
PESANTREN, PIETY, AND POWER: MADURESE *ULAMA* AND THE SHAPING OF ISLAMIC EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

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Abstract

Madura, East Java, provides a distinctive setting for examining how ethnic identity and religious patronage shape Islamic educational governance. In Madurese society, Kiai occupy a central position; their authority extends beyond religious instruction to leadership, curriculum balance, discipline, succession, and mosque-based education. Previous studies have discussed Kiai authority mainly as a social, cultural, or political phenomenon, but its institutionalisation within pesantren governance remains insufficiently examined. Using a sociological-ethnographic approach, this study draws on fieldwork conducted from early 2023 to late 2024 in three pesantren representing traditional-federal, modern-integrated, and classical-salafiyah governance models. Data were collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews with nine students and alumni, and documentary analysis, and were analysed using Spradley's domain-analysis framework. The study identifies three patronage-governance models: cluster, pyramid, and network. These models explain how authority over teaching, discipline, and institutional management is exercised and delegated. It also identifies patronage of interest, through which political actors use Ulama client networks, creating opportunities for support but risks for institutional autonomy. The findings highlight succession dependency, weak professional governance, and gender imbalance as key challenges for institutional sustainability.

Keywords: Islamic educational leadership, pesantren governance, Ulama patronage, religious authority, Madurese Muslim society, institutional sustainability

Abstrak

Guru di pesantren sering bekerja pada persinggungan antara kewajiban institusional, pengabdian keagamaan, dan kehidupan pribadi, sehingga kesejahteraan psikologis mereka rentan terhadap tekanan emosional dan kaburnya batas antara pekerjaan dan kehidupan pribadi. Meskipun penelitian tentang kepemimpinan pendidikan telah banyak membahas manajemen formal dan dukungan organisasi, masih sedikit kajian yang menjelaskan bagaimana praktik kepemimpinan sehari-hari melindungi kesejahteraan psikologis guru di sekolah berbasis pesantren. Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana perilaku kepemimpinan mempertahankan dan meningkatkan kesejahteraan guru di dua pesantren di Indonesia. Dengan menggunakan desain studi kasus ganda kualitatif, data dikumpulkan dari 18 partisipan, yang terdiri atas pimpinