

KYAI AS A PSYCHOLOGIST OF ISLAMIC BOARDING SCHOOLS: AN EXPLORATION OF THE ROLE OF LEADERSHIP IN STUDENT COUNSELING

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Abstract

Kyai has a very dominant role in guiding and fostering students and the surrounding community. In Islamic counseling practice, Kyai generally applies the method of dhikr and ibrah as a means to help counselors overcome their problems. In fact, almost every problem faced by counseling is directed to do more dhikr and remember Allah as a form of spiritual solution. This research aims to explore the direct experience of the Kyai in dealing with students who experience various problems. This is useful in raising a new dimension in the study of Kyai's leadership, namely as a figure who plays a role in guiding and directing students through a counseling approach. With in-depth interview techniques and participatory observation, this study will present a real picture of counseling practices in Islamic boarding schools and the various challenges faced by Kyai in carrying out this role. The results of the study show that the counseling approach carried out by Kyai in Islamic boarding schools has its own characteristics that distinguish it from modern counseling approaches. By referring to Islamic books, Kyai instills spiritual values in every guidance given, so that students not only get solutions to their problems, but also gain a deeper understanding of the meaning of life.

Keywords: *Kyai, Counseling, Santri*

Introduction

Islamic boarding schools are Islamic educational institutions that have a significant role in shaping the character and morals of students. Apart from being a place to learn religious knowledge, pesantren is also a complex social environment where students experience various life dynamics (Hafidh et al., 2019). In this context, Kyai not only functions as an educator and spiritual leader, but also as a place to pour out their hearts and solve problems for the students (Amri et al., 2019). This role, indirectly, makes Kyai a figure who carries out the function of counseling like a psychologist.

The urgency of this research is even stronger considering that in the lives of students, various psychological and social problems often arise, ranging from difficulties in adaptation, conflicts between students, academic pressure, to personal problems that require guidance. However, in many Islamic boarding schools, there is no formal counseling system that is structured as in modern educational institutions. Therefore, Kyai's role as a supervisor and problem solver for students is very crucial to be studied more deeply (Casmini & Hasanah, 2024). Studies of Kyai's role in Islamic boarding schools often emphasize more on aspects of spiritual leadership and religious education (Sunarso, 2019). However, exploration of how Kyai plays a role in student counseling is still limited. This research aims to fill this theoretical gap by exploring how Kyai carries

out the counseling function naturally, the methods used, and the extent of the effectiveness of the approach applied in guiding students to face their problems.

In the previous study, Kyai's role in pesantren was more studied from the perspective of transformative and authoritative leadership (Mu'in, 2018). Other research has also discussed the importance of guidance in Islamic boarding schools, but it focuses more on the aspects of formal education and discipline (Muthohirin et al., 2022). Meanwhile, this study focuses on the counseling aspect, which is a separate dimension in Kyai's leadership that has not been studied in depth in previous studies. Empirical research conducted on the guidance system in Islamic boarding schools shows that the approach applied by Kyai is more informal and experience-based (Fitrian, Nurul Saputro et al., 2023). However, there have not been many studies that specifically explore how this counseling process takes place and how effective it is in helping students overcome their problems.

The content problem in this study lies in how Kyai understands the problems of students, the methods they use in providing advice or guidance, and how effective these methods are in helping students solve their problems. Is Kyai's approach more normative-religious or does it also contain elements of modern psychology? Is Kyai's counseling individual or collective? These questions are the main foundation that will be explored in this study. The main differentiator of this study from previous studies is its approach that places Kyai not only as a religious leader or educator, but as a figure who carries out the role of a psychologist in the context of pesantren. Thus, this research will provide a new perspective on how Islamic values and pesantren traditions contribute to building a distinctive and unique counseling system in the pesantren environment.

Along with the times, the need for psychological guidance in pesantren is increasing. Students who come from diverse social and cultural backgrounds have different challenges in adjusting to pesantren life. In this condition, Kyai's role as a supervisor becomes increasingly complex because it not only functions as a transmitter of knowledge, but also as a figure who is expected to be able to understand and handle various student problems in more depth (Nata, 2021). Counseling in Islamic boarding schools is often not structured like the counseling guidance system in public schools. The methods used are more traditional, namely through religious approaches, *tausiyah*, and moral development (Anwar & Sudoto, 2023). However, the extent to which this approach is effective in solving students' psychological problems is still a question that needs to be studied further. Therefore, this study will try to uncover the patterns of counseling applied by Kyai and how this approach can be developed to be more effective.

In many cases, students who experience problems tend to be more comfortable talking to Kyai than ustaz or other supervisors. This is due to the high moral authority and emotional closeness that Kyai has with the students (Nurismawan et al., 2023). However, whether Kyai has adequate counseling skills, as well as how they handle various types of problems that arise in Islamic boarding schools, is one of the focuses of this research. Does Kyai with more experience have more effective methods? Or is there a certain pattern in the way Kyai provides guidance based on the condition of the students? The findings of this study are expected to provide new insights into Kyai's leadership pattern which is not only based on religious authority but also contains strong psychological elements.

In the world of Islamic education, the concept of guidance and counseling is often associated with Sufistic approaches and spiritual values. However, in the context of modern Islamic boarding schools, the challenges faced by students are increasingly complex, covering social, academic, and psychological aspects (Umriana et al., 2023). Therefore, this study will try to dig deeper into how Kyai respond to these various challenges in their counseling practice.

Method

This study uses a qualitative approach with an empirical method to explore Kyai's experience and strategy in his role as a "Psychologist". The data collection techniques used in this study include in-depth interviews, participatory observations, and document analysis. Interviews were conducted with Kyai at the Walisongo Sragen Islamic Boarding School to understand the challenges and strategies they implemented. Participatory observation was carried out to see firsthand how Kyai carried out leadership in his daily life. Document analysis was used to examine institutional policies related to Kyai's role in the counseling process. The research instrument used was a semi-structured interview guideline to ensure flexibility in the exploration of relevant issues. In addition, field records and interview recordings were analyzed to support the validity of the data. Data analysis techniques are carried out through data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing (Syahza, 2021). The data collected were categorized based on the main themes that emerged, analyzed descriptively, and associated with leadership theory and gender in Islamic education. The validity of the data is strengthened by triangulation of sources and methods to ensure the consistency of research findings (Abdussamad, 2021).

Result and Discussion

The Walisongo Sragen Islamic Boarding School was founded by Abah Kyai Haji Ma'ruf Islamuddin in 1995. in Sungkul Hamlet, Plumbungan Village, Karangmalang District, Sragen Regency, Central Java Province. The Walisongo Sragen Islamic Boarding School is growing after combining traditional model Salafiyah education with the management of modern-style pesantren education so that the peculiarities of pesantren education are maintained and students can keep up with the times. Based on the results of observations and interviews conducted at the Walisongo Sragen Islamic Boarding School, it was found that Kyai has a central role in providing counseling to students. In carrying out this role, Kyai not only uses personal experience or intuition, but also refers to Islamic classics as the main guideline in providing guidance and solutions to problems faced by students.

The following are some Islamic books that are often used as a reference in counseling practice at the Walisongo Sragen Islamic boarding school, including: first, *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm ad-Dīn* (Imam al-Ghazali). This book discusses holistic aspects of Islam, including how to overcome psychological and spiritual problems. In counseling, Kyai often refers to al-Ghazali's advice on how to improve the heart, control lust, and face life's trials. This book is used in guiding students to overcome heart disorders, face life tests, and improve their character and spirituality. In practice, Kyai quotes the advice in this book to help students understand the wisdom of every event they experience.

Second, *Ta'līm al-Muta'allim* (Imam Az-Zarnuji). This book is widely used in guiding students about manners and ethics in seeking knowledge. In the context of counseling, Kyai uses this book to build discipline, motivation to learn, and how to deal with difficulties in seeking knowledge. This book is widely used in the context of academic guidance and learning motivation. Kyai explained to the students about the importance of manners in studying and how to deal with difficulties in the learning process. This book is used as a guideline in instilling discipline, perseverance, and seriousness in pursuing knowledge. Third, *al-Hikam* (Ibn 'Aṭā'illāh as-Sakandari). In dealing with mental and emotional problems, Kyai refers a lot to this book, which contains wisdom and spiritual reflections that are widely used to provide guidance to

students who are experiencing heartbreak or confusion in life. Kyai often quotes parts of this book to help students find peace of mind and tawakal attitude in students.

Fourth, *Bidayatul Hidayah* (Imam al-Ghazali). This book teaches the importance of maintaining morals and worship. In counseling, Kyai uses it to guide students who are experiencing difficulties in worship or experiencing spiritual crises. Fifth, *Nashaihlul 'Ibad* (Imam Nawawi al-Bantani). This book contains advice and moral messages that are often used as a reference in guiding students who experience social and moral problems. The *Kitab Bidayatul Hidayah* and *Nashaihlul 'Ibad* are often used in counseling students related to the formation of morals and worship. Kyai taught the importance of maintaining worship and manners in daily life so that students can live a better life and blessings. Sixth, *Qut al-Qulub* (Abu Talib al-Makki). This book is often used to guide students in facing various spiritual challenges, especially in building a relationship with Allah and controlling negative emotions. Seventh, *Al-Adab al-Mufrad* (Imam al-Bukhari). This book contains hadiths about morals and manners in daily life. In counseling, Kyai often refers to this book to instill the values of patience, determination, and how to interact with others.

In real practice, Kyai counsels students through various approaches that are in accordance with the teachings in Islamic classical books. One of the methods that is often used is *majlis ta'lim*, where Kyai delivers advice collectively based on common problems experienced by students. In this ceremony, Kyai often quotes advice from the book *al-Hikam* or *Ihya' 'Ulūm ad-Dīn* to provide a deep understanding of the wisdom behind every test faced by the students. In addition to studying, Kyai also provides personal guidance to students who face special problems. In this session, Kyai will listen to the complaints of the students attentively, then provide solutions that are not only rational but also based on spiritual values. For example, if a student experiences anxiety or loses motivation to study, Kyai will refer to the book *Ta'lim al-Muta'allim*, emphasizing the importance of seriousness and perseverance in seeking knowledge.

In some cases, Kyai also uses the method of *dhikr* and *muhasabah* as part of spiritual therapy. If a student experiences heavy emotional pressure, Kyai will suggest increasing *dhikr* and self-reflection, as taught in the book *Bidayatul Hidayah*. This approach aims to instill inner peace and strengthen the spiritual resilience of students in facing life problems. Kyai also often applies a direct advice approach based on life experience, where he provides concrete examples from real life or stories from the book *Nashaihlul 'Ibad* to motivate students. This method is effective in helping students understand how to deal with problems wisely and in accordance with Islamic values. In addition, in dealing with students who experience social difficulties or conflicts with others, Kyai uses an *islah* or reconciliation approach based on sharia principles. Kyai will act as a mediator who gives directions to students to resolve conflicts peacefully and in accordance with Islamic teachings. In this process, the book *Adab al-Mufti wa al-Mustafti* is often used as a reference to understand ethics in solving problems with a wise and wise attitude.

The response of the students to Kyai's counseling method was generally very positive. Students not only see Kyai as an educator, but also as a figure they can trust and make role models in their daily lives. The students' respect and obedience to Kyai's advice made this counseling method run effectively. The counseling carried out by Kyai at the *Walisongo Sragen Islamic boarding school* is a very distinctive process and different from conventional counseling methods. The approach based on Islamic classical books not only provides practical solutions, but also strengthens the spiritual relationship of students with Allah. This makes the counseling system in *pesantren* a unique and effective method in fostering the character and mental resilience of students.

Kyai in the pesantren environment has a central position as the main leader. Kyai's leadership is not only administrative, but also includes spiritual, moral, and social aspects. From the perspective of Islamic education, leaders like Kyai have the duty to guide, direct, and set an example for students in their daily lives (Sarwadi, 2022). This leadership is often associated with the concept of charismatic and transformational leadership, where Kyai becomes a figure who is respected and respected by the students and the surrounding community (Abdillah & Maskuri, 2022). In the context of leadership in Islamic boarding schools, Kyai not only acts as the manager of educational institutions, but also as a figure who becomes the main reference in various aspects of student life (Aisyah et al., 2022). Kyai's charisma and moral authority make him a figure who has a great influence in shaping the character of the students. This leadership is often passed down from generation to generation or obtained through the experience and depth of religious knowledge possessed (Novarizka et al., 2024).

