

From Centralized Authority to Shared Vision: Collective-Transformational Leadership in Pesantren

Sutrisno^{1*}, Ethem Gürhan², Muhtar Hazawawi³

¹State Islamic University of Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang, Indonesia

²Ministry National Education, Konya, Türkiye

³State Islamic University of Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang, Indonesia

Email: drsutrisno65@uin-malang.ac.id¹, ethemgurhan@gmail.com², muhtarhz@gmail.com³

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Abstract: *The sustainability of faith-based educational organizations often relies heavily on the singular charisma of their founders, making them highly vulnerable to institutional collapse upon the founder's demise ("founder's syndrome"). This study explores the actualization of collective-transformational leadership and its impact on shaping organizational culture within traditional Pesantren. Employing a qualitative multiple-case study design, research was conducted across three distinct institutional models: the Federation, Modern, and pure Traditional models. Data were collected over six months through in-depth interviews with nearly 30 participants—including central clerics, senior teachers, and students—complemented by participant observation and document analysis. The cross-case thematic analysis reveals a strategic structural shift from solitary, founder-centric authority to formalized, shared leadership councils. This transition successfully institutionalizes the clerics' charisma rather than diluting it. Furthermore, through informal communication strategies and spiritual synergy, this collective leadership mitigates internal conflicts and inspires the organizational community. Consequently, this shared authority shapes resilient and agile organizational cultures tailored to specific institutional visions, ranging from socio-environmental activism and global modern integration to the robust preservation of classical scholasticism. Theoretically, this study expands transformational leadership discourse by demonstrating that charismatic influence can operate synergistically as a collective phenomenon. Practically, it offers a sustainable governance blueprint for global faith-based organizations navigating the tension between preserving traditional religious identity and adapting to modern educational complexities.*

Keywords: *Collective Leadership; Transformational Leadership; Organizational Culture; Faith-Based Education; Pesantren*

Introduction

Religious-based educational institutions, particularly Pesantren in Indonesia, represent a unique intersection between religious tradition and educational development (Idris, 2013; Najib, 2018; Wibowo & Istiyani, 2020). Historically, the organisational culture of Pesantren has been heavily dependent on the singular and charismatic authority of the Kiai (founder and religious scholar) (Larsson & Rönnmark, 1996; M. Latif, 2018; Paulsen et al., 2009; Saugi et al., 2022). This centralised leadership model has proven to be highly effective in preserving Islamic

teachings, fostering deep moral values, and shaping the character of santri (Islamic boarding school students) (Yusuf & Taufiq, 2020; Isbah, 2020; Zarkasyi, 1980). In this traditional order, the Kiai is not merely an administrator, but the spiritual and cultural centre of the institution (Arifin & Slamet, 2010).

The rapid modernization of the educational landscape and the complexity of institutional governance pose significant challenges to traditional leadership models in Pesantren. As these schools expand—now integrating the national curriculum, managing thousands of students, and building international networks—reliance on a single charismatic leader has become a tangible administrative and pedagogical obstacle. This phenomenon often triggers Founder's Syndrome, where the dominance of the founding figure hinders the organization's professionalism and sustainability in the future (Muthmainnah et al., 2023). To ensure their relevance, pesantren are urged to shift their governance paradigm from charismatic individual leadership toward a collaborative and shared governance model, ensuring the institution can adapt without losing its fundamental religious identity (Hallinger & Kovanović, 2021; Hidayat & Syam, 2022).

To date, academic attention to Kiai leadership has largely characterized it as a singular, charismatic figure driving institutional transformation unilaterally. Previous research on transformational leadership in religious-based education has tended to focus on the individual traits and singular influence of the Kiai in shaping organizational culture. However, as these institutions evolve into complex educational networks, this individual-centered focus leaves significant theoretical and empirical gaps (Gumus et al., 2020). There remains a scarcity of research investigating how transformational leadership functions as a collective dynamic—where leadership councils or inter-Kiai collectives synergize their authority to navigate organizational complexities (Suryadi, 2021). Therefore, the novelty of this study lies in a shift from the traditional single-leader paradigm, offering a pioneering examination of how the actualization of collective transformational leadership reshapes organizational culture across various pesantren models

