

The Phenomenon of Feudalism in Islamic Boarding Schools: Examining the Social Structure of the Relationship between Kiai and Santri at the Ainul Yaqin Campus Islamic Boarding School

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Abstract: This article departs from the accusations of some people who consider that the social system in Islamic boarding schools reflects the practice of feudalism. This article aims to examine and uncover the existing reality, around the relationship between kiai and students through a case study at the Ainul Yaqin Campus Islamic Boarding School, University of Islam Malang. The research was carried out with direct observation, documentation and in-depth interviews with administrators and students. The results of the study show that the leadership style of the kiai in this Islamic boarding school is democratic and not based on heredity, while the relationship between kiai and students is built on the basis of science, example, and spiritual awareness. Practices such as solemnity and respect for students do not reflect the dominance of power, but the value of education that is rooted in Islamic manners and traditions. Therefore, social relations in this Islamic boarding school cannot be categorized as feudal, but as part of an education system that is full of moral and religious meaning.

Keywords: Feudalism; Islamic Boarding Schools; Social Structure.

Abstrak: Artikel ini didasarkan pada tuduhan beberapa orang bahwa sistem sosial di pesantren mencerminkan praktik feodal. Tujuan dari artikel ini adalah untuk mengkaji dan mengungkap realitas yang ada mengenai hubungan antara kiai (ulama Islam) dan santri (mahasiswa) melalui studi kasus di Pondok Pesantren Kampus Ainul Yaqin Universitas Islam Malang. Penelitian dilakukan melalui observasi langsung, dokumentasi, dan wawancara

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mendalam dengan pengurus dan mahasiswa. Kesimpulan dari penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa gaya kepemimpinan kiai di pondok pesantren ini bersifat demokratis dan tidak berdasarkan keturunan, sedangkan hubungan kiai-santri dibangun atas dasar pengetahuan, perilaku teladan, dan kesadaran spiritual. Praktik seperti pelayanan dan penghormatan terhadap siswa tidak mencerminkan dominasi kekuasaan, melainkan nilai-nilai pendidikan yang berakar pada tata krama dan tradisi Islam. Oleh karena itu, relasi sosial di pondok pesantren ini tidak dapat dikategorikan sebagai feodal, melainkan sebagai bagian dari sistem pendidikan yang kaya akan makna moral dan agama.

Kata Kunci: Feodalisme; Pesantren; Struktur Sosial.

A. Introduction

Islamic boarding schools as a traditional Islamic educational institution in Indonesia, it is often in the spotlight in contemporary social discourse (Musytari et al., 2025). Despite their significant role in fostering the knowledge, morals, and spirituality of the community, Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) have not escaped criticism, one of which concerns the strengthening of feudalism within their social structure. In addition to criticism voiced through social media, this issue became even more prominent in 2025 after a national television program aired a segment deemed disproportionate to pesantren life, sparking widespread backlash on social media. This issue led to accusations that the relationship between kiai (Islamic scholars) and santri (Islamic students) was viewed as an unequal power relationship. Consequently, many views emerged that kiai are often perceived as figures of high authority, while santri are held in a position of great respect and obedience without understanding the values and culture of the pesantren itself.

Speak Regarding Islamic boarding schools, the role of the Kiai, the highest authority, is inextricably linked. We understand that Islamic boarding schools are closely associated with the figure of the Kiai (or Buya in West Sumatra, Ajengan in West Java, Bendoro in Madura, and Tuan Guru in Lombok). In an Islamic boarding school, the Kiai is a central, authoritative figure, and the center of all policies and

changes. The Kiai plays a crucial role in any changes or innovations made in the Islamic boarding school (Ramli, 2017). Therefore, the policies and dynamics of Islamic boarding school life are greatly influenced by the leadership style of the kiai. The leadership patterns implemented by the kiai, both in decision-making and in building relationships with the students, will shape the character of the pesantren and determine the patterns of social relationships that develop within it.

The heightThe position of the kiai within the pesantren structure is often cited as the basis for accusations of feudalism. However, this assumption requires careful and contextual examination. The relationship between kiai and santri cannot be understood solely through the lens of structural power, but also through the values of knowledge, manners, devotion, and spiritual traditions that shape pesantren life. Therefore, this study aims to uncover the leadership style of a kiai figure at the Ainul Yaqin Campus Pesantren, Unisma. Furthermore, this article aims to question the national issue of feudalism in the pesantren world by examining the social structure of pesantren through the relationship between kiai and santri at the Ainul Yaqin Campus Pesantren, UNISMA Malang, to see whether the relationships that are built exhibit characteristics of feudalism or represent a different social pattern. By examining this more contextually, this article aims to provide a fairer and more proportional understanding of the relationship patterns that exist within it.

