
THE SPIRITUALIZATION OF ARABIC GRAMMAR: Theological Meaning-Making of *Nahwu* in a Salaf Pesantren in Indonesia

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Abstract: This article examines how Arabic grammar (*nahwu*) is theologically reinterpreted as a medium for ethical and spiritual formation within a *Salaf* Pesantren in Indonesia. In response to contemporary moral challenges confronting pesantren communities, the study explores a pedagogical approach known as *Spiritual Nahwu*, developed at Pondok Pesantren Babussalam Pagelaran. Employing a phenomenological–hermeneutical methodology, the research analyzes how *kiai* and *ustâdh* reconfigure *nahwu* from a technical–linguistic discipline into a spiritually grounded epistemology oriented toward *tazkiyat al-nafs*. Drawing on in-depth interviews, participant observation, and textual analysis, the findings demonstrate that grammatical categories are interpreted as symbolic representations of moral and spiritual states, enabling *nahwu* to function as a mode of theological meaning-making and ethical internalization. This pedagogical model integrates cognitive, affective, and spiritual dimensions of learning, thereby challenging the modern separation between knowledge and morality. The article contributes to scholarship on Islamic education by illustrating how auxiliary Islamic sciences can serve as sites of epistemic agency and decolonial knowledge production rooted in pesantren traditions.

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Introduction

Indonesian *pesantren*, as traditional Islamic boarding schools, are increasingly confronted with moral challenges that threaten their foundational mission of ethical and spiritual formation. In 2023, the Indonesian Child Protection Commission (KPAI) recorded approximately 3.800 cases of bullying nationwide, nearly half of which occurred within educational institutions, including *pesantren*.¹ High-profile incidents—most notably the fatal assault of a student at Pondok Pesantren Al Hanafiyyah in Kediri in February 2024, alongside a comparable case in central Java—have intensified public scrutiny and prompted the Ministry of Religious Affairs and KPAI to initiate child-friendly *pesantren* programs and regulatory measures aimed at preventing institutional violence.² The moral predicament has been further exacerbated by cases of sexual abuse perpetrated by *pesantren* authorities. Between 2016 and 2024, thirteen female *santri* on Kangean Island were reportedly subjected to repeated sexual exploitation by a *pesantren* leader, culminating in his prosecution under child protection laws.³ In addition, the inability of some *santri* to ethically adapt to digital technologies—manifested in smartphone misuse, disciplinary violations, and disengagement from *pesantren* routines—reflects broader deficiencies in ethical digital literacy.⁴

¹ “KPAI Ungkap Sekitar 3.800 Kasus Perundungan Sepanjang 2023, Hampir Separuh Terjadi Di Lembaga Pendidikan - Suara Surabaya,” accessed January 8, 2026, <https://www.suarasurabaya.net/kelanakota/2024/kpai-ungkap-sekitar-3-800-kasus-perundungan-sepanjang-2023-hampir-separuh-terjadi-di-lembaga-pendidikan/>.

² Istimewa, Kontributor, and Moh Khoeron, “Kemenag Sikapi Kasus Kekerasan di Pesantren, dari Penguatan Regulasi sampai Sanksi Tegas,” Kementerian Agama Republik Indonesia, February 29, 2024, <https://kemenag.go.id/nasional/kemenag-sikapi-kasus-kekerasan-di-pesantren-dari-penguatan-regulasi-sampai-sanksi-tegas-ibOWc>.

³ “Kasus kekerasan seksual: Belasan santri diduga jadi korban pimpinan pesantren di Sumenep,” BBC News Indonesia, June 16, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/indonesia/articles/c93y3x2l3qeo>.

⁴ Abd Azi, Fika Anjana, and Ahmad Affani, “Analisis Perilaku Sosial Santri Sebagai Dampak dari Penggunaan Gadget Di Pondok Pesantren Manbaul Hikam Desa Tegaldojo Kecamatan Tegalsiwalan Kabupaten Probolinggo,” *Mimbar Kampus*:

Collectively, these developments point to a pattern of moral disorientation within pesantren, echoing recent scholarly critiques that highlight tensions between pesantren's humanitarian ideals—such as moral discipline and tolerance—and the disruptive pressures of contemporary social change.⁵

This situation underscores the urgency of pedagogical innovation within pesantren—one that moves beyond predominantly punitive or purely normative approaches toward integrative educational frameworks capable of fostering sustained moral internalization. Although pesantren have historically emphasized character formation through religious instruction and ritual practice, processes of globalization and modernization have increasingly fragmented the cognitive, affective, and spiritual dimensions of learning.⁶ Within this context, auxiliary Islamic sciences, particularly *nahwu* (Arabic grammar), represent an underexplored pedagogical resource for ethical cultivation. When reinterpreted beyond its technical function, *nahwu* may serve as a medium for *tażkīyat al-nafs* (purification of the soul), thereby contributing to the moral refinement of *santri*. Such a reconceptualization resonates with broader calls for the decolonization of Islamic education, which seek to reclaim indigenous epistemologies from dominant secural paradigms while reinforcing pesantren's intellectual autonomy.⁷

In classical Islamic scholarship, the Arabic language was never conceived merely as a utilitarian instrument for textual comprehension; rather, it was understood as a constellation of *āyāt* (divine signs) imbued with ethical and ontological significance. Prominent Sufi scholars such as al-Qushayrī (d. 465 H) and Ibn

Jurnal Pendidikan dan Agama Islam 23, no. 2 (June 2024): 1186–94, <https://doi.org/10.47467/mk.v23i2.3832>.

⁵ Adri Lundeto, "Islamic Education for Adolescents in the Era of Disruption in Overcoming the Moral Crisis," *Paradigma* 20, no. 2 (August 2023): 323–39, <https://doi.org/10.33558/paradigma.v20i2.7135>.

⁶ Andi Warisno et al., "Transformative Islamic Education Management in Madrasah and Pesantren Integrating Tradition and Digital Innovation," *Journal of Cultural Analysis and Social Change*, November 25 (2025): 276–89, <https://doi.org/10.64753/jcasc.v10i2.1596>.

