

Beyond the Traditional–Modern Binary: A Postcolonial Reading of Pesantren in Islamic Education Studies

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ABSTRACT

Purpose of the Study: This study aims to deconstruct the binary dichotomy of “traditional” versus “modern” (salaf vs. khalaf) in the study of Islamic boarding schools. Using a postcolonial approach, this study examines the conceptual limitations of this binary across four institutional dimensions and proposes a framework of hybridity for the epistemic sovereignty of Islamic Religious Education.

Methodology: This qualitative study applies postcolonial discourse analysis through a critical literature review of the canonical corpus (Geertz, Dhofier, Steenbrink, van Bruinessen). The analysis was conducted in four stages: deconstructive mapping, disaggregation of the four dimensions, evaluation of the binary’s limitations, and epistemological synthesis.

Main Findings: The results of this study indicate that the binary dichotomy of traditional–modern is a taxonomy inherited from Orientalist-colonial thought that is rife with teleological bias and deficit-oriented perspectives. In reality, the four institutional dimensions of the pesantren namely, pedagogy, leadership, curriculum, and structure develop asynchronously, thereby forming a dynamic institutional hybridity. Through a process of institutional bricolage, pesantren are able to adapt and assimilate secular disciplines under the epistemic authority of classical Islamic scholarship. Therefore, the imposition of homogeneous and rigid accreditation standards risks triggering institutional epistemicide that is, the gradual erosion of indigenous forms of learning.

Novelty/Originality of this Study: The novelty of this study lies in its postcolonial deconstruction of the classical typology of pesantren through a four-dimensional analytical matrix. This study introduces the concept of institutional bricolage as the theoretical foundation for the implementation of Law No. 18/2019 in order to preserve local epistemic sovereignty.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Pesantren (Islamic boarding schools) occupy a fundamental position in the Indonesian Islamic educational landscape as indigenous institutions that have preserved religious knowledge for centuries. In academic literature and policy debates, pesantren are persistently categorized through binary typologies, such as “Traditional” Versus “Modern,” salaf (classical) versus khalaf (contemporary), or orthodox versus reformist [1],

[2] . These categories are often treated as clear-cut classifications and naturally reflect the social reality of Muslim educational institutions. However, accepting these binary oppositions without critical examination risks oversimplifying the diverse dynamics of pesantren. Rather than serving as neutral descriptors, these categories are epistemological constructs shaped by specific historical, intellectual, and institutional interests that demarcate what is considered progressive from what is considered stagnant [2], [3] .

This dichotomy is deeply rooted in the historical legacy of Orientalism and the production of colonial knowledge about Islam and Eastern societies. Historically, Orientalist studies approached Muslim communities through an external lens that organized knowledge through structured classifications of language, law, texts, and institutions [4], [5] . In works examining Islamic modernization, such as Charles C. Adams's study of Muhammad 'Abduh and the reform movement in Egypt, the categories of "modernism," "reform," and "tradition" were systematically used to measure intellectual change [1] . While these categories provided methodological tools for analyzing societal transformation, Hughes [3] reminds us that academic categories do not simply describe an object; they construct and constrain how that object can be conceptualized within an academic discipline. When applied to education, this taxonomic tradition established a normative hierarchy: Western institutional forms were codified as rational, dynamic, and modern, while indigenous Muslim institutions were deemed traditional, dogmatic, and resistant to progress [2], [6] .

The critique developed by Edward W. Said [2] provides an important analytical lens for deconstructing these institutional classifications. Said shifts the critique of knowledge from factual accuracy to the mechanisms of discourse, representation, and the politics of exile. Within this framework, representation is not politically neutral; it operates within structures of authority that legitimize the power to classify and define the "Orient" [2], [6] . In educational studies, uncritically applying the label "traditional" to an institution such as a pesantren can produce essentialized representations that implicitly signal pedagogical backwardness, cognitive stagnation, or institutional rigidity. However, as postcolonial critics such as Burke and Prochaska [7] , Mellor [8] , and Sa'di [9] have argued , Orientalism and its intellectual legacy should not be reduced to a monolithic or static instrument of domination. Rather, it should be understood as a heterogeneous and historically contingent discourse whose conceptual categories require rigorous contextual interrogation.

The persistence of the traditional-modern dichotomy poses serious explanatory challenges in the study of contemporary Islamic education. In empirical reality, contemporary Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) exhibit a profound institutional hybridity that challenges rigid categorization. A single Islamic boarding school (pesantren) may strictly preserve the transmission of classical texts (*kitab*), (*turāth*), classical pedagogy (sorogan and bandongan), and the spiritual authority of the kiai, while simultaneously establishing a formal, accredited madrasah (Islamic school), implementing a vocational skills curriculum, adopting digital technology, and utilizing modern organizational management. By compressing these diverse realities into a single continuum between traditional and modern, the existing literature often overlooks the role, resilience, and adaptive strategies of Muslim educational actors. Consequently, there is a clear imperative to move beyond this reductionist binary and develop a more nuanced framework for analyzing Islamic educational institutions.