B. Research Methods

The researcher adopted a descriptive qualitative research method with a specific case study approach. This method and approach were intended to allow researchers to more easily describe and elaborate on abstract research results into flexible, coherent, and comprehensive qualitative data (Rukminingsih et al, 2020). The location for data collection, the researcher chose the 'Ainul Yaqin Campus Islamic Boarding School, Malang Islamic University with two classifications of informants, namely key informants consisting of the Daily Management Board (BPH) & supporting informants sourced from students by adopting a simple random sampling system.

Furthermore, the main research instruments applied to collect data included observation, interviews, and documentation. The first step involved direct observation of the subjects' lifestyles over a long period of time. The second step involved interviews with the Islamic boarding school's Daily Management Board (BPH) and several students to gain deeper insights into feudalism and the social structure of the relationship between the kyai and the students. The third step involved analyzing documents found during the field data collection process.

After the data is collected, the researcher continues with data analysis, which consists of a series of processes of processing, classifying, compiling, and identifying data, so that research data is obtained that is coherent with the formulation raised (Saleh, 2017). The data analysis process is adopted from the proprietary design Miles, Huberman, & Saldana (2014) which interactively and sequentially includes four stages: 1) data collection, 2) data condensation, 3) data presentation, and 4) conclusion drawing. Then, in the final stage, the data is tested for its validity using the source and technique triangulation method by the researcher to ensure the accuracy of the data can be accounted for.

C. Results and Discussion

The National Issue of Feudalism in Islamic Boarding Schools

The issue of feudalism in Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) has recently resurfaced, particularly through social media and online news. One trigger came from a social media video comparing the classical feudal system to practices carried out by certain individuals in Islamic boarding schools. The video sparked debate, which was then reinforced by opinions circulating on various digital platforms. In an NU Online article written by Labib (2015), it is stated that accusations against Islamic boarding schools as feudal institutions are usually based on the practice of devotion of students to the kyai, such as making coffee, farming, or helping to build Islamic boarding schools without compensation.

However, upon closer and more contextual examination, the relationship between kyai and santri in the Islamic boarding school system cannot be directly equated with the

structure of classical feudalism. Feudalism is synonymous with a socio-political system that places one elite group as the holder of absolute power and bequeaths privileges to certain groups, often through exploitation of the lower classes. Meanwhile, in Islamic boarding schools, the relationship between kiai and santri is built on the foundation of scholarly values, spirituality, and moral awareness, as illustrated at the Ainul Yaqin Campus Islamic Boarding School at Unisma.

In-depth interviews revealed that the relationship between the kiai and his students is based on the principle of mutual priority. Students demonstrate loyalty and devotion to the kiai not out of compulsion or structural pressure, but rather as a form of *tawadhu'* (humility) and *khidmah* (service) based on spiritual awareness. Furthermore, a good kiai does not immediately exploit his authoritative position for personal gain, but rather prioritizes the needs and learning of his students. The tasks assigned are also educational, such as memorization or scientific learning, the benefits of which return to the students themselves. This aligns with Fahrudin Al Razi's 10 detailed ideas on the ethics of students towards the kiai, one of which is that students demonstrate an attitude of *khidmah*, namely a readiness to serve the kiai in all situations and conditions (Syukriyah, 2019).

Thus, the submission that emerges in Islamic boarding schools needs to be distinguished between *tawadhu'* and feudal practices. *Tawadhu'* is an attitude that arises from inner awareness and sincerity, thus having the value of worship in a religious perspective. Meanwhile, feudal submission tends to arise due to structural coercion and exploitative power relations, so it does not have the same spiritual value. This is also discussed in a study discussing the role of kyai's role models in shaping the *tawadhu'* attitude of students, in which Miftahul Jannah, as the head of the Daruf Falah 5 Islamic boarding school in Jombang, revealed that sincerity is an important element in devotion at the boarding school, both in guiding students, serving parents, and carrying out duties as a caregiver. According to him, sincerity will bring benefits, both in the present and in the future, while without sincerity, all that is felt is mere fatigue (Zahrotunnahdliyah, Divine, & Muslih, 2025).

Furthermore, in the context of the relationship between kiai and santri, it is important to emphasize that the practice of respect is not merely a form of power relations, but an integral part of the values of Islamic boarding school education, imbued with spiritual meaning. One of the primary values to be instilled through the students' respect for the kiai is the value of blessing (barakah). This value is an important foundation in the Islamic boarding school tradition, which is not only symbolic but also spiritual. This is also reflected in daily practices. The relationship between the kiai (Islamic scholars) and students at the Ma'hadutholabah Islamic Boarding School in Babakan Tegal has a positive impact on the students' character development, religious practices, and social attitudes. Devotion, obedience, and respect for the kiai and his family are carried out sincerely for the sake of gaining the blessings of knowledge and prayer. From this relationship, a sense of togetherness and mutual respect develops, as well as the development of independence, social awareness, and leadership within the students (Misbah, 2019).

The blessings referred to are not merely material or worldly benefits, but refer to the sustainability and usefulness of knowledge in the lives of students, both in this world and the hereafter. This aligns with the opinion expressed by Ramdan & Usman (2021) that the attitude of respect and full obedience of students to the kyai is not solely because the kyai is considered to have absolute authority, but is based on the belief that the kyai is an intermediary for God's grace that is channeled to the students, both for the good of this world and the hereafter. In the tradition of Islamic boarding schools, the saying has long been known: "With respect, knowledge is useful, with service, status increases." This expression is not just a hereditary proverb, but also a philosophical value that is believed and practiced in real life in the lives of students. There is an expression such as "with respect, knowledge is useful, with service, status increases" reflects the belief that manners and service to teachers will bring blessings of knowledge and an increase in the quality of life. However, a good and wise kyai also does not demand excessive respect, let alone to the point of bothering or exploiting students.

From this explanation, it can be concluded that accusations against Islamic boarding schools as feudal institutions generally stem from a misunderstanding of the practice of devotion, which is part of the educational process and the character formation of students. While it cannot be denied that in some cases, individuals abuse their positions, this cannot be considered representative of the entire Islamic boarding school system. Feudalism in Islamic boarding schools is not an inherent characteristic, but rather a deviation perpetrated by certain individuals.

Therefore, the issue of feudalism in Islamic boarding schools is more accurately positioned as a myth born of inaccurate generalization, rather than a structural fact of the Islamic boarding school system itself. As educational institutions based on values and spirituality, Islamic boarding schools essentially teach respect rooted in sincerity and knowledge, not oppression or unilateral domination.

Leadership Style of Kiai at the Ainul Yaqin Campus Islamic Boarding School, Unisma Malang

The Ainul Yaqin Campus Islamic Boarding School is currently led by a kiai named KH. Taqijuddin Alawy, ST, MT, who has mastered many scientific fields, including in addition to religious knowledge, he is an expert in the field of engineering. This Campus Islamic Boarding School is a student boarding school that still adopts traditional pondok learning methods such as bandongan recitations or discussion forums such as Bahtsul Masa'il. This is one effort to preserve the traditions of the pondok amidst the development of modern learning under the auspices of educational institutions at Islamic higher education institutions.

Before presenting the social patterns present at the Ainul Yaqin Campus Islamic Boarding School, it is important to emphasize that the use of the term feudalism in Islamic boarding schools remains a contemporary phenomenon. The English word "feudalism," derived from the Latin word feudum, has a similar meaning to fief, namely a plot of land granted to a vassal (a subordinate ruler or military leader) as compensation, but only temporarily, for the duration of his tenure or service to a lord (landlord). Thus, feudalism is closely related to the system of land ownership and control. Entering the 17th century, historians' use of the term feudalism began to expand

to encompass social aspects, particularly the lives of land workers in landowners' territories. This is where the term "feudal society" emerged, describing a social structure with a rigid hierarchy. This term also began to be used to satirize the authoritarian and conservative behavior of rulers who demanded excessive respect and insisted on upholding outdated, irrelevant values (Rahmawati, 2023).

According to the Big Indonesian Dictionary, feudalism is a social system that places position or rank as the main benchmark, not work performance (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2016). Feudalism is also known as a form of power exercised by a particular group that obtains special rights over the people under its control (Iddian, 2022).

In the world of education, feudalism refers to a belief that places educators as the absolute authority in the learning process. In this system, students are positioned as completely subservient to the educator's direction. This relationship pattern also reinforces a culture of seniority, where older or more experienced individuals are considered always right, while younger individuals tend to be considered wrong, with no room for dialogue (Iddian, 2022).

From the various definitions above, when related to the world of education in Islamic boarding schools, Feudalism in Education in Islamic Boarding Schools can be defined as a system of social relations that places the kiai as the highest authoritative figure who has absolute power in determining the direction of education and the lives of students. In this structure, students are positioned as parties who are completely submissive and obedient to every decision and direction of the kiai, without adequate space to express opinions or engage in critical dialogue. This relationship is often not only based on respect, but also on a hierarchy of power that places the kiai as an undeniable figure. This pattern reflects the characteristics of feudalism, where position or status becomes the main source of legitimacy of power, not achievement or knowledge alone. Therefore, it can be questioned, what is the pattern of social interaction between kiai and students at the Ainul Yaqin Unisma Campus Islamic Boarding School that can provide an answer to whether or not there are characteristics of feudalism in the Islamic boarding school.

Kiai are generally known to many as leaders and key decision-makers in Islamic boarding schools. However, according to Turmudi, he stated that kiai are not limited to Islamic boarding schools (Purnomo, 2016). He categorized kiai into four types: pesantren kiai, tarekat kiai, political kiai, and platform kiai. In this case, a pesantren kiai is a leader who focuses on teaching activities at the pesantren. Kiai with this type of leadership style generally earn full obedience from students, guardians, and the surrounding community. This obedience is based on the belief that loyalty to the kiai is believed to be able to guarantee their continued existence in the future. Second, the tarekat kiai whose activities build the intelligence of the heart (inner world) of Muslims. Because the tarekat is a formal institution, its followers are also registered as official members of the movement. Third, political kiai are those who show great attention to the development of the organization, especially Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), which is generally manifested through their direct involvement in political practices. Fourth, the stage kiai is a da'wah figure known for actively delivering religious sermons in various regions. Through their da'wah activities, they play a role in spreading Islamic teachings and developing the religious life of the community.

Based on the classification of the kiai figure above, this study will focus more on the kiai of Islamic boarding schools who are involved in the world of Islamic boarding schools. Then in this case, based on the results of documentation and observations, it was revealed that the Kiai at the Ainul Yaqin Campus Islamic Boarding School, UNISMA Malang, has a different position from the traditional pesantren leadership pattern in general. It is known that the kiai at this pesantren is not hereditary from the family of the founder of the pesantren, but is appointed directly by the Islamic University of Malang Foundation (UNISMA) through an official Decree (SK). This appointment indicates that the kiai's leadership is structural and institutional, not personal or based on lineage as is often found in the salaf pesantren model or family pesantren.

In daily leadership practice, kiai apply a leadership style that tends toward democracy. This is reflected in the decision-making process, which involves other leadership elements, such as the head and secretary of the pondok. According to

Gunawan (2017), democratic leadership is a leadership style that views humans as noble beings. Leaders with this style strive to develop their own capacity, encourage the success of their subordinates, are open to suggestions and criticism, and prioritize teamwork with all members of the organization (Fahri et al., 2022). However, in several strategic situations related to the principles and ideals of the Islamic boarding school, the kiai still uses his authority independently without going through deliberation (Syafaat et al., 2024). In this context, the kiai's decision is final and must be followed by staff and administrators, with no room for objection. This demonstrates flexibility in leadership styles, capable of balancing the need for participation with the urgency of upholding the pondok's values.

According to a member of the Islamic Boarding School's Daily Management Board revealed that the leadership style of the kiai at the Ainul Yaqin Campus Islamic Boarding School, Unisma, can be categorized as democratic and charismatic. The kiai not only regulates the policies and management direction of the boarding school administratively, but also actively shapes the boarding school's culture through direct presence in teaching activities. The kiai also teaches in dirosah classes and other boarding school activities, demonstrating active involvement in the educational process, not merely as a symbol of structural authority.

In terms of communication, kiai are known for their warm yet formal communication style. This approach strikes a balance between emotional closeness with students and staff, while maintaining their institutional authority as leaders of the pondok. This communication style contributes to creating a conducive, authoritative, yet friendly and comfortable atmosphere in the pesantren.

This leadership style is reflected in the daily activities of the Islamic boarding school. Kiai are able to build a stable and directed Islamic boarding school culture, while maintaining academic and spiritual values. Leadership, implemented with a balance between structural power and a personal approach, makes the Islamic boarding school environment a learning space that prioritizes not only discipline but also exemplary values and dialogue.

Social Structure at the Ainul Yaqin Unisma Campus Islamic Boarding School through Social Relations between Kyai and Santri

The social relations between the kiai and the students at the Ainul Yaqin Campus Islamic Boarding School, UNISMA Malang, demonstrate a dynamic and open pattern. Interviews revealed that the kiai provide ample space for the students to express their opinions, ask questions, and engage in direct discussions. The kiai do not impose rigid restrictions on interactions and instead encourage open communication. This aligns with Aries Djaenuri's (2015) perspective. Salmi (2018) At the very least, a leader must possess several qualities, one of which is openness. An open leader is willing to engage in discussion, is honest and fair in all matters, is wise in decision-making, and accepts criticism and suggestions with an open heart. However, in reality, these relationships have not yet been fully established. The main obstacle comes from the students themselves, who still feel awkward, resulting in limited social interactions. In fact, in principle, a kiai is not someone who intentionally creates distance, but rather reflects a humble and non-feudal leadership attitude.

The students' respect for the kiai at this Islamic boarding school generally does not stem from coercion or authoritarian power relations, but rather from the students' personal awareness. This attitude of *tawadhu'* (humility) and *ta'dzim* (respect) grows from the understanding that a teacher is worthy of respect for their knowledge, not their power. This awareness is also often shaped by the students' previous experiences of studying at the Islamic boarding school. However, during the orientation period for new students, there are still rules and directives that emphasize the importance of good manners toward teachers. These rules are educational, not restrictive, and aim to shape the students' character to respect knowledge and *ulama*. This is not unique to the Ainul Yaqin Campus Islamic Boarding School; at the Mansyaul Ulum Islamic Boarding School, students establish interpersonal relationships characterized by respect for others, especially the kiai and *ustadz*. This respect is demonstrated through polite speech, bowing when walking in front of teachers, kissing their hands, and promptly carrying out their instructions (Pratama et al., 2025; Arifin, 2024).

A healthy social relationship between the kiai and his students is also reflected in the practice of *khidmah*, which is the students' readiness to assist the kiai as a form of

worship. Students are happy to serve their teacher, believing that helping a learned person is a noble deed. On the other hand, a good kiai tries not to burden his students, and shows empathy and appreciation for the assistance provided. When this mutual understanding is established, the relationship between the kiai and students will be harmonious and far from practices resembling feudalism. This aligns with the results of studies that discuss the relationship between kiai and students, which can be likened to that of a parent and child. The kiai not only serves as a teacher of religious knowledge, but also as a guide, role model, and prays for the students in their lives. This closeness encompasses both rational and spiritual aspects in depth. The kiai shows affection to the students as if they were their own children and serves as an ideal role model for them (Noor, 2019).

Another view also emphasizes that the best form of respect from students to their kiai is not merely symbolic, but rather through concrete behaviors such as listening attentively during the learning process and demonstrating diligence in pursuing knowledge. This is considered more essential than formalistic or even extreme forms of respect. Such practices, sometimes found in other Islamic boarding schools by certain individuals, have the potential to create misunderstandings in the eyes of the general public.

Compared to some traditional Islamic boarding schools, the Ainul Yaqin Campus Islamic Boarding School has a more adaptive approach to student culture. As a boarding school that manages students from among its students, its leadership approach and social relations are adjusted to avoid resistance. This is a key difference from the relationship patterns in traditional Islamic boarding schools, where highly hierarchical leadership systems are sometimes still found, sometimes carried out by certain individuals who abuse their power. Therefore, accusations that Islamic boarding schools are fertile grounds for feudal practices are irrelevant. Instead, the social relations built are based on the principle of mutual respect and an awareness of the importance of knowledge.

D. Conclusion

Based on the research results, it can be concluded that the accusation of Islamic boarding schools as institutions that implement a feudal system is not entirely accurate. At the Ainul Yaqin Campus Islamic Boarding School, Unisma Malang, the relationship between kiai and santri is based on knowledge, respect, and spirituality. The kiai's democratic and charismatic leadership style, as well as open and educative social relations, indicate that the social structure of this pesantren is participatory and non-exploitative. The practice of service and the attitude of tawadhu' (reverence) of the santri emerge from spiritual awareness, not hierarchical pressure. This research makes an important contribution in correcting the misunderstanding of some parties who view the kiai-santri relationship as a form of feudalism. This accusation arises from a misunderstanding of the pesantren tradition that places adab and blessings as part of the educational process, not a form of power domination. Therefore, the issue of feudalism in pesantren is more appropriately viewed as a myth resulting from misunderstanding and generalization, rather than a structural fact within the pesantren system.

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