i>Bikla</i> Coffee	Local residents and Islamic boarding school graduates are empowered as production workers.	
Handicrafts	Handicraft products from coffee trees.	

Agrotourism	Islamic boarding schools collaborate with <i>Perhutani</i> and BUMDes.	
Farm	Islamic boarding schools collaborate with local breeders.	

Source: Field observation

Discussion

The role of the *kiai* in *pesantren* has undergone a significant transformation compared to its traditional functions (Taufiq, 2021; Moh. Yasin Abidin et al., 2024; Salim et al., 2024). Whereas in the past the *kiai* was primarily recognized as a religious teacher, spiritual guide, and caretaker of the students (*santri*), today his role has expanded to include responsibilities as a leader, innovator, and driver of *pesantren*-based economic enterprises (Wajdi et al., 2022; Karim et al., 2023; Tamam & Kadi, 2024). This expanded role positions the *kiai* as a central figure who not only imparts religious knowledge and safeguards spiritual values but also determines strategic policies, formulates long-term visions, manages human resources, and optimizes *pesantren* assets to achieve sustainable economic independence. Contemporary *kiai* leadership is built upon two foundational pillars: spiritual values that serve as a moral compass and safeguard integrity (Chanifah et al., 2021; Gamage et al., 2021) and modern managerial strategies that emphasize efficiency, innovation, and adaptability to market dynamics (Tikhonov & Solodova, 2023; Cosa, 2024; Zong & Guan, 2025). This combination creates a distinctive leadership model in which spirituality provides an ethical foundation to prevent mission drift, while modern management offers a practical framework for professional organizational governance.

This approach aligns with the principles of Community-Based Development Theory, which positions local leaders as the primary drivers of transformation through the optimization of community-based potential (Mansuri et al., 2003). Within this framework, the success of economic development is not solely determined by external capital or interventions but rather by the community's collective and sustainable capacity to mobilize its own resources. In the context of *pesantren*, the *kiai* does not act as a sole authority dictating top-down economic policies but serves as a participatory facilitator who encourages active involvement from both students and the surrounding community. Deliberation becomes the main mechanism in decision-making, where aspirations, needs, and feedback from all stakeholders are openly considered. Such deliberative practices foster healthy dialogue, minimize conflicts of interest, and produce policies with strong social legitimacy (Jacquet & van der Does, 2021; Møller, 2021; Neely et al., 2021).

Collective participation not only cultivates a strong sense of ownership over each economic initiative but also strengthens shared responsibility for ensuring

sustainability. In practice, this is evident in the willingness of students and community members to contribute their time, labor, and skills for the success of *pesantren*-based economic programs (Idris et al., 2023; Mufarokah et al., 2021; Rodliyah et al., 2024). The spirit of gotong royong (mutual cooperation) thus becomes a valuable form of social capital (Qizam et al., 2024). Enterprises rooted in local values tend to demonstrate greater resilience against environmental shifts and market challenges (Kennedy & Linnenluecke, 2022; Böhm et al., 2022; DiBella et al., 2023). Furthermore, this participatory leadership model positions *pesantren* not only as centers of religious learning but also as hubs of local economic growth firmly grounded in cultural and community values. The integration of visionary leadership, community participation, and the mobilization of local resources ultimately produces an adaptive, inclusive, and sustainable ecosystem. This demonstrates that community-based development not only generates short-term economic gains but also strengthens social cohesion and the collective identity of the *pesantren* community.

The involvement of all *pesantren* elements in economic activities produces dual impacts, both economic and social. Economically, enterprises managed through local resources provide direct benefits that can be reinvested into *pesantren* development and the welfare of its members (Hafas Rasyidi et al., 2022; Jahidin, 2023; Dacholfany et al., 2024). Socially, the process strengthens networks of solidarity between students, administrators, and the surrounding community. The revival of gotong royong through these economic initiatives reinforces trust and mutual support among stakeholders. Consequently, the *pesantren* emerges not only as a center of religious education but also as a productive hub that unites diverse potentials (Huda, 2024; Assa'idi, 2021; Islam et al., 2023). The organizational structure of *pesantren* enterprises also reflects systematic and professional management. The division of roles among production managers, financial officers, marketing teams, and general administrators illustrates an awareness of the importance of specialization in teamwork. Each unit carries distinct responsibilities, enabling more focused operations and clearer accountability. This system further allows individuals to develop expertise in their respective roles. Such management practices prove that modern managerial principles can be applied without neglecting religious values, and in fact, can complement them in achieving collective goals (Hidayah, 2021; Tok, E., et al., 2022).

From the perspective of Empowerment Theory, empowerment is understood as a multi-level process encompassing intrapersonal, interactional, and behavioral dimensions (Messman et al., 2022; Thulin et al., 2022; Yin-han Chung et al., 2023; Kitsantas et al., 2025). At the intrapersonal level, the empowerment process nurtures self-confidence, self-efficacy, and a sense of control over one's life. This is reflected in the willingness of students and community members to assume roles in enterprise management, take calculated risks, and shape marketing strategies. At the interactional level, they acquire broader insights into market dynamics, distribution networks, and accessible business opportunities, while learning to identify resources, analyze opportunities, and anticipate potential challenges. At the behavioral level, empowerment manifests in active participation across the entire production and distribution chain, from raw material processing to product marketing. This involvement not only generates financial returns but also shifts students and community members from passive beneficiaries to active agents with real control over economic resources. Accordingly, it is recommended that *pesantren* continue to

strengthen institutional frameworks, expand practice-based learning, and enhance collaboration with external partners so that *pesantren*-based empowerment models can be more widely replicated.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that the role of the kiai in Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) has evolved from solely teaching religion to becoming a leader who drives community economic development. The combination of spiritual values and modern management enables *pesantren* enterprises to operate efficiently, with clear direction, and in alignment with Islamic teachings. The active involvement of *santri* and local residents fosters a sense of ownership, strengthens cooperation, and enhances skills. By utilizing local potential, such as coffee plantations and processed products, *pesantren* are able to build an independent, sustainable economy that benefits the surrounding community.

Theoretically, these findings reinforce the concepts of Community-Based Development Theory and Empowerment Theory, which emphasize the role of local leaders and community participation in development. Practically, this study recommends that *pesantren* managers and policymakers adopt a leadership model that integrates religious values with modern management practices, establishes clear task divisions, optimizes local potential, and provides ample opportunities for all community members to participate.

This study is limited to one *pesantren* and therefore does not fully reflect the conditions of other *pesantren* with different contexts. Furthermore, it does not explore in depth the relationship with global markets or the use of digital technology. Future research is recommended to cover more *pesantren*, compare various management models, and examine the role of technology and marketing networks in strengthening the economic independence of *pesantren*.

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