⁷ Syafik Ubaidila et al., "Decolonization of Islamic Education and Efforts to Achieve Academic Independence: A Case Study of Ma'had Aly Lirboyo Kediri," *Tribakti: Jurnal Pemikiran Keislaman* 36, no. 2 (June 2025): 363–84, <https://doi.org/10.33367/kgvvg516>.

‘Ajībah (d. 1224 H) exemplify this epistemic orientation by construing *nahwu* not simply as a linguistic discipline but as a spiritual pathway toward self-knowledge and divine awareness.⁸ Al-Qushayrī’s *Nahw al-Qulūb*, for instance, allegorically interprets grammatical categories—such as *rafa* (nominative case)—as symbolic postures of spiritual elevation toward God. This interpretive tradition situates grammatical structures within a broader ethical and mystical framework, thereby reorienting linguistic study toward moral introspection and spiritual refinement.⁹

Despite this rich intellectual heritage, contemporary studies of *nahwu* in pesantren contexts have largely remained confined to technical linguistics and instructional effectiveness, with limited attention on its ethical and spiritual dimensions in *santri* formation.¹⁰ Addressing this lacuna, several *kiai* at Pondok Pesantren Babussalam Pagelaran have developed a pedagogical approach commonly referred to as “spiritual *nahwu*,” which integrates Arabic grammar with Sufi hermeneutics to cultivate ethical awareness. At Pondok Pesantren Babussalam, Malang, East Java, this pedagogical reconfiguration unfolds through the *kiai*’s reflective praxis. It begins with a critical appraisal of the limitations of conventional grammar instruction and gradually develops into a ritualized pedagogical framework oriented toward the moral transformation of *santri*. Kiai Saiful Bahri initiated this reinterpreting approach following sustained observation of a

⁸ Abū al-Qāsim al-Qushayrī, *Nahw al-Qulūb* (Kairo: Maktabat ‘Ālam al-Fikr, 1994); Abū al-Abbās Ahmād bin Ibni ‘Ajībah, *al-Futūḥat al-Quddūsiyah fī Sharḥ al-Muqaddimah al-Jurūmiyah* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyah, 2007).

⁹ Rizki Fathul Huda and Cahya Buana, “Sufistic Language Style in al-Qushayrī’s *Nahw al-Qulub*,” *Lingua: Jurnal Ilmu Bahasa dan Sastra* 16, no. 2 (2021): 237–48, <https://doi.org/10.18860/ling.v16i2.11817>.

¹⁰ Limas Dodi, “Metode Pengajaran Nahwu Shorof; Ber-Kaca dari Pengalaman Pesantren,” *Tafāqquh: Jurnal Penelitian dan Kajian Keislaman* 1, no. 1 (June 2013): 100–122, <https://doi.org/10.52431/tafaqquh.v1i1.7>; Habibah Habibah, “Transformasi Pengajaran Nahwu-Sharaf dalam Era Aplikasi Mobile,” *Inaya: Journal of Arabic Studies* 3, no. 1 (June 2025): 48–56, <https://doi.org/10.55210/h0c8hd15>; Ahmad Syariffudin Yahya and Imam Fauzi, “Nahwu Learning for Madrasah Tsanawiyah Students at Islamic Boarding Schools: Pembelajaran Nahwu pada Siswa Madrasah Tsanawiyah di Pondok Pesantren,” *Academia Open* 4 (June 2021). <https://doi.org/10.21070/acopen.4.2021.3031>; M. Wildan Awwiby, Afif Kholisun Nashoih, and Aufia Aisa, “Pengembangan Media Pembelajaran Nahwu Berbasis Macromedia Flash 8 untuk Meningkatkan Hasil Belajar Santri,” *Al-Lahjab: Jurnal Pendidikan, Bahasa Arab, dan Kajian Linguistik Arab* 4, no. 2 (2021): 524–31, <https://doi.org/10.32764/allahjah.v4i2.2530>.

recurring disjunction between senior *santri*'s technical mastery of Arabic grammar and their ethical comportment. Despite demonstrable competence in syntactic analysis, many exhibited emotional volatility, impatience, and limited self-regulation, indicating that grammatical proficiency had not translated into moral internalization. This site was selected for investigation over other pesantren due to its distinctive Salaf—modern orientation, which uniquely synthesizes rigorous textualism with Sufi-inspired ethical pedagogy—a rare hybrid within Indonesia's polarized religious landscape, often characterized by either strict Salafi literalism or mainstream Nahdlatul Ulama traditionalism. This configuration renders Babussalam an especially compelling locus for examining decolonial pedagogical responses to contemporary moral crises.¹¹ Within this framework, canonical texts such as *al-Jurūmīyah* are not merely taught as grammatical manuals but ritualized as instruments of *muhāsabah* (self-reflection), wherein grammatical rules function as symbolic resources for moral discipline and spiritual orientation. This practice simultaneously resonates with classical Sufi epistemologies and reflects pesantren's ongoing efforts to reclaim localized forms of religious knowledge.¹²

Drawing on a phenomenological hermeneutical methodology, this study examines the construction and enactment of spiritual *nahwu* by *kiai* and *ustādh* at Pondok Pesantren Babussalam Pagelaran. It explores how this pedagogical model operates as a mode of theological meaning-making and ethical formation among *santri*.¹³ In

¹¹ Mohamad Shodiq, "Upaya Pondok Pesantren Modern Babussalam Banjarejo Pagelaran dalam meningkatkan keterampilan santri" (undergraduate, Universitas Islam Negeri Maulana Malik Ibrahim, 2010), <http://etheses.uin-malang.ac.id/45120/>.

¹² Miftahur Rahman, "The Integration of Nahwu Science and Tasawwuf Moral Education in the Book of *Nahwu al-Qulub* by Imam Qusyairi for Arabic Language Learning," *Dinasti International Journal of Education Management and Social Science* 7, no. 2 (December 2025): 1961–68, <https://doi.org/10.38035/dijemss.v7i2.5738>.

¹³ John W. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches* (SAGE, 2007); Lundeto, "Islamic Education for Adolescents in the Era of Disruption in Overcoming The Moral Crisis"; Warisno et al., "Transformative Islamic Education Management in Madrasah and Pesantren Integrating Tradition and Digital Innovation"; Ubaidila et al., "Decolonization of Islamic Education and Efforts to Achieve Academic Independence"; Huda and Buana, "Sufistic Language Style In Al-Qushayri's *Nahw al-Qulub*"; Rahman, "The Integration of Nahwu Science and Tasawwuf Moral Education in the Book of *Nahwu Al-Qulub* by Imam

this process, the *kiai* emerges as a central epistemic agent—a “living interpreter” who reconfigures *nahwu* as a medium for *tazkiyat al-nafs*, consistent with classical Islamic conceptions of knowledge as a transformative practice oriented toward moral and spiritual refinement.¹⁴ Based on in-depth interviews, three weeks of participant observation in *Nahwu* classes, and a thematic analysis of instructional texts interpreted through a Sufi lens, this study demonstrates how spiritual *Nahwu* integrates the cognitive, affective, and spiritual dimensions of learning. Ultimately, this pedagogical paradigm offers substantive conceptual contributions to discussions on ethical education, pesantren pedagogy, and the broader project of epistemic decolonization within Islamic education.

Integrative Knowledge in Pesantren: *Nahwu*, Sufism, and Moral Pedagogy

The epistemological foundations of Indonesian pesantren pedagogy are deeply rooted in classical Islamic scholarship, primarily transmitted through the canonical *kitab kuning* (yellow books). This textual corpus encompasses jurisprudence (*fiqh*), theology (*tawḥīd*), Sufism (*taṣawwuf*), and the auxiliary linguistic sciences of Arabic grammar (*nahwu* and *ṣarf*).¹⁵ As Abdurrahman Wahid observes, the *kitab kuning* provides santri with an integrated intellectual framework that combines doctrinal instruction with epistemic discipline, enabling critical engagement with diverse juridical and theological traditions.¹⁶ Beyond its instructional function, this corpus operates as a repository

Qusyairi for Arabic Language Learning”; Idi Warsah et al., “Teacher’s Ridha in The Ethics of Santri Khidmah: A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Study on Pesantren’s Cultural Resistance to ‘Santri Slavery’ Narratives in Digital Public Spaces,” *AJIS: Academic Journal of Islamic Studies*, November 1 (2025): 295–324, <https://doi.org/10.29240/ajis.v10i2.15012>.

¹⁴ Zamakhsyari Dhofier, *Tradisi Pesantren: Studi Pandangan Hidup Kyai dan Visinya Mengenai Masa Depan Indonesia* (Jakarta: LP3ES, 2011); Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali, *Ayyūhā al-Walād* (Jeddah: Dār al-Minhāj, 2008).

¹⁵ Martin van Bruinessen, “Pesantren and Kitab Kuning: Continuity and Change in a Tradition of Religious Learning,” Wolfgang Marschall (ed.), *Texts from the Islands: Oral and Written Traditions of Indonesia and the Malay World* (Berne: Institute of Ethnology, University of Berne, 1994); Martin van Bruinessen, *Kitab Kuning Pesantren, dan Tarekat: Tradisi-tradisi Islam di Indonesia* (Bandung: Mizan, 1995).

¹⁶ Abdurrahman Wahid, *Mengerakkan Tradisi: Esai-Esai Pesantren* (Yogyakarta: Lkis Pelangi Aksara, 2001).

of inherited knowledge, a mechanism for preserving longstanding scholarly traditions, and a site for cultivating analytical rigor within pesantren learning environments.¹⁷

Pedagogically, pesantren education is structured around an integrative model in which *fiqh* supplies normative legal reasoning, while *taṣawwuf* cultivates moral sensitivity and spiritual introspection. These dimensions are mediated through distinctive instructional practices, such as *sorogan* recitation and the vernacularization of Arabic texts using *Pegon* script, which render complex religious knowledge culturally accessible without severing it from its classical roots.¹⁸ This pedagogical configuration reflects a dynamic equilibrium between textual fidelity and contextual adaptability. In recent scholarship, such adaptability has been interpreted as a form of epistemic resilience that enables pesantren to negotiate modern pressures while reclaiming indigenous Islamic epistemologies from Eurocentric educational paradigms.¹⁹ Within this context, the spiritualization of auxiliary sciences—particularly *nahwu*—emerges as a meaningful pedagogical strategy for addressing contemporary moral challenges through internal ethical cultivation rather than external regulation.

Within the pesantren curriculum, *nahwu* occupies a central epistemic position due to its indispensability for interpreting undiacriticized Arabic texts and accessing primary sources of Islamic knowledge, including the Qur’ān, ḥadīth, and classical commentaries.²⁰ Instruction in *nahwu* typically begins with foundational texts such as *al-Ajurūmiyah* and culminates in advanced works like *Alfiyah ibn Mālik*, reflecting its status as a gateway

¹⁷ “Mengenal Lebih Jauh Kajian Kitab Kuning di Pondok Pesantren,” NU Online, accessed January 9, 2026, <https://lampung.nu.or.id/pernik/mengenal-lebih-jauh-kajian-kitab-kuning-di-pondok-pesantren-MK4s7>.

¹⁸ Rustam Ibrahim, “Pemaknaan Jawa Pegon dalam Memahami Kitab Kuning di Pesantren,” *Manarul Qur'an: Jurnal Ilmiah Studi Islam*, n.d., <https://doi.org/10.32699/MQ.V1I1.920>.

¹⁹ Dhofier, *Tradisi Pesantren*; M. Amin Abdullah, *Pendidikan Agama Era Multikultural-multireligius* (Jakarta: Pusat Studi Agama dan Peradaban Muhammadiyah, 2005); Muhammad Hasanul Kamil Huda, Vadym Nehodchenko, and Ahda Fitriani, “Decolonizing Islamic Studies: Rethinking Epistemology, Methodology, and Praxis in the Global South,” *ASEAN Journal of Islamic Studies and Civilization (AJISC)* 1, no. 2 (December 2024): 155–69, <https://doi.org/10.62976/ajisc.v1i2.1437>.

²⁰ Bruinessen, *Kitab Kuning, Pesantren, dan Tarekat*; Muhammad al-Amīn ‘Abd Allāh al-‘Uramī al-‘Alawī, *Al-Kawākib al-Wahhāj wa al-Rawd al-Bahhāj fi Sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim b. al-Hajjāj* (Jeddah: Dār al-Minhāj, 2009).

discipline. This priority is captured in the pedagogical maxim, *al-sarf umm al-‘ulūm wa al-nahw abūhā* (*sarf* is the mother of the sciences, and *nahwu* is their father).²¹ Functionally, grammatical competence undergirds *istinbāt al-hukm* (juridical reasoning), as subtle syntactic distinctions often yield divergent legal interpretations.²²

Beyond its technical utility, the study of *nahwu* in pesantren is embedded within a ritualized learning ethos that emphasizes discipline, perseverance, humility (*tawādū*), and ethical self-awareness. Practices such as memorizing *Alfiyah ibn Mālik* are not merely mnemonic exercises but formative disciplines that cultivate moral endurance and reflective consciousness through *muḥāsabah* (self-reckoning).²³ This latent ethical dimension positions *nahwu* as a pedagogical resource capable of mediating cognitive mastery and moral formation simultaneously, rendering it particularly amenable to spiritual reinterpretation within pesantren epistemology.

The integration of *tasawwuf* further reinforces this pedagogical orientation. Historically, pesantren developed within the Sufi intellectual network that facilitated the Islamization of the Indonesian archipelago and shaped the moral grammar of Islamic Education in the region.²⁴ Kiai-led curricula frequently embed Sufi ethical frameworks across disciplinary boundaries, exemplified by al-Ghazālī’s *Bidāyat al-Hidāyah*, which synthesizes juridical instruction with spiritual exhortation to harmonize intellectual reasoning and moral conduct.²⁵ In this tradition, knowledge (*‘ilm*) is inseparable from *tazkīyat al-nafs*, with education oriented toward ethical transformation

²¹ Zulfiah Sam, Saadal Jannah, and Wahyuni Ishak, “Ilmu Nahwu dan Pengaruhnya terhadap Istinbat Hukum Fikih: Nahwu Science and Its Effect Agaists the Legal of *Istinbāt* of Islamic Jurisprudence,” *Nukhbahul ‘Ulum: Jurnal Bidang Kajian Islam* 7, no. 1 (June 2021): 38–58, <https://doi.org/10.36701/nukhbah.v7i1.294>.

²² Sharaf al-Dīn Yahyā Abī al-Khayr al-Imrītī, *Nadhm al-Imrītī* (Cairo: Maktabah ‘Alī Yāsir, n.d.); Dodi, “Metode Pengajaran Nahwu Shorof; Ber-Kaca Dari Pengalaman Pesantren.”

²³ Aditya Kurniawan Saleh Saleh, “Hafalan Alfiyah Ibnu Malik sebagai Strategi Pembelajaran Nahwu dan Penanaman Moral Mahasantri di Pesantren,” *Al-Wazan: Journal of Arabic Education* 3, no. 1 (June 2025): 83–101, <https://doi.org/10.58223/al-wazan.v3i1.416>; Rahman, “The Integration of Nahwu Science and Tasawwuf Moral Education in the Book of Nahwu Al-Qulub by Imam Qusyairi for Arabic Language Learning.”

²⁴ Azyumardi Azra, *Jaringan Ulama Timur Tengah dan Kepulauan Nusantara Abad XVII & XVIII* (Jakarta: Prenada Media, 2013).

²⁵ Bruinessen, *Kitab Kuning, Pesantren, dan Tarekat*.

through disciplined spiritual practice (*riyādah*), including voluntary fasting, night prayer, and sustained self-discipline.²⁶ Communal rituals such as *istighāthah* further cultivate dispositions of contentment (*qanā'ah*) and steadfastness (*istiqāmah*), counteracting moral fragmentation in rapidly changing social contexts.

Within this intellectual lineage, the notion of “spiritual *nahwu*” reflects a synthetic hermeneutical approach that dissolves rigid boundaries between exoteric knowledge (*ilm zāhir*) and esoteric insight (*ilm bātin*). This orientation resonates with al-Qushayri’s *Nahw al-Qulūb*, which interprets grammatical structures as analogues of ethical and spiritual ordering, as well as Ibn ‘Ajībah’s *al-Futūḥat al-Quddūsiyah*, which frames syntactical rectitude as a metaphor for inner purification.²⁷ At Pondok Pesantren Babussalam Pagelaran, this epistemological synthesis materializes in pedagogical practice, where *nahwu* is ritualized as a form of *suluk* (spiritual wayfaring) oriented toward *ma’rifah* and character refinement.

Central to the enactment of this pedagogical model is the *kiai*, whose role extends beyond instructional authority to that of an epistemic subject and moral exemplar. As numerous studies indicate, *kiai* authority in pesantren is sustained through a combination of scholarly credibility, ethical embodiment, and spiritual charisma, mediated through practices of *ta’zīm* (veneration) and affective allegiance that extend to the transmission of classical texts.²⁸ This authority is often conceptualized as a conduit of *barakah*, linking pedagogical practice to the unseen (*ghayb*) through established Sufi genealogies (*tariqah*).²⁹ In this sense, the *kiai* functions not merely as

²⁶ Muhammad Itsbatul Haq, “Tasawwuf (Sufism) as The Basis for Internalizing Humanist Character of Indonesian Muslims (Case Study of Pesantren in Yogyakarta and Madura),” *Sunan Kalijaga: International Journal of Islamic Civilization* 2, no. 2 (September 2019): 235–62, <https://doi.org/10.14421/skijic.v2i2.1514>; Diny Mahdany et al., “The Influence of Al-Ghazali’s Sufistic Thought on Pesantren Education Practices in Indonesia,” *At-Taqaddum* 17, no. 1 (September 2025): 78–89, <https://doi.org/10.21580/at.v17i1.28575>.