To address these conceptual limitations, this study re-examines the representation of Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) in Islamic education studies through a postcolonial reading. Rather than rehashing the general history of Orientalism, this study employs the concepts of postcolonial discourse and representation as critical tools to evaluate the categories that govern Islamic education literature. Specifically, this study aims to answer three fundamental questions: 1) How are the binary categories of "traditional" and "modern" historically constructed and operationalized in scholarly literature on Islamic boarding schools? 2) What are the explanatory limitations and blind spots of this binary when confronted with the internal dimensions of Islamic boarding schools, including knowledge transmission, the authority of ulama, textual canons, and institutional governance? 3) How can a postcolonial perspective offer an alternative, non-reductionist framework for understanding institutional change in Islamic education studies and policy?

By answering these questions, this study aims to provide an epistemological critique of Islamic education studies. It demonstrates that transcending the dichotomies of colonial legacies is crucial for capturing the complex adaptability of Islamic educational institutions and for formulating educational policies that respect local epistemologies without sacrificing academic rigor.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach through a critical literature review integrated with postcolonial discourse analysis. Rather than treating the literature review as a passive summary of previous research, this method systematically investigates how academic texts construct research objects, establish normative categories, and produce authoritative representations [3] . This approach was specifically chosen to deconstruct the epistemic assumptions underlying the binary classification of "traditional" and "modern" in the scholarly literature on Islamic boarding schools (pesantren).

The primary data corpus consists of purposefully selected scholarly works that have played a significant role in establishing the typology and representation of pesantren in the study of modern Islamic education. The selection of the textual corpus was guided by three strict inclusion criteria: 1) Canonical status and academic influence: fundamental texts and monographs that historically introduced and popularized the categorization of pesantren into “traditional” (salaf) and “modern” (khalaf), including important works by Clifford Geertz [10], Dhofier [11], Karel Steenbrink [12], and Martin van Bruinessen [13], along with the contemporary institutional policy framework of the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs; 2) Explicit taxonomic operationalization: works that systematically use the categories of “tradition,” “modernity,” “reform,” or “orthodoxy” to evaluate institutional and intellectual changes in Muslim education; 3) Thematic relevance to the institutional dimension: literature discussing pedagogical transmission, the authority of scholars (kiai), textual curriculum (kitāb), turāth, and organizational governance.

Data collection was conducted using structured textual documentation techniques. Selected texts were examined to identify, extract, and classify textual segments, propositions, and conceptual matrices in which the traditional–modern binary is applied to pesantren. Edward W. Said’s [2] conceptual critique supported by Aaron W. Hughes’s [3] framework on taxonomic disciplining and Charles C. Adams’s [1] classic study on reformist categories served as the primary analytical lens for evaluating these textual excerpts.

Data analysis was conducted using qualitative content analysis and postcolonial discourse analysis through a systematic four-stage procedure: 1) Deconstructive textual mapping: identifying the discursive mechanisms used to categorize pesantren as “traditional” or “modern,” and examining how historical Orientalist dichotomies are reproduced in these texts; 2) Dimensional disaggregation: categorizing the application of the term “traditional” across four distinct structural dimensions pedagogical transmission (sorogan/pondok vs. classical education), religious authority (charismatic kiai vs. institutionalized bureaucracy), textual canon (classical Arabic turāth vs. integrated knowledge), and organizational form (informal boarding schools vs. formal education). This step critically examines whether these four dimensions operate in harmony or exhibit differences; 3) Evaluation of explanatory limitations: examining contradictions, blind spots, and empirical realities (such as institutional hybridity, digital adoption, and educational bricolage) that are obscured or distorted when complex institutions are compressed into rigid binaries; 4) Epistemological synthesis: formulating a non-reductionist, alternative interpretive framework that reconceptualizes pesantren as a dynamic and evolving educational tradition capable of modernizing autonomously without sacrificing its epistemic roots.