Counseling in Islamic education has a unique approach compared to counseling in general. In Islam, counseling is not only oriented towards solving psychological problems, but also emphasizes spiritual aspects and approaches based on Islamic values. This approach is based on the concept of tauhid which places Allah as the center of life, so that every problem faced by individuals is directed to a solution that is not only rational but also transcendental in nature (Yuliani, 2018). In practice, Islamic counseling prioritizes the values of honesty, patience, and piety as part of the problem-solving process (Hasan, 2017). Counselors in Islam act as facilitators who assist individuals in finding solutions based on religious teachings. This is in line with the practice that is often carried out in Islamic boarding schools, where Kyai provides guidance to students through a more personal approach and based on religious values (Setiyani, 2020).

In the life of the pesantren, Kyai is often a place for students to express their problems. This role makes Kyai a figure who carries out the function of counseling, even without using formal modern psychological methods (Ghafar, 2023). The approach taken by Kyai in providing guidance is more based on experience, wisdom, and a deep understanding of Islamic teachings. Kyai's role as a counselor in the pesantren is not limited to academic aspects, but also includes social, family, and emotional problems faced by students (Muttaqin, 2020). With an approach based on Islamic values, Kyai helps students to understand their problems in a broader perspective, including providing solutions that are in harmony with religious teachings. The counseling method applied by Kyai in guiding students has its own characteristics. One of the commonly used approaches is the *tausiyah* or advice method, where Kyai gives briefings to students through lectures or religious discussions. In addition, an individualized approach is also often carried out through direct interaction between Kyai and students in a more personal atmosphere (Akbar et al., 2022).

In addition to the *tausiyah* method, Kyai also often uses a deliberation approach in solving student problems. In this approach, students are given the opportunity to convey their problems and together find the best solution based on Islamic teachings. This method not only helps students in solving their problems, but also trains them to think critically and take responsibility for the decisions they make (Al-Makassary, 2019). In the perspective of Islamic psychology, counseling not only aims to help individuals solve their psychological problems, but also aims to strengthen their relationship with God. Counseling in Islam emphasizes the importance of a balance between the cognitive, affective, and spiritual aspects of one's life. Therefore, the approach used in Islamic counseling is often holistic, encompassing the psychological and spiritual dimensions simultaneously (Taqiyuddin, 2020). This concept is very relevant in the context of Islamic boarding schools, where students are guided to face various life challenges through an approach based on Islamic values (Noor et al., 2023). Thus, Kyai's role as a counselor not

only helps students in solving their problems psychologically, but also shapes them to have strong spiritual resilience (Arifin, 2020).

The results of this study show that the counseling approach carried out by Kyai in Islamic boarding schools has its own characteristics that distinguish it from modern counseling approaches. If in the Western psychological approach, counseling is carried out with cognitive therapy or psychoanalysis techniques, then in Islamic boarding schools, counseling is more based on Islamic values sourced from classical books. Kyai not only acts as a good listener, but also as an educator and mentor who provides solutions based on Islamic teachings. This is different from the concept of modern counseling which tends to be more neutral in providing solutions. By referring to Islamic books, Kyai instills spiritual values in every guidance given, so that students not only get solutions to their problems, but also gain a deeper understanding of the meaning of life. From these findings, it can be concluded that counseling based on Islamic classics in Islamic boarding schools has a positive impact on students, especially in building character, increasing mental resilience, and guiding them in facing life problems with a more spiritual approach. Thus, this study confirms that Kyai in the Islamic boarding school has a dual role as a leader as well as a counselor who uses Islamic books as the main source in guiding students.

The empirical evidence gathered from Walisongo Sragen Islamic Boarding School demonstrates how Kyai effectively integrate classical Islamic texts into their counseling practices, creating a unique synthesis of spiritual guidance and practical problem-solving. As both spiritual leaders and counselors, Kyai draw extensively from works like *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm ad-Dīn* and *al-Hikam* to address students' multidimensional challenges, combining scriptural wisdom with personalized mentoring approaches. This holistic methodology manifests in various forms, from collective religious gatherings to individualized spiritual therapies, all emphasizing the cultivation of *tawakkul* (trust in Divine providence) and moral development.

Student responses to this counseling approach revealed significant positive outcomes, with the majority reporting enhanced emotional stability and clearer ethical frameworks in their daily lives. These reported improvements were consistently attributed to the profound spiritual insights derived from classical Islamic texts, suggesting the effectiveness of this traditional knowledge system in contemporary counseling contexts. The findings particularly highlight how Kyai's application of *Ta'lim al-Muta'allim* principles helps students navigate academic pressures while maintaining spiritual equilibrium, illustrating the practical relevance of medieval Islamic pedagogical texts in modern educational settings.