To address these empirical and theoretical gaps, this study aims to explore the actualisation of collective transformational leadership in shaping the organisational culture of religious-based educational institutions. By investigating three different models of Pesantren (Federation, Modern, and Traditional) in Madura, Indonesia, this study seeks to reconstruct how collaborative Kiai leadership functions as a catalyst for institutional transformation. Ultimately, this study aims to provide a robust theoretical framework for managing complex religious-based educational organisations globally, as well as demonstrating how traditional authority can be aligned with the demands of modern collective leadership (Hutagaol et al., 2020; Mudyahardjo, 2001; Nisa et al., 2020).

Method

This study employed a qualitative exploratory approach utilizing a multiple-case study design (Yin, 2018). This design was deliberately chosen to allow for a robust, comparative exploration of contemporary phenomena within their real-life contexts. By examining the actualization of collective-transformational leadership across three distinct institutional models, the multiple-case approach facilitates both within-case depth and cross-case synthesis, thereby strengthening the analytic generalizations of the findings (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014) This study employs a multiple case study design with a theoretical replication approach to explore leadership

transitions in three contrasting pesantren models in Sumenep, Madura. Site selection was conducted through purposive sampling to cover a broad organizational spectrum: Pondok Pesantren Annuqayah was selected to represent the Federation (Salaf-Khalaf) model with a decentralized authority structure; Pesantren Al-Amien Prenduan represents the Modern model with institutionalized collective management; and Pesantren Al-Is'af Kalabaan represents the pure Traditional (Salaf) model to test the adaptation of collectivity within a strong Kiai-centrism culture. Methodologically, these three sites frame (bound) the phenomenon of collective-transformational leadership from various distinct sociological perspectives, such that the exclusion of any one site would weaken the external validity and typological comparisons required in this study.

Data collection was carried out over a period of six months utilizing three triangulated methods: semi-structured in-depth interviews, prolonged participant observation, and document analysis. The duration of each interview session varied dynamically based on the informants' schedules and the depth of their insights, focusing on the mechanisms of shared decision-making, authority distribution, and community inspiration. Observations were conducted during leadership board meetings (*Majelis Pengasuh*), communal prayers, and cultural gatherings to capture collective leadership dynamics in natural settings, while institutional statutes and curriculum documents were reviewed for corroboration. Data analysis was conducted iteratively using the Interactive Model—encompassing data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Initially, a within-case analysis was performed to construct a standalone profile for each Pesantren, followed by a cross-case analysis to identify overarching thematic similarities, differences, and patterns. To ensure the rigor and trustworthiness of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), methodological and source triangulation, member checking, and strict ethical protocols regarding informed consent and confidentiality were applied throughout the research. The detailed mapping of the research focus, data sources, and key instrument indicators is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Matrix of Data Collection and Research Instruments

Research Focus / Core Themes	Data Collection Methods	Target Informants / Data Sources	Key Instrument Indicators / Interview Questions
1. The Actualization of Collective-Transformational Leadership	In-depth Interviews, Participant Observation	<i>Kiai</i> (Founders/Leaders), <i>Majelis Pengasuh</i> (Leadership Board)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How is authority distributed among the Kiai in this Pesantren? • What are the mechanisms for collective decision-making? • How do leaders resolve internal conflicts or differences in vision?
2. Shaping the Organizational Culture and Santri Character	In-depth Interviews, Participant Observation	<i>Kiai, Ustadz</i> (Senior Teachers), <i>Santri</i> (Students)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does the collective leadership inspire and motivate the Pesantren community? • What specific traditions or rituals (e.g., <i>forum ngopi, istighosah</i>) foster unity?

Research Focus / Core Themes	Data Collection Methods	Target Informants / Data Sources	Key Instrument Indicators / Interview Questions
3. Institutional Adaptation & Curriculum Flexibility	Document Analysis, In-depth Interviews	Administrators, <i>Ustadz</i> , Institutional Archives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How is the "Kiai's charisma" perceived when led by a collective board? • How are traditional Islamic texts (<i>kitab kuning</i>) integrated with modern curricula? • Review of foundation statutes, academic guidelines, and official decrees.
4. Cross-Case Distinctiveness	All Methods (Triangulation)	All Informants across Federation, Modern, and Traditional Models	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does the leadership approach in this specific model differ from other Pesantren models? • What are the unique challenges faced by this specific institutional model?

Result

This section presents the empirical findings derived from the cross-case analysis of the three distinct Pesantren models (Federation, Modern, and Traditional). Rather than presenting each institutional case in isolation, the findings are synthesized thematically to provide a comprehensive understanding of how collective leadership operates across different contexts. The analysis revealed three overarching themes regarding the actualization and impact of collective-transformational leadership: (1) the structural shift toward shared authority and the institutionalization of the Kiai's charisma; (2) the transformational synergy achieved through informal communication and community inspiration; and (3) the subsequent shaping of organizational culture that balances traditionalism with modern agility. The thematic progression of these findings is visualized in Figure 1.

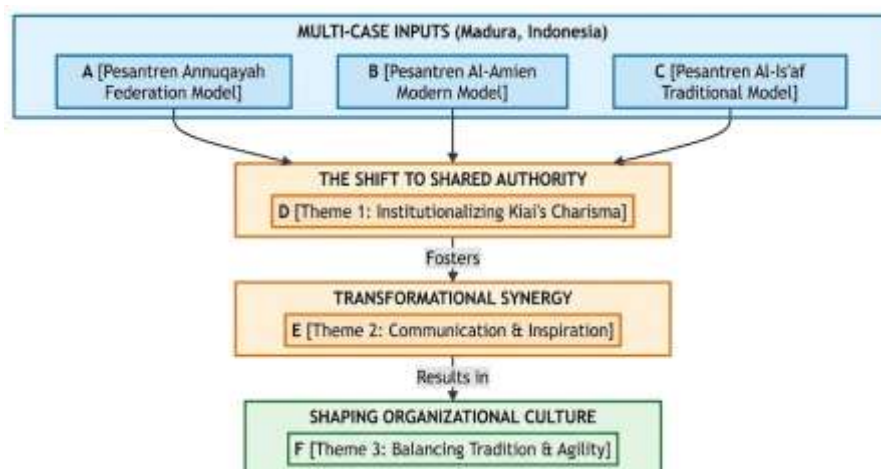


Figure 1. Thematic Flow of Cross-Case Findings: From the actualization of shared authority to the shaping of organizational culture.

The Shift to Shared Authority: Institutionalizing the Kiai's Charisma

The cross-case analysis reveals a fundamental shift in the governance structures across the three observed Pesantren models, transitioning from a singular, founder-centric authority to a formalized system of shared leadership. This transition was not perceived by the institutional communities as a diminishment of the Kiai's traditional charisma, but rather as a strategic institutionalization of that charisma to ensure organizational sustainability and manage increasing complexities.

In the Federation model of Pondok Pesantren Annuqayah, this shift is actualized through the establishment of the *Majelis Pengasuh* (Board of Caretakers). Historically managed by a single charismatic founder, the massive expansion of the institution necessitated a decentralized approach. Currently, multiple Kiai autonomously manage their respective sub-Pesantren (zones) while remaining bound to the central federation. The collective leadership here functions on the principle of *musyawarah* (consensus-building). The charisma of the Kiai is distributed among the board members, creating a synergistic authority where strategic decisions regarding the institutional vision are made collectively, thereby preventing the administrative bottlenecks typically associated with centralized leadership.

Similarly, the Modern model of Pondok Pesantren Al-Amien Prenduan exhibits a profound structural transformation through its *Dewan Riasah* (Leadership Council). A defining characteristic of this model is the philosophical declaration that the Pesantren is an endowment (*wakaf*) belonging to the Muslim community (*ummah*), rather than the private property of the founding family. Consequently, the collective leadership structure is deliberately designed to be collegial and meritocratic. The *Dewan Riasah* distributes institutional responsibilities among several leaders, ensuring that the Pesantren's operational and strategic agility does not rely on the physical presence or lifespan of a single individual. This shared authority effectively mitigates "founder's syndrome" and guarantees a seamless succession process.

Even within the pure Traditional model of Pondok Pesantren Al Is'af Kalabaan, which strictly adheres to classical Islamic pedagogy (*Salaf*), a form of collective leadership has emerged. While preserving the profound spiritual reverence for the central Kiai, the administrative and educational burdens—particularly the rigorous teaching of classical texts (*kitab kuning*)—are distributed among a core group of senior clerics and family members. This traditional collective ensures that the purity of the educational content is maintained while accommodating a growing student body.

Overall, the data from these three distinct models demonstrate that collective-transformational leadership begins with the deliberate restructuring of power. By institutionalizing the Kiai's charisma into collaborative councils (*Majelis* or *Dewan*), these religious-based educational organizations successfully build a resilient foundation capable of navigating modern demands without sacrificing their traditional spiritual authority.

Transformational Synergy: Communication Strategies and Community Inspiration

Cross-case analysis shows that the greatest challenge of collective leadership is the potential for internal conflict and fragmentation of vision among leaders. However, findings from these three Pesantren reveal that the Kiai successfully overcame this potential through what is known as "transformational synergy". This synergy was not built through rigid bureaucratic regulations, but rather through informal

communication strategies rooted in the values of brotherhood (ukhuwah) and spiritual respect.

At the Pesantren Annuqayah, this communication strategy is actualised through deeply rooted cultural traditions, such as coffee forums or, in the local language, moy-tamoyan (gathering and chatting casually). These informal spaces effectively break down the hierarchical barriers between the Kiai who oversee the zones. It is in these forums that strategic decisions are often agreed upon before being brought to the formal meetings of the Majelis Pengasuh. This transformational approach fosters idealised influence, where leaders demonstrate unity and exemplary behaviour in public, thereby preventing confusion or factions among teachers and students.

Meanwhile, at the Pesantren Al-Amien Prenduan, transformational synergy is realised through communication that combines modern structures with deep emotional bonds. Members of the Riasah Council actively provide inspirational motivation not only to fellow leaders but also to the ustadz (teachers). Collective leadership here continuously instils the value of sincerity (selfless devotion), so that the ustadz work beyond mere administrative demands. The unity of the leadership council is a source of inspiration that spreads to all levels of the pesantren community.

At the Pesantren Al-Is'af Kalabaan, despite adopting a purely traditional model, communication between senior scholars and young clerics takes place within a framework of cultural obedience (tawadhu'). Differences of opinion are resolved privately in the family room of the ndalem (cleric's residence), so that what the students see is only a solid front of unity. The unity of the spiritual aura of these leaders provides a sense of security and high motivation to learn for the students.

Overall, these findings confirm that the collective leadership council in Pesantren is not merely a corporate board, but rather a spiritual brotherhood. The informal communication strategies and transformational cohesiveness of these Kiai have proven to be the most effective instruments for inspiring the community, maintaining institutional cohesion, and ensuring that the shared vision can be executed without bureaucratic obstacles.

Shaping the Organizational Culture: Between Traditionalism and Modern Agility

The ultimate outcome of the collective-transformational leadership across the three Pesantren is the formation of a resilient yet agile organizational culture. The cross-case analysis demonstrates that shared authority does not dilute the religious identity of the institution; rather, it empowers the Pesantren to adapt to external demands and sculpt a distinct organizational culture that balances classical Islamic traditionalism with modern agility.

In the Modern model of Pondok Pesantren Al-Amien Prenduan, the collective leadership of the *Dewan Riasah* has cultivated a highly progressive and globally oriented organizational culture. The shared authority enables a rapid, agile response to modern educational demands without compromising Islamic ethos. This is evidenced by the successful integration of national curricula, the enforcement of a strict bilingual environment (Arabic and English), and the attainment of international recognition (*mu'adalah*) from global Islamic universities. The organizational culture here is characterized by discipline, modernization, and an outward-looking vision, proving that faith-based institutions can operate with the administrative sophistication of modern schools.

Conversely, the Federation model of Pondok Pesantren Annuqayah exhibits an organizational culture deeply rooted in social activism and community empowerment (the *Salaf-Khalaf* paradigm). The *Majelis Pengasuh* synergizes classical Islamic teachings with contemporary societal issues. The transformational impact of the collective Kiai is vividly reflected in their environmental preservation initiatives, which earned the Pesantren the prestigious national "Kalpataru" award. The culture at Annuqayah positions the Pesantren not merely as an educational center, but as an active agent of social change, where *santri* are trained to bridge the gap between religious texts and ecological/social realities.

Meanwhile, the pure Traditional model of Pondok Pesantren Al-Is'af Kalabaan illustrates a different facet of organizational agility: the agility of preservation. In a rapidly modernizing educational landscape, the collective leadership of senior clerics functions defensively to protect the purity of the *Salaf* tradition. The organizational culture is fiercely dedicated to the in-depth mastery of classical Islamic texts (*kitab kuning*). Despite the absence of formal state curricula, the institution demonstrates remarkable cultural resilience, continuously attracting a large student body seeking authentic, unadulterated Islamic scholarship. Here, the collective leadership ensures that traditionalism survives not as a relic of the past, but as a vibrant, living academic culture.

In summary, the actualization of collective-transformational leadership acts as the primary architect of organizational culture in these institutions. Whether driving modernization (Al-Amien), fostering socio-environmental activism (Annuqayah), or preserving classical scholasticism (Al-Is'af), the shared authority of the Kiai provides the necessary strategic foundation for these religious-based educational organizations to thrive in the 21st century.

Discussion

The primary objective of this study was to reconstruct the actualization of the Kiai's collective-transformational leadership and its role in shaping the organizational culture of religious-based educational institutions. The cross-case findings reveal a profound evolution in Pesantren governance: the strategic transition from solitary, founder-centric authority to formalized, shared leadership structures. This transition fundamentally challenges the traditional paradigms of faith-based educational leadership and offers a new theoretical lens for understanding organizational sustainability in religious contexts.

Beyond Individual Charisma: The Institutionalization of Transformational Leadership

The most prominent theoretical contribution of this study is the reconceptualization of charismatic and transformational leadership from a singular trait to a collective, institutionalized phenomenon. Historically, sociological theories, stemming from Max Weber's foundational work, have posited that charismatic authority is inherently individualistic, unstable, and deeply tied to the physical presence of the leader. Consequently, the death of the charismatic founder often triggers an organizational crisis—a phenomenon commonly referred to as the "routinization of charisma." Furthermore, mainstream transformational leadership models (e.g., Bass & Riggio, 2006) frequently romanticize the "heroic individual" who unilaterally inspires followers to achieve extraordinary outcomes.

However, the empirical evidence from Annuqayah, Al-Amien, and Al-Is'af contradicts this single-leader paradigm. The findings demonstrate that charisma and

transformational influence can be successfully decoupled from a single individual and distributed across a collective board (such as the *Majelis Pengasuh* or *Dewan Riasah*). This study argues that the establishment of these collaborative councils is not merely an administrative delegation of tasks, but the deliberate institutionalization of charisma.

By sharing the pedagogical and administrative burdens among several Kiai, the Pesantren effectively mitigates "founder's syndrome." The idealized influence and inspirational motivation—core components of transformational leadership—are projected by the *council as a unified entity* rather than by one solitary figure. This collective projection ensures that the spiritual reverence of the *santri* (students) and *ustadz* (teachers) is directed toward the institution itself, guaranteeing long-term organizational sustainability even as individual leaders pass away. This finding significantly expands the existing literature by proving that transformational leadership in faith-based organizations can function as a synergistic, pluralistic mechanism rather than a heroic, individualistic one.

Navigating the Paradox of Collective Authority: Spiritual Contract as a Synergistic Mechanism

A critical paradox often associated with shared leadership models in modern organizations is their high susceptibility to internal conflict, factionalism, and power struggles. However, cross-case findings in this study reveal that collective leadership in the observed pesantren successfully navigates this paradox without relying on rigid corporate regulations. This synergy mechanism lies in the transformational nature of the Kiai, who prioritize "spiritual contracts" over administrative formalities. This aligns with the concept of shared leadership in global religious educational institutions, where organizational success is determined by the distribution of authority rooted in shared core values (Gumus et al., 2020; Hallinger & Kovanović, 2021).

In this context, the Kiai's collective approach demonstrates idealized influence and inspirational motivation, which are core components of transformational leadership (Muhith, 2017). Unlike typical organizational leaders who might compete for prestige, the Kiai position themselves as moral guardians whose primary focus is the physical and spiritual development of the institution (Suprayogo, 2011). Potential conflicts are neutralized through strong cultural practices, such as informal social gatherings and the "ngopi" tradition (casual meetings) observed at Annuqayah, or family-based spiritual consensus (*tawadhu'*) at Al-Is'af.

These leadership dynamics demonstrate a strong convergence with patterns of distributed leadership in Catholic schools in Europe (Torres, 2022) and shura councils in Middle Eastern madrasahs (Suryadi, 2021), where charismatic authority is distributed within a collective decision-making system to ensure organizational stability. In the three pesantren studied, a shared vision acts as a synergistic tool that transforms the Kiai's singular vision into an institutionalized collective commitment. The successful transition of authority at Al-Amien and Annuqayah confirms that a shared vision can foster organizational resilience that outlasts the founder's lifetime (Muthmainnah et al., 2023). This synergistic mechanism demonstrates that within the organizational culture of religious-based education, a futuristic vision is not achieved through aggressive corporate competition, but rather through collective spiritual humility and cultural integration.

Theoretical and Practical Implications for Global Faith-Based Organizations

The actualization of collective-transformational leadership within these Pesantren offers profound implications beyond the Indonesian context. Theoretically, it enriches the discourse on educational management by demonstrating that traditional religious institutions can maintain their distinct identity while managing highly complex, modernized educational networks (Larsson & Rönmark, 1996; M. Latif, 2018; Paulsen et al., 2009). The collective leadership model serves as a strategic bridge between classical Islamic values and modern technocratic demands, establishing the Pesantren as dynamic agents of change and cultural transformation (Wahid, 2008; Wibowo & Istiyani, 2020).

Practically, this study provides a viable blueprint for other faith-based educational organizations globally that are struggling with institutional succession and the limitations of centralized authority. By adopting a shared leadership board—rooted in transformational synergy and spiritual cohesion—institutions can effectively decentralize administrative burdens, foster agile curriculum development (from classical texts to international integration), and ensure long-term institutional resilience. The ultimate goal of the Pesantren—to produce individuals who are not only intellectually capable but also deeply moral (Yusuf & Taufiq, 2020; Isbah, 2020)—is best safeguarded when its leaders collectively embody the very transformational values they seek to instil in their students.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the transition from centralized authority to a shared vision at the Annuqayah, Al-Amien, and Pesantren Al-Is'af successfully mitigated the risks of Founder's Syndrome through mechanisms of collective-transformational leadership. The findings indicate that the "Spiritual Contract" and the institutionalization of deliberation are capable of distributing the Kiai's charismatic authority into a more stable and forward-looking organizational structure. This phenomenon contributes theoretically on a global scale by demonstrating that transformational leadership within religious institutions need not be individual-centric but can operate distributively, as seen in Catholic educational institutions in Europe and madrasahs in the Middle East. By synergizing theological values and modern management, these pesantren create organizational resilience capable of enduring beyond the lifetime of their founding figures. Scope and Limitations of the Study

The scope of this study is limited to three pesantren models in Sumenep, Madura, selected through theoretical replication to represent the Federation, Modern, and Traditional typologies. Although these findings offer a framework for the re-humanization of education in the digital age, this study is constrained by a six-month observation period, which may not have captured the long-term dynamics of total leadership succession. Furthermore, the focus of this study is on the managerial and structural levels of the kiai, so the broader perceptions of santri regarding these changes in leadership style have not been explored in depth. Future researchers are advised to conduct longitudinal studies or incorporate broader sociological variables to test the consistency of this collective leadership model across different geographical and cultural contexts

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