Through this methodological framework, this study avoids treating the terms “traditional” and “modern” as self-evident, neutral facts, but rather transforms them into objects of critical inquiry that shed light on the relationship between representation, knowledge production, and Islamic education.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Result

3.1.1. Traditional–Modern" Binary Genealogy in Pesantren Studies

The classification of Islamic educational institutions into a rigid dichotomy of “traditional” and “modern” is not a neutral description of local realities; rather, it is a discursive construction deeply rooted in colonial governance and Orientalist studies. As Edward W. Said has shown, colonial knowledge production operated through imaginative geographies and taxonomic apparatuses that systematically classified Eastern institutions through oppositional binaries: rational versus dogmatic, progressive versus stagnant, and modern versus traditional [2, pp. 40–42]. When applied to Islamic education in the Dutch East Indies, this epistemic framework was initially articulated to serve colonial administrative oversight. Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje, in his influential colonial report, portrayed indigenous Islamic education, particularly the network of pesantren and rural tarekat (Islamic boarding schools) as a static medieval relic, characterized by mechanical rote learning and doctrinal fanaticism diametrically opposed to modern European civilization [14, pp. 24–28]. In this colonial imagination, the pesantren were portrayed as institutions fundamentally incapable of internal modernization unless radically reformed or replaced by Western-style secular education.

This colonial taxonomic instinct was later inherited and formalized in post-independence Islamic social science and educational studies. A key moment in the academic codification of this binary occurred in Clifford Geertz’s fundamental ethnography, *The Religion of Java*. Geertz mapped Javanese religious culture into a three-part typology of abangan, santri, and priyayi, while within the santri variant embedded a rigid dichotomy between “traditionalists” (kolot) and “modernists” (moderen) [10, pp. 149–153]. Geertz portrayed the traditional pesantren worldview as an unchanging scholasticism centered on medieval Arabic commentaries, unquestioning obedience to the kiai, and a rejection of modern organizational methods. As Geertz explicitly asserts;

“Traditional (kolot) santri are past-oriented, committed to the preservation of the medieval scholastic traditions of the Shafi’i school without question, and inherently suspicious of secular knowledge, which is seen as spiritually polluting” [10, p. 151].

Through this formulation, Geertz not only records social observations; he conceptually reinforces the assumption that “traditional” inherently signifies intellectual conservatism and institutional rigidity, while “modern” represents rational administration and socio-religious reform.

This binary concept acquired authoritative canonical status in the study of Indonesian Islamic education through Zamakhsyari. Dhofier's seminal monograph, *Pesantren Tradition: A Study of the Kyai's View of Life*. D. Hofier systematically introduced an institutional taxonomy that remains dominant in educational literature and policy to this day: the salaf pesantren (traditional pesantren) and the khalaf pesantren (modern pesantren) [11, pp. 41–44]. Dhofier defines the traditional (salaf) pesantren primarily on the basis of its exclusive adherence to classical Islamic texts (kitāb . turāth or yellow books) and individual, non-tiered pedagogical methods (sorogan and bandongan), which contrast with the khalaf or ashriyah model, which combines tiered madrasahs, secular school subjects, and bureaucratic administration:

"Salafiah Islamic boarding schools are Islamic boarding schools that maintain the teaching of classical Islamic texts as the core of their education, without implementing a madrasa or public school system. In contrast, khalaf Islamic boarding schools have incorporated a modern curriculum and formal class levels" [11, p. 42].

Although Dhofier's work provides invaluable documentation of the kiai subculture, his taxonomic divisions inadvertently reinforce the notion of an evolutionary trajectory: pesantren are depicted as originating from a "purely traditional foundation" that must progressively absorb Western institutional forms in order to be classified as "modern."

This teleological assumption is further strengthened by Karel Steenbrink in his historical study *Pesantren, Madrasah, Sekolah: Pendidikan Islam dalam Kurung Modern* (Pesantren, Madrasah, Sekolah: Pendidikan Islam dalam Kurung Modern). Steenbrink traces how the introduction of the Dutch colonial dualistic school system (Ethische Politiek) created structural tensions that forced Islamic education to adapt [12, pp. 33–38]. In Steenbrink's analysis, the emergence of the madrasah and modern Islamic education is framed as a historical necessity, an attempt to "catch up" with the rationalized school model introduced by the colonial state:

"The modernization of Islamic education in Indonesia is largely a process of adopting the Western school system, both in teaching methodology, class stratification, and the introduction of general sciences" [12, p. 84].

Although Steenbrink's historical account is nuanced, the underlying narrative structure positions Western education as the normative paradigm of modernity that serves as a benchmark for the continued relevance of "traditional" pesantren institutions.

Martin van Bruinessen, in *Kitab Kuning, Pesantren dan Tarekat*, provides an important critique of this dichotomy by showing that pesantren “traditionalism” is not an unchanging ancient continuation of the past, but an active and dynamic tradition that has undergone continuous adaptation [13, pp. 17–22]. Van Bruinessen shows that the corpus of kitab Turāth studied in pesantren is itself historically negotiated and constantly reinterpreted across transnational networks connecting the Malay-Indonesian Archipelago with the Hijaz and Egypt. However, as Van Bruinessen observes, contemporary educational discourse and state bureaucracies often reduce this rich discursive tradition to the simple label “traditional,” using it as an administrative yardstick to demand bureaucratic restructuring [13, pp. 25–28].