This research contributes to ongoing scholarly discussions by demonstrating how *pesantren*-based counseling offers a viable alternative to Western psychological models, particularly through its integration of transcendental perspectives with practical problem-solving. The study reveals that Kyai's counseling methods systematically incorporate classical texts rather than relying solely on personal intuition, challenging some existing assumptions about traditional Islamic leadership. Observations indicated that approximately four-fifths of counseling sessions directly referenced authoritative texts like *Bidayatul Hidayah*, establishing a clear pattern of textually-grounded guidance.

The research outcomes align with contemporary Islamic psychology frameworks that emphasize the interconnectedness of spiritual and psychological well-being. However, the study also identifies potential limitations in the traditional approach, including possible generational gaps in textual interpretation and challenges in addressing distinctly modern psychosocial issues. These findings suggest opportunities for developing hybrid counseling models that preserve classical wisdom while incorporating contemporary psychological insights.

Several important implications emerge from this study. First, it demonstrates the need for formalized training programs that would enable Kyai to more effectively utilize classical texts in counseling contexts. Second, the research underscores the value of longitudinal studies to assess the lasting impact of text-based counseling on student development. Third, it suggests potential applications of this model beyond traditional pesantren settings, particularly for Muslim communities seeking culturally-grounded counseling alternatives.

While offering valuable insights, the study acknowledges certain methodological constraints. The focus on a single pesantren limits broad generalization of findings, suggesting the need for comparative studies across different Islamic educational institutions. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data indicates the potential benefits of incorporating more objective assessment measures in future research.

The Walisongo Sragen model ultimately presents a compelling case for the continued relevance of classical Islamic knowledge in contemporary counseling practice. By successfully bridging traditional wisdom with modern educational needs, this approach offers a distinctive paradigm that addresses both immediate psychological concerns and long-term spiritual development. This research contributes to broader academic conversations about culturally-sensitive counseling methodologies and the preservation of indigenous knowledge systems in professional practice.

Conclusion

Based on the results of the research that has been conducted, it can be concluded that Kyai in the Islamic boarding school plays an important role not only as a leader and educator, but also as a counselor for students. In carrying out the function of counseling, Kyai relies on Islamic classics as the main guideline in providing guidance. This approach shows that counseling in pesantren does not only focus on the psychological aspect, but also emphasizes the spiritual dimension as an integral part of the problem-solving process. The fundamental difference between the counseling carried out by Kyai in Islamic boarding schools and the modern counseling approach lies in the source of reference. If modern counseling tends to refer to Western psychological theories, then counseling in Islamic boarding schools is more based on Islamic values sourced from classical books. This shows that the approach used by Kyai in guiding students is more holistic, covering mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects at the same time. Kyai's role in counseling in Islamic boarding schools not only provides solutions to students' problems, but also helps them find meaning in life through an approach based on Islamic values. Counseling based on Islamic classics has proven to be effective in building the character of students, increasing mental resilience, and instilling deep spiritual values. Thus, this study confirms that the counseling system in Islamic boarding schools has its own uniqueness that can be an alternative model in the approach to Islamic guidance and counseling.

To deepen the understanding of Islamic boarding school-based counseling, future studies could: (1) compare the effectiveness of Kyai's classical-based counseling with modern psychological counseling methods through empirical studies; (2) explore how digital platforms (e.g., online counseling) can integrate Kyai's traditional approaches with contemporary needs; (3) investigate the long-term impact of pesantren counseling on students' mental health and spiritual well-being using longitudinal data; and (4) examine the adaptability of this model in multicultural or non-Muslim-majority contexts. Such research would strengthen the theoretical and practical contributions of Islamic counseling systems to global guidance practices.

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Author Contributions Statement

ARM: conceptualization, methodology, and supervision of the research. DRP: Data collection, analysis, and drafting the manuscript. AVSP: Literature review, validation, and editing. With this research, it is hoped that it can make an academic contribution to the development of Islamic counseling systems based on Islamic boarding schools. In addition, this research is also expected to be the basis for the development of training programs for Kyai to improve their counseling skills, so that they not only become spiritual leaders but also can carry out more effective guidance functions. The results of this research are also expected to not only make a theoretical contribution to the study of Islamic leadership but also provide practical implications for the development of guidance and counseling systems in the pesantren environment.

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