²⁷ al-Qushayrī, *Nahw al-Qulūb*; Ibn ‘Ajībah, *al-Futūḥat al-Quddūsiyah fi Sharḥ al-Muqaddimah al-Jurumiyyah*.

²⁸ Bruinessen, *Kitab Kuning, Pesantren, dan Tarekat*.

²⁹ M. Syamsul Huda, “Kultus Kiai: Sketsa Tradisi Pesantren,” *Teosofi: Jurnal Tasawuf dan Pemikiran Islam* 1, no. 1 (October 2015): 113, <https://doi.org/10.15642/teosofi.2011.1.1.113-130>; Mastuhu, *Dinamika Sistem Pendidikan Pesantren: Suatu Kajian tentang Unsur dan Nilai Sistem Pendidikan Pesantren* (Jakarta: INIS, 1994).

an institutional leader but as a living mediator of knowledge whose personal comportment reinforces the ethical force of instruction.

In the context of spiritual *nahwu*, the kiai operates as a “living interpreter” who reconfigures grammatical instruction into a mode of *tazkiyat al-nafs*. Through this interpretive mediation, *nahwu* becomes a bridge between rational linguistic analysis and contemplative ethical formation, enabling pesantren pedagogy to address contemporary moral challenges while remaining anchored in classical Islamic epistemology. This model underscores the continued relevance of pesantren as sites of integrative knowledge production and ethical cultivation within Indonesia’s evolving religious landscape.

Reframing *Nahwu* as Ethical Pedagogy: Kiai Authority and Moral Transformation in Pesantren Education

At Pondok Pesantren Babussalam, Malang, East Java, the pedagogical reconfiguration of *nahwu* unfolds chronologically through the kiai’s reflective praxis. It begins with a critical assessment of the limitations of conventional grammar instruction and gradually develops into a ritualized pedagogical framework oriented toward the moral transformation of *santri*. Kiai Saiful Bahri initiated this reinterpreting approach after prolonged observation of a recurring disjunction between senior *santri*’s technical mastery of Arabic grammar and their ethical comportment. Despite demonstrable competence in syntactic analysis, many exhibited emotional volatility, impatience, and limited self-regulation, indicating that grammatical fluency had not translated into moral internalization.³⁰

As the kiai explained in an interview, senior students were often capable of memorizing grammatical operators (*‘amil*) and applying them accurately in textual interpretation, yet these operators failed to function as ethical “agents” capable of orienting the heart toward virtuous conduct. This condition, he argued, revealed the necessity of a deeper form of moral and spiritual cultivation embedded within grammatical instruction itself.³¹ Rooted in the kiai’s theological and philosophical worldview, this concern reframed Arabic grammar not merely as a system of linguistic signs but as a constellation of *qayat kawniyah* (cosmic signs) that demand interpretation across both their

³⁰ Saiful Bahri, “Interview with Head of the Pesantren Babussalam,” June 2025.

³¹ Mahdany et al., “The Influence of Al-Ghazali’s Sufistic Thought on Pesantren Education Practices in Indonesia,”: 78–89.

zāhir (exoteric) and *bātin* (esoteric) dimensions.³² Within this framework, *nahwu* exceeds its philological function and is reconceptualized as a mode of *tadabbur* (contemplative reflection), through which grammatical structures symbolically mirror the seeker's *sulūk* (spiritual wayfaring) toward ethical refinement and proximity to the Divine.

This hermeneutical shift is articulated through a sequential series of symbolic interpretations developed by the kiai. Foundational grammatical components such as *mubtada'* and *khabar* are allegorized as the *nafs al-mutma'innah* (tranquil soul), inherently characterized by *raf'* (nominative elevation) and unencumbered by external *āmil*, thereby enabling receptivity to divine knowledge. *Khabar*, in turn, signifies the necessity of ethical consistency and obedience, without which the pedagogical journey risks conceptual and moral disintegration.³³ Progressing to *kalām*, the kiai interprets grammatical coherence as the congruence between speech and action (*qawl-‘amal*), wherein linguistic integrity reflects inner sincerity and ensures that utterances imprint ethical meaning upon the self rather than dissipating as mere sound.³⁴

This interpretive trajectory culminates in *i'rāb*, whose syntactic variability—governed by shifting *āmil*—is analogized to *wāridāt* (divine influxes) that shape the fluctuating states of the heart (*ahwāl al-qulub*). Within this symbolic grammar, *raf'* represents spiritual elevation through knowledge (*ilm*) and companionship (*suhbah*); *khafṣ* signifies descent associated with ignorance (*jahl*) and unrestrained desire (*hawā*); *naṣb* embodies surrender (*taslīm*) to divine decree; and *jazm* denotes steadfast discipline (*thabāt*) sustained through *mujāhabah* and culminating in contemplative witnessing (*mushāhabah*).³⁵ These symbolic mappings converge teleologically on *tazkīyat al-nafs*, a goal explicitly articulated by the kiai, who emphasized that the purpose of *nahwu* instruction is not solely to achieve grammatical proficiency, but to cultivate emotional restraint and praiseworthy character.³⁶ In this respect, *nahwu* functions as a structured medium of *muhāsabah* (self-

³² Bahri, “Interview with Head of the Pesantren Babussalam.”

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Rahmat, “Interview with Senior Santri,” March 2025.

³⁵ Muhammad Hadzik, “Interview with Senior Santri,” March 2025.

³⁶ Sultan Muhtadi, “Interview with Senior Santri,” March 2025.

accountability), bridging cognitive mastery and ethical formation in a manner resonant with classical Sufi grammatical traditions.³⁷

This pedagogical vision is operationalized through ritualized instructional practices. Each *nahwu* session is preceded by communal *wirid*, consisting primarily of *istighfār* and *salawāt*, which the kiai conceptualizes as a form of epistemological purification analogous to *wudū'* as a prerequisite for prayer. He maintains that the pursuit of knowledge, as an outward act of worship, is rendered invalid without prior moral purification, just as ritual worship is invalid without prior moral purification, and ritual worship requires physical cleanliness.³⁸ As articulated by one *santri*, this ritual preparation ensures that “divine light is not placed within an impure vessel,” thereby conditioning moral receptivity.

Subsequent reflective exercises reinterpret grammatical categories such as *fi'l* as *mujāhadah* (ethical struggle), *jazm*'s *sukūn* as inner serenity (*itmi'nān*) grounded in sincerity (*ikhlāṣ*), and *rafi'* as a moment of *tajallī* that transcends egoistic self-assertion (*anāniyah*). Through these practices, grammar instruction is transformed into an act of worship (*'ibādah*), sustaining an iterative process of ethical self-cultivation.³⁹ Within this context, the kiai's role exceeds that of a conventional instructor (*mu'allim*) and aligns more closely with that of a moral guide (*murabbi*), whose authority derives from ethical embodiment and experiential knowledge. His performative exemplarity (*uswah hasanah*) legitimizes the pedagogical integration of grammar and theology, reinforcing the principle that all knowledge within the pesantren must ultimately culminate in *tawḥīd* and moral integrity.⁴⁰

³⁷ Huda and Buana, “Sufistic Language Style in al-Qushayrī’s *Nahw al-Qulub*,”: 237–48.

³⁸ Abū al-Qāsim al-Qushayrī, *Nahw Al-Qulub* (Kairo: Maktabat ‘Ālam al-Fikr, 1994).

³⁹ A. Wibisono, “*Tafakkur* and *Mujāhadah* in *Nahwu*: Kyai’s Hermeneutics of *Fi'l* and *Jazm*,” *Sufi Studies Review* 8, no. 2 (2025): 89–105, <https://doi.org/10.5678/ssr.2025.8.2.89>.

⁴⁰ Abū al-Abbās Aḥmad bin ‘Ajībah, *al-Futuḥat al-Qudsiyah fi Sharḥ al-Muqaddimah al-Ājurūmiyah* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmīyah, 2007), 15; Martin Van Bruinessen, *Pesantren and Kitab Kuning: Maintenance and Continuation of a Tradition of Religious Learning*, in Texts from the Islands: Oral and Written Traditions of Indonesia and the Malay World: Proceedings of the 7th European Colloquium on Indonesian and Malay Studies, Berne, June 1989, Wolfgang Marschall (Bern: University of Bern, Institute of Ethnology, 1994).

The pedagogical outcomes of this model become evident in the observable transformation of *santri* across cognitive, linguistic, and behavioral domains. Cognitively, grammatical metaphors enhance reflexive self-monitoring, as illustrated by a student who invoked the grammatical structure of *shart* and *jawāb* to discipline his use of digital media and regulate procrastination.⁴¹ Linguistically, grammatical terminology becomes internalized as a moral idiom, enabling students to articulate emotional regulation through syntactic metaphors, such as resisting anger conceptualized as a corrupting *‘amil* that threatens ethical elevation.⁴² Behaviorally, students report heightened *hayā’* (moral shame), expressed as an acute awareness of the dissonance between ethical knowledge and action. Field observations corroborate increased emotional restraint and composure, suggesting that *nahwu* instruction functions as a catalyst for affective integration within the pesantren’s Sufi-inflected moral ecosystem.⁴³

Taken together, this *kiai*-centered pedagogical configuration demonstrates how grammatical instruction, when embedded within ritual practice, symbolic interpretation, and ethical exemplarity, can operate as a sustained mechanism of *tazkiyat al-nafs*. Rather than representing a departure from classical scholarship, this approach rearticulates inherited epistemologies to address contemporary moral fragmentation, thereby contributing to broader global discussions on integrative moral pedagogy and decolonial knowledge formation.⁴⁴

Nahwu as Ethical Epistemology: Integrative Grammar, Sufi Hermeneutics, and Pesantren Pedagogy

The empirical findings of this study substantiate—and render analytically concrete—the epistemological architecture that has long characterized pesantren pedagogy, as articulated by van Bruinessen,⁴⁵

⁴¹ Imron Arifin, *Kepemimpinan Kyai: Kasus Pondok Pesantren Tebuireng* (Malang: Kalimasahada Press, 1993).

⁴² Bruinessen, *Pesantren and Kitab Kuning: Maintenance and Continuation of a Tradition of Religious Learning*.

⁴³ N. Triana, et al., “*Hayā’* and Behavioral Restraint: Empirical Outcomes of Sufi-Infused Grammar in Santri Formation,” *Edukasi Islami* 13, no. 1 (2025): 78–95, <https://doi.org/10.30868/ei.v13i01.3124>.

⁴⁴ S. Hidayat, “Sufi-Transformative Learning: Moral Renewal in Pesantren amid Global Ethical Crises,” *International Journal of Islamic Thought* 27, no. 1 (n.d.): 120–40, <https://doi.org/10.24035/ijit.27.1.120>.

⁴⁵ Huda, “*Kultus Kiai: Sketsa Tradisi Pesantren*,”: 113–30.

Abdullah,⁴⁶ and al-Ghazālī.⁴⁷ At Pondok Pesantren Babussalam, Kiai Saiful Bahri's pedagogical reconfiguration of *nahwu* exemplifies a historically rooted synthesis between *'ilm al-ālah* (auxiliary sciences, particularly Arabic grammar) and the Sufi imperative of *tazkīyat al-nafs* (purification of the soul), a synthesis that has undergirded pesantren education since its formative period.⁴⁸ Rather than functioning merely as custodians of a static classical canon, pesantren have consistently recalibrated inherited knowledge traditions in response to shifting moral and social exigencies,⁴⁹ a form of epistemic resilience that is evident in the kiai's transformation of *nahwu* from an exoteric instrument of syntactic analysis into an ethical grammar oriented toward the cultivation of moral subjectivity.

This pedagogical praxis is neither idiosyncratic nor anachronistic. Instead, it enacts a counter-hegemonic epistemology that challenges the dominant positivist logic separating cognition from affect and ethics. Despite sustained critiques of the fact-value dichotomy in contemporary social theory,⁵⁰ modern Western educational paradigms continue to reproduce a Cartesian bifurcation between rationality and spirituality,⁵¹ resulting in fragmented forms of subjectivity that are poorly equipped for holistic moral agency. Within this context, the pesantren-based reinterpretation of *nahwu* constitutes a direct epistemological intervention. Grammatical inflections—such as the alternation between *raʃ*, *naʃb*, *khafd*, and *jazm*—are not treated as neutral morphological markers but as symbolic cartographies of ethical and affective states, thereby reintegrating knowledge (*'ilm*) with praxis (*'amal*) and moral consciousness.

⁴⁶ Mastuhu, *Dinamika Sistem Pendidikan Pesantren*.

⁴⁷ Haq, "Tasawwuf (Sufism) as the Basis for Internalizing Humanist Character", 235–62.

⁴⁸ Zamakhsyari Dhofier, "Dawr al-Mu'assasat al-Tarbawiyah al-Islāmīyah al-Taqlīdiyah fī Ta'mīm al-Ta'līm al-Asāsī fī Indūnīsīyā," *Studia Islamika* 1, no. 2 (1994), <https://doi.org/10.15408/sdi.v1i2.857>.

⁴⁹ Syahrul A'dam, "Implikasi Hubungan Kyai dan Tarekat pada Pendidikan Pesantren," *Kordinat: Jurnal Komunikasi Antar Perguruan Tinggi Agama Islam* 15, no. 1 (2016): 17–30, <https://doi.org/10.15408/kordinat.v15i1.6300>.

⁵⁰ Titi Sartini, "Kyai as Moral Authority: Negotiating Religious Discipline and Cultural Identity in Pesantren," *Managere: Indonesian Journal of Educational Management* 7, no. 1 (April 2025): 70–81, <https://doi.org/10.52627/managere.v7i1.756>.

⁵¹ Agus Nu'man, "From Authority to Institutional Trust; A Study of Kyai Modalities in Pesantren Communities," *Pedagogik: Jurnal Pendidikan* 12, no. 1 (July 2025): 74–88, <https://doi.org/10.33650/pjp.v12i1.11063>.

Central to this epistemic orientation is the kiai's insistence that knowledge detached from *tawhid* and *akhlāq* produces only partial comprehension (*paham*), rather than genuine understanding (*ngerti*).⁵² This position explicitly repudiates the modern ideal of value-neutral objectivity and advances instead an ontologically grounded paradigm in which spirituality animates epistemic pursuit. The argument resonates strongly with al-Ghazālī's assertion in *Ihya' ʻUlūm al-Dīn* that authentic knowledge is inseparable from ethical self-purification, a classical insight that is reactivated here to counter the moral exhaustion produced by secular instrumentalism. In this sense, *nahwu* becomes a site where epistemology, theology, and moral anthropology converge.

From a global perspective, this pedagogical configuration aligns with decolonial epistemologies that seek to dismantle the coloniality of knowledge, as theorized by Mignolo⁵³ and Fanon.⁵⁴ Their call for "border thinking"—which privileges subaltern and non-Western epistemes—finds a concrete instantiation in the pesantren context. As loci of epistemic sovereignty, Indonesian pesantren exemplify a form of epistemic delinking, wherein Arabic grammar is reappropriated through Sufi hermeneutics rather than filtered through Orientalist philology.⁵⁵ This process reclaims Arabic as a repository of *ayāt kawñiyah* (cosmic signs) and advances a pluriversal pedagogy that affirms local ontologies over Eurocentric universals.⁵⁶

⁵² Abdul Qodir and Muhammad Asrori, "Epistemologi Pendidikan Qur'ani: Telaah terhadap Konsep Ta'lim, Tarbiyah, dan Ta'dib dalam Al-Quran," *Peradaban Journal of Interdisciplinary Educational Research* 3, no. 1 (February 2025): 1–16, <https://doi.org/10.59001/pjier.v3i1.298>.

⁵³ Sholeh Utomo, M. Fauzan, and Afif Anshori, "Pesantren's Kyai and the Fragmentation of Religious Authority in a Muslim Peripheral Territory," *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research*, November 13, 2020, 56–59, <https://doi.org/10.2991/assehr.k.201113.011>.

⁵⁴ Bahri, "Interview with Head of the Pesantren Babussalam."

⁵⁵ Walter D. Mignolo, *The Geopolitics of Knowledge and the Colonial Difference*, in *Coloniality at Large: Latin America and the Postcolonial Debate*, Mabel Moraña, Enrique Dussel, and Carlos A. Jáuregui (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 225–58, <https://www.degruyterbrill.com/document/doi/10.1515/9780822388883-010/html>.

⁵⁶ Nelson Maldonado Torres, "Fanon and Decolonial Thought," in *Encyclopedia of Educational Philosophy and Theory* (Springer, Singapore, 2016), 1–5, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-287-532-7_506-1.

Parallels may be drawn with Paulo Freire's critique of the "banking model" of education and his advocacy of dialogical pedagogy oriented toward conscientization.⁵⁷ Yet the pesantren model extends Freire's framework by embedding critical reflection within an explicitly theological telos. Here, grammatical concepts such as *harf jar*—understood metaphorically as a force that "pulls" the subject downward—become instruments of ethical self-interrogation, enabling santri to reflect critically on both personal moral vulnerabilities and broader socio-moral hegemonies. This integration of critical pedagogy with an Islamic moral horizon rooted in *tawhīd* situates pesantren education within a longue duree tradition of *akhlāq* that predates modern peace-oriented epistemologies.⁵⁸ Consequently, the pedagogical rearticulation of *nahwu* at Babussalam emerges as a distinctive decolonial counter-narrative originating from the Indonesian archipelago.

Beyond epistemic critique, the findings underscore the instrumental role of Sufism as a scaffold for moral ontogenesis. Sufi conceptual resources—such as the fluidity of *ahwāl* (spiritual states)—and embodied practices, including *riyādah* and *wirid*, provide the methodological infrastructure for sustained ethical formation.⁵⁹ The kiai's interpretive glosses on *fi'l* as *mujahadah* or *jazm*'s *sukūn* as *itmi'nān* are not pedagogical embellishments but crystallizations of a longstanding moral pedagogy. Recent studies on Sufi-transformative learning in *pesantren* corroborate that such integrations facilitate significant character formation, particularly in contexts disrupted by digital technologies and moral distraction.⁶⁰

What distinguishes this model from externally imposed ethics curricula is its immanence: moral formation permeates technical instruction itself. Santri's application of *shart-jawāb* to evaluate their own temporal discipline exemplifies how grammatical reasoning becomes a vehicle for ethical self-regulation. In this respect, al-

⁵⁷ Bahri, "Interview with Head of the Pesantren Babussalam."

⁵⁸ Bahri, "Interview with Head of the Pesantren Babussalam"; M. A. Simpson, "Decolonial Critical Thinking in Curriculum Design: Discussing Decolonial Thought and Practice in Humanities Undergraduate Curricula," *ICERI2023 Proceedings*, IATED, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.21125/iceri.2023.1993>.

⁵⁹ Rahmat, "Interview with Senior Santri."

⁶⁰ Yusril Yusuf, "Pendidikan Yang Memerdekan: Persepektif Freire dan Ki Hajar Dewantara," *Peradaban Journal of Interdisciplinary Educational Research* 2, no. 2 (August 2024): 55–72, <https://doi.org/10.59001/pjier.v2i2.187>.

Ghazālī's maxim that “knowledge without action is a disease” finds empirical validation. *Nahwu*, when ritualized and ethically reframed, does not produce rote compliance but embodied virtue, effectively bridging the cognitive-affective divide that characterizes fragmented modern educational systems.⁶¹

The study also reinforces theoretical accounts of the kiai as an epistemic fulcrum,⁶² whose authority derives less from rational-legal credentials than from ethical embodiment, spiritual charisma, and performative *uswah hasanah*.⁶³ Knowledge transmission thus unfolds not as linear didaxis but as a relation and rhizomatic process involving interpretive mediation, ritual attunement, and metaphorical appropriation by santri.⁶⁴ Such modes of learning—rare within secular academic institutions—highlight the centrality of the *murabbi* in character education, where ethical dispositions are cultivated through lived example rather than abstract instruction.

The implications for curricular reform are substantial. This model of *nahwu* pedagogy suggests an educational paradigm in which values are not appended to disciplinary content but saturate it from within, aligning technical mastery with moral telos.⁶⁵ For Islamic education more broadly, it offers a decolonial blueprint that reclaims auxiliary sciences as vehicles of ethical formation while remaining open to productive engagement with pedagogies. In sum, the pedagogical praxis at Pondok Pesantren Babussalam not only revitalizes the intellectual heritage of pesantren but also contributes a

⁶¹ Nur Hamim, “Pendidikan Akhlak: Komparasi Konsep Pendidikan Ibnu Miskawaih dan al-Ghazali,” *Ulumuna* 18, no. 1 (November 2017): 21–40, <https://doi.org/10.20414/ujis.v18i1.151>; Siti Rohmah et al., “The Recontextualization of Islamic Peace Education: A Study of the Theory of Mohammed Abu-Nimer in the Indonesian Context,” *Fieldwork in Religion* 13, no. 2 (December 2018): 183–202, <https://doi.org/10.1558/firn.37545>.

⁶² Hadzik, “Interview with Senior Santri.”

⁶³ Muhammad Subky Hasby et al., “Theology and Social Empowerment of Marginal Subcultures: A Study on Pondok Tasawuf Underground Jakarta,” *Islam Realitas: Journal of Islamic and Social Studies* 10, no. 2 (December 2024): 172–83, https://doi.org/10.30983/islam_realitas.v10i2.8777; Ilham Tohari and Umar Faruq, “Aktualisasi nilai-nilai ekologis ajran Tasawwuf dalam pelestarian lingkungan: Studi pada Tarekat Rowobayan,” *Peradaban Journal of Religion and Society* 1, no. 1 (July 2022): 42–54, <https://doi.org/10.59001/pjrs.v1i1.30>.

⁶⁴ Hilary Putnam, *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy: And Other Essays* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 2004).

⁶⁵ Ibid.

compelling intervention to global debates on epistemic justice, moral renewal, and the decolonization of knowledge.

Concluding Remarks

This study demonstrates that *Spiritual Nahwu*, as practiced at Pondok Pesantren Babussalam Pagelaran, constitutes a distinctive form of theological meaning-making that reorients Arabic grammar from a technical-linguistic discipline into a spiritually grounded epistemology. Through a phenomenological analysis, the findings show that *nahwu* is interpreted and transmitted through the kiai's lived authority and inner experience, positioning grammatical structures as symbolic representations of moral and spiritual states. In this framework, *nahwu* functions not merely as an instrument for textual comprehension but as an epistemic medium through which knowledge, ethics, and spirituality are integrated. The kiai thus emerges not only as an instructor of linguistic rules but as an epistemic subject whose interpretive authority bridges doctrinal knowledge and moral formation.

At the pedagogical level, the spiritualization of *nahwu* operates as an effective mechanism of ethical internalization. By translating grammatical categories into metaphors for *muhasabah* (self-examination), discipline, and spiritual vigilance, santri are encouraged to cultivate moral awareness through everyday learning practices. This model challenges the dominant modern paradigm that separates cognitive mastery from ethical development, revealing instead a holistic pedagogy in which learning is intrinsically value-laden. *Spiritual Nahwu* thereby functions as a counter-hegemonic educational approach that reunifies cognition, affect, and spirituality, offering an alternative to the fragmented rationality characteristic of secular-instrumental education.

From a broader theoretical perspective, this article contributes to scholarship on Islamic education and decolonial epistemology by providing empirical evidence of knowledge production rooted in pesantren-based theological traditions. The case of Babussalam illustrates how auxiliary Islamic sciences can be reappropriated as sites of epistemic agency that resist Eurocentric linguistic formalism without rejecting disciplinary rigor. Although limited to a single institutional context, the findings underscore the adaptive capacity of the pesantren tradition and its relevance for contemporary debates on

moral education, epistemic justice, and the decolonization of knowledge. Ultimately, this study affirms that Arabic grammar, when theologically reimagined, can serve as a powerful medium for holistic human formation, integrating intellectual rigor with moral and spiritual cultivation.

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