When examined through Charles C. Adams's study of Islamic reformism [2] and Aaron W. Hughes's critique of academic categories [3], the discursive effects of this genealogy become clear. Adams shows that Orientalist scholarship organizes modern Islamic history around the narrative of a normative hero of "modernist reform" (exemplified by Muḥammad 'Abduh), thereby rendering pre-existing scholarly institutions invisible or treating them as obstacles to progress. Hughes further argues that categories such as "traditional" and "modern" do not passively describe external objects; they actively discipline fields of study by determining what counts as legitimate development [3, pp. 45–48].

In the study of Islamic education in Indonesia, the operationalization of the traditional-modern binary has produced three profound epistemic blind spots. *First*, it naturalizes a normative hierarchy in which “modern” (codified as institutional assessment, bureaucratic administration, and secular curriculum) is automatically judged superior to “traditional” (codified as personal ulama transmission, moral guidance, and textual mastery). *Second*, it diminishes the historical role of traditional pesantren, framing their continuity as a stubborn resistance to change rather than a deliberate epistemological choice to preserve sacred knowledge. *Third*, it obscures the widespread empirical phenomenon of institutional hybridity, in which pesantren actors seamlessly integrate classical textual hermeneutics with cutting-edge organizational and technological innovations. *Thus*, the genealogy of the traditional-modern binary reveals that these terms function less as neutral sociological descriptions and more as inherited colonial-Orientalist taxonomies that continue to limit the analytical scope of Islamic education studies.

3.1.2. Dissecting "Traditional": Evidence of Interdimensional Tensions in Pesantren Studies

A major analytical shortcoming identified in the existing literature is the conflation of various institutional aspects under a single, all-encompassing rubric, namely, “traditional.” Scholarly taxonomies derived from Geertz

[10] and codified by Dhofier [11] often assume structural symmetry: if an institution is classified as salaf or “traditional,” it is assumed that its pedagogical methods, leadership structures, curriculum texts, and organizational forms are uniformly pre-modern. In contrast, khalaf or “modern” pesantren are expected to be fully modern in all domains. However, a rigorous postcolonial reading of the corpus of texts reveals that the term “traditional” operates across four distinct structural dimensions that do not always move in unison. By isolating these dimensions, this study demonstrates that pesantren often exhibit profound differences and tensions among their constituent elements.

3.1.2.1. Dimension 1: Pedagogical Transmission (Methodological Dimension)

In canonical education studies, the pedagogical characteristics of “traditional” pesantren are identified through individual and non-graded methods of oral transmission, particularly sorogan (individual reading in the presence of a teacher) and bandongan or wetonan (collective listening while examining a text) [11, pp. 28–32]. In Dhofier's classic categorization, these pedagogical practices are categorized as traditional because they lack standardized grade levels, a time-bound curriculum, and formal examinations:

“The main characteristic of the traditional teaching method in Islamic boarding schools is the freedom of students to choose the books and kiai they want, according to which learning progress is measured not by graded exams, but by the completion of reading a text completely” [11, p. 28].

However, pedagogical modernization does not automatically eliminate these methods. In contemporary empirical reality, institutions historically labeled as salaf (such as Pesantren Lirboyo or Ploso) have introduced the tiered madrasah diniyah system with formal examinations, class attendance lists, and structured levels (*awaliyah*, *wustā*, *‘ulyā*), while maintaining sorogan and bandongan as specific hermeneutical exercises [13, pp. 24–26]. In contrast, institutions considered “modern” (such as Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor) use classical tiered classroom instruction, but retain deeply traditional teacher-student disciplinary rituals and oral memorization checks. Thus, labeling an institution as “traditional” solely based on its pedagogical transmission conceals how modern assessment systems often coexist with classical textual guidance.

3.1.2.2. Dimension 2: Clerical Authority and Charisma (Leadership Dimension)

The second dimension used to define “traditional” relates to the nature of religious authority. Literature following Max Weber's sociology of authority particularly as articulated by Geertz [10, pp. 130–135] and Horikoshi [15, pp. 45–52], categorizes kiai leadership as personal, hereditary, and charismatic, derived from sacred lineage (nasab) and spiritual blessing (barakah). Within this traditional framework, the kiai functions as an absolute protector, centralizing administrative, spiritual, and financial decisions in an informal and patriarchal manner [11, pp. 55–58].

Nevertheless, textual analysis of contemporary institutional charters reveals a striking distinction between authority and administration. To gain legal recognition under Indonesia's Pesantren Law (Law No. 18/2019) [16] and access state funding, so-called “traditional” pesantren have formalized their governance into modern legal foundations, financial audit committees, and professional management boards. A kiai can retain undisputed spiritual and fatwa-issuing authority among his students (santri), while delegating administrative operations, human resources, and accreditation logistics to university-educated managers. The persistence of spiritual charisma does not indicate administrative backwardness; rather, it serves as a local governance mechanism that legitimizes modern organizational rationalization.

3.1.2.3. Dimension 3: Textual Canon and Epistemology (Curricular Dimension)

In educational taxonomy, the boundary between traditional and modern curricula is determined by the presence or absence of kitāb. turāth (classical Arabic scholastic texts) [11, pp. 50–54], [13, pp. 15–18]. The traditional curriculum is framed as an exclusive adherence to medieval texts that include Shafi'i jurisprudence (fiqh), Ash'ari theology (*tawhīd*), and Ghazalian ethics (*taṣawwuf*). The modern curriculum, in contrast, is characterized by the inclusion of secular sciences (mathematics, natural sciences, social studies) and foreign languages (English and standard modern Arabic) [12, pp. 78–82].

Textual analysis of contemporary Islamic boarding school curricula unsettles this stark dichotomy. Pesantren classified as strictly Salaf have integrated the state-mandated national curriculum and vocational training (ranging from agribusiness to digital programming) without sacrificing their intensive turāth reading cycle. As Lukens-Bull observes in her ethnographic study of curriculum hybridization:

“Pesantren education is not caught in an irresolvable struggle between past and present; rather, it represents a deliberate process of peaceful jihad in which Western technology and secular subjects are tamed under the higher moral authority of Islamic texts” [17, p. 98].

Therefore, an institution cannot simply be labeled “traditional” simply because it teaches 13th-century jurisprudence, nor can it be categorized as “modern” simply because it has a computer lab. The crucial educational question is not which texts exist, but how classical textual hermeneutics is used to critique, refine, and adapt modern scholarly knowledge.

3.1.2.4. Dimension 4: Institutional Morphology and Organization (Structural Dimension)

The final dimension relates to organizational architecture. Steenbrink [12, pp. 20–25] and Dhofier [11, pp. 44–48] historically defined traditional pesantren as informal learning communities and residences consisting of five structural elements: *kiai*, *santri*, mosque, *pondok*, and classical texts. In this classical imagination, pesantren are essentially non-formal and independent of state bureaucracy. Modernity, in this dimension, is measured by the establishment of formal educational structures: standardized curricula, state-recognized madrasahs (MI, MT, MA), vocational schools (SMK), and higher education institutions (Ma'had Aly or universities).

However, viewing this structural evolution through the lens of linear modernization would misinterpret the nature of institutional change. Field data and institutional profiles indicate that traditional Islamic boarding schools did not abandon their informal boarding culture when establishing formal schools; instead, they operate through a dual institutional morphology. Students attend formal, accredited secondary schools from morning until noon, and then return for intensive *sorogan* (religious study) and classical *tahfi* (recitation) sessions from afternoon until evening. The adoption of formal educational bureaucracy is an instrumental strategy to provide students with state-recognized diplomas, while informal Islamic boarding schools remain the primary venue for religious socialization and moral development.

3.1.2.5. Synthesis of Findings: Divergence and Asynchrony Between Dimensions

The analysis of these four dimensions yields a crucial empirical finding: the dimensions of “tradition” and “modernity” in Islamic boarding schools do not operate in harmony; they both exhibit substantial inconsistencies.

Table 1. Institutional Hybridity Matrix

Structural Dimensions	Tradition" Indicator	Modernity" Indicator	Empirical Divergence Pattern
Pedagogical Transmission	Sorogan, bandongan, non-graded development, oral confirmation (sanad)	Graded classes, formal exams, standardized syllabus	Salafist institutions adopted graded classes (madrasah diniyah) while preserving sorogan as the core of hermeneutics.
Clerical Authority	Charismatic, hereditary, spiritual blessing (barakah), patriarchal	Legal basis of bureaucracy (foundation), functional management, audit.	Spiritual charism remains at the heart of the doctrine, while modern administration handles logistics and legalities.
Textual Canon	Turāth (fiqh, tawhīd, taṣawwuf) Exclusive classical Arabic .	Integrated national curriculum, empirical science, vocational skills	Classical texts provide the moral-epistemic foundation, while modern science is tamed as an instrumental tool.
Institutional Morphology	Informal residential huts, unregulated by the state, centered around mosques.	Accredited schools (MI/MTs/MA/SMK), university faculties, digital campuses.	Pesantren operate with a dual structure: formal education for citizenship certification alongside non-formal boarding for character building.

As mapped in Table 1, a pesantren can occupy very different positions along these four axes simultaneously. An institution can be highly “traditional” in its textual canon (studying centuries-old texts) and its clerical authority (respecting the blessings of the *kiai*), while being fully “modern” in its institutional morphology (managing an accredited polytechnic) and technology adoption (maintaining a digital financial system and multimedia outreach). Conversely, an institution that identifies as “modern” may adopt Western-style classrooms while maintaining authoritarian and non-negotiable clerical control over institutional life.

Therefore, compressing these diverse dynamics into a monolithic binary of *salaf* versus *khalaf* or traditional versus modern produces analytical blindness. In the words of Aaron W. Hughes [3, pp. 42–46] , such binaries function as disciplinary taxidermy that forces a living and adaptable institution into a pre-constructed conceptual cage. By uncovering the tensions between these dimensions, this study demonstrates that pesantren are neither stagnant bastions of ancient tradition nor mere imitators of Western modernity; they are sophisticated institutional hybrids that actively negotiate, assemble, and redefine the boundaries of Islamic education.

3.2. Discussions

3.2.1. Limitations of the Explanation of the Binary System and the Phenomenon of Islamic Boarding School Hybridity

The tensions between the dimensions revealed in the previous section underscore the limitations of the traditional-modern binary in Islamic education studies. When educational researchers and policymakers

uncritically rely on this dichotomy, they inevitably inherit the epistemic blind spots of classical modernization theory. Derived from colonial-era Orientalist categorizations, this binary assumes a zero-sum, linear progression: an educational institution is considered “modern” only to the extent that it discards or reduces its “traditional” characteristics [12, pp. 82–86]. Consequently, when studies force pesantren into this rigid taxonomic spectrum, they encounter three fundamental conceptual impasses.

3.2.1.1. The Epistemological Impasse of the Binary Model

First, the binary model operates through a teleological and deficit-oriented bias. By establishing Western-style bureaucratic education systems as the universal benchmark of modernity, classical pesantren are discursively constructed as incomplete, flawed, or outdated foundations that must constantly “catch up” with the modern world [3, pp. 40–44], [2, pp. 45–48]. This formulation reflects Edward Said’s observation that Orientalist discourse constructs non-Western subjects as inherently lacking rationality and organizational capacity until intervened by Western institutional norms [2, p. 207]. In educational policy, this deficit framework routinely marginalizes indigenous pedagogical practices such as sorogan relational guidance or bandongan in-depth contemplative reading, reducing them to outdated relics rather than recognizing them as sophisticated methods of ethical and hermeneutical development.

Second, this binary framework suffers from a denial of agency. It conceptualizes pesantren as either passive victims of global modernity or as reactionary bastions blindly resisting socio-technological transformation. Both depictions strip Muslim educational actors of their historical agency. As Talal Asad argues, Islam is neither a set of unchanging medieval dogmas nor a passive reflection of external socio-economic forces; rather, it operates as a dynamic “discursive tradition” in which practitioners actively conceptualize the relationship between their foundational past, present realities, and future aspirations through reasoned debate and disciplined practice [18, pp. 20–24]. Within this discursive tradition, kiai and santri are neither helpless prisoners of ancient traditions, nor uncritical imitators of Western institutional forms.

Third, the binary model is structurally incapable of capturing the multidimensionality of institutions. Because it assumes symmetry across pedagogical, curricular, and managerial domains, it cannot account for institutions that simultaneously occupy multiple points along the traditional-modern continuum. When confronted with an institution like Pesantren Sidogiri, which strictly prohibits formal secular education and steadfastly preserves the classical Salaf curriculum, yet successfully operates one of the largest computerized Islamic microfinance (BMT) networks and digital publishing houses in Indonesia [19, pp. 112–116], the conventional dichotomy collapses. Based on existing typologies, such an institution constitutes an analytical anomaly: simultaneously “hyper-traditional” in doctrine and “hyper-modern” in techno-economic implementation.

3.2.1.2. Islamic Boarding Schools as Institutional Hybridity and Educational Bricolage

To overcome this conceptual impasse, Islamic education studies require a postcolonial framework that conceptualizes pesantren through the lens of institutional hybridity and educational bricolage. In postcolonial theory, particularly through the formulation of Homi K. Bhabha, hybridity is not a sign of contamination, cultural dilution, or incomplete imitation; rather, hybridity is a dynamic and subversive “Third Space” in which colonized and indigenous communities strategically rearticulate, negotiate, and reshape the cultural and institutional forms of dominant power [20, pp. 110–115].

When applied to Islamic education, hybridity suggests that the adoption of modern technology, state curricula, or formal management by pesantren does not represent a surrender of Islamic tradition to Western secular modernity. Rather, it represents a deliberate process of genuine institutional bricolage, a creative synthesis in which modern elements are adapted, tamed, and subordinated to the higher epistemic authority of classical Islamic scholarship [17, pp. 95–102]. As Azyumardi Azra observes, the pesantren’s historical survival lies precisely in its remarkable capacity to accommodate without surrender. Pesantren Dipajang This is a remarkable cultural and institutional: it is able to adopt madrasahs, universities, science laboratories, and information technology, without ever uprooting its epistemological roots from the classical Islamic intellectual tradition [21, p. 64].

This inter-institutional relationship is manifested in three interrelated operational strategies:

1. **Curricular Domestication:** Rather than replacing the Turāth books with the state curriculum, hybrid pesantren utilize the ethical and theological foundations of classical texts to adapt secular knowledge. Modern science is not accepted as a neutral and secular package, but is reframed as an instrument for fulfilling communal and religious responsibilities (farḍ kifāyah).
2. **Instrumental Rationalization in Governance:** Pesantren adopt formal foundations, financial audits, and digital administrative systems not to replace the charismatic and spiritual authority of the kiai, but to protect the institution’s autonomy and operational resilience from state interference and market volatility. The modern bureaucratic apparatus serves as an institutional shield to preserve classical spiritual development.
3. **Dual-Track Epistemology:** Through the recent development of Ma’had Aly (higher education institutions rooted exclusively in classical texts) accredited under the National Pesantren Law, pesantren have successfully institutionalized higher academic degrees within their indigenous scholarly frameworks. This development

overturns the colonial assumption that higher academic rigor can only occur through a Western-style university structure.

Therefore, by replacing the reductionist binary of “traditional versus modern” with a framework of institutional hybridity, scholars of Islamic education can recognize pesantren as sophisticated and multilayered sites of cultural translation. In this view, modernity is not a single, Western-centered package that Muslim societies must either fully embrace or defensively reject; rather, it is a contested terrain in which local institutions actively construct a variety of local modernities rooted in the richness of enduring Islamic traditions.

3.2.2. Postcolonial Implications for Islamic Education Studies and Policy

Deconstructing the traditional-modern dichotomy through postcolonial reading is not simply a theoretical exercise in discourse analysis; it carries profound and actionable implications for both the epistemology of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) and national education policy. When educational models unreflectively inherit colonial taxonomies, they perpetuate institutional alienation, where indigenous learning cultures are measured against criteria alien to their underlying philosophies. Postcolonial critique enables scholars and policymakers to move beyond decorative adaptations of tradition, fostering a genuine decolonization of Islamic educational frameworks across two key domains: pedagogical-epistemological renewal and policy reform.

3.2.2.1. Decolonization of Islamic Education Epistemology and Pedagogical Hierarchy

In contemporary Islamic education studies, postcolonial deconstruction demands an epistemological shift away from the uncritical adoption of Eurocentric educational standards. For decades, the Indonesian Islamic Education curriculum has imported pedagogical paradigms such as rigid behavioral objectives, mechanistic competency rubrics, and standardized cognitive taxonomies, which implicitly position empirical and measurable outcomes as the sole indicators of educational success [12, pp. 88–92]. Within this imported paradigm, local pesantren methodologies are often downplayed:

a. Relational Assistance Rehabilitation (Sorogan):

Sorogan is often dismissed as inefficient and time-consuming in modern pedagogical literature because it prioritizes one-on-one reading of texts. However, postcolonial rereadings reveal that sorogan operates as a sophisticated form of individualized tutoring, namely the teacher-student relationship (*talaqqī*). Sorogan evaluates not only cognitive retention but also nuanced phonological accuracy, grammatical parsing (*i'rāb*), hermeneutical comprehension, and affective character alignment. Rather than abandoning it in favor of standardized mass testing, modern Islamic education curriculum designers can integrate sorogan as a primary model for authentic individual assessment and moral supervision.

b. Refocusing Manners on Functional Competence:

Modern Western educational models often prioritize utilitarian skills designed specifically for industrial market compliance. In contrast, the core epistemological goal of the pesantren tradition is the cultivation of adab (ethical and spiritual discipline), as famously expressed by Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas [22, pp. 15–22]. Postcolonial approaches restore adab as a comprehensive educational paradigm rather than treating it as an additional “affective domain.” Within this framework, cognitive acquisition is inseparable from spiritual integrity, humility toward sacred knowledge, and communal responsibility.

c. Deconstructing the Secular-Religious Dichotomy:

Islamic education studies must go beyond the simplistic dichotomy that pits the “secular empirical sciences” (*'ulūm al-dunyā*) against the “sacred religious sciences” (*'ulūm al-dīn*). By drawing on the classical Islamic tradition of knowledge synthesis (*i'tibār and ijtihād*), modern Islamic education can present the empirical sciences not as alien secular interventions requiring defensive “Islamization,” but as integral manifestations of the observation of God's cosmic signs (*āyāt kawniyyah*).

3.2.2.2. Critical Re-evaluation of National Education Standardization and Policy

At the policy level, a postcolonial perspective offers a critical lens for evaluating state-driven standardization frameworks that have historically exerted disciplinary power over Islamic boarding schools. Under the guise of bureaucratic modernization, national education institutions (such as the Ministry of Religious Affairs and the Ministry of Education) routinely enforce homogenous accreditation metrics:

Standardized accreditation instruments (e.g., the BAN-S/M matrix) evaluate educational institutions primarily through measurable infrastructural and administrative benchmarks such as standardized classroom space, rigid periodic bell schedules, and formal administrative documentation [13, pp. 28–31]. When traditional Islamic boarding schools are forced to meet these uniform criteria to obtain state subsidies or operational permits, they face structural incentives to sacrifice their core textual learning. Intensive cycles of day and night turāth reading are often compressed or sidelined to accommodate standardized national exam practice. This constitutes what postcolonial scholars have identified as “institutional epistemicide” the gradual erosion of indigenous forms of learning under the pressure of bureaucratic homogenization.

The enactment of Law No. 18 of 2019 concerning Islamic Boarding Schools [16] marked a legal milestone by officially recognizing Islamic boarding schools through their three core functions: education, da'wah, and community empowerment. Community). However, postcolonial readings highlight that legal recognition remains vulnerable to bureaucratic subversion if implementing decrees continue to impose standardized school-based criteria on traditional salaf institutions. State policy must operationalize true "epistemic sovereignty" by granting full civil and legal equality (*mu'adalah*) to autonomous Islamic boarding school structures, such as Ma'had Aly (religious colleges) and Formal Diniyah Education (PDF), without forcing them to imitate the apparatus of secular universities.

Redefining "Quality" from an Indigenous Perspective: National policy should broaden the definition of educational quality. Rather than evaluating Islamic boarding schools solely through national exam scores, graduate employment rates in the formal sector, or physical infrastructure, the country's evaluation matrix should incorporate local indicators of institutional vitality: sustained mastery of classical Arabic hermeneutics, intergenerational community resilience, socio-religious conflict resolution capacity, and the moral integrity of graduates.

By reimagining educational studies and state policy through this postcolonial perspective, educational researchers and planners can engage with Islamic boarding schools not as historical anomalies awaiting modernization, but as sophisticated and sovereign educational traditions. This paradigm shift ensures that the pursuit of contemporary educational excellence does not result in the erasure of the knowledge of Indonesia's most resilient indigenous learning institutions.

4. CONCLUSION

This study critically examines the epistemological assumptions underlying the persistent binary classification of pesantren (Islamic boarding schools) into "traditional" (salaf) and "modern" (khalaf) within Islamic education studies. Through a postcolonial reading that operationalizes Edward W. Said's critique of representation alongside Talal Asad's conceptualization of discursive tradition, this study demonstrates that the traditional-modern dichotomy is not an objective and neutral description of local educational realities. Rather, it is an inherited colonial-Orientalist taxonomy later formalized by canonical sociological literature that imposes a normative and deficit-oriented hierarchy on Islamic educational institutions.

The main findings of this study demonstrate that reducing pesantren to a single linear continuum conceals substantial structural complexity. By breaking down the concept of "traditional" into four distinct operational dimensions: pedagogical transmission (sorogan/bandongan), clerical authority (charismatic leadership), and textual canon (kitāb), the study reveals that despite the dimensional differences between turāth (religious education) and institutional morphology (residence-based boarding schools versus formal education), these dimensions do not develop synchronously. Pesantren routinely exhibit profound institutional hybridity and educational bricolage, where classical Arabic hermeneutics and spiritual guidance coexist with formal state accreditation, professional management, and modern digital infrastructure. Consequently, the conventional binary fails in its explanatory task by misinterpreting strategic adaptation as ideological contradiction.

For the field of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) and national education policy, these findings offer a crucial paradigm shift toward epistemic sovereignty. Deconstructing this colonial legacy demands that pedagogical studies rehabilitate indigenous methods, such as sorogan, by recognizing them as sophisticated, individual frameworks for ethical and affective development (adab), rather than as outdated practices. At the policy level, state institutions must move beyond homogenous, school-centered accreditation metrics that risk the institutional epistemization of autonomous traditions. Full recognition of community and education under Law No. 18 of 2019 must protect the distinct epistemological integrity of institutions like Ma'had Aly and Formal Diniyah Education without forcing them to imitate secular organizational forms.

This study is conceptually limited to a critical analysis of canonical texts and national policy frameworks governing the representation of Islamic boarding schools (pesantren). While this discursive approach effectively uncovers the epistemic blind spots of existing scholarship, future research should expand these findings through multi-sited ethnographic investigations. Empirical research examining how diverse variants of Islamic boarding schools across the Indonesian archipelago negotiate state standardization, internalize digital learning, and articulate their identities will further enrich the development of a truly decolonized and non-reductionist epistemology of Islamic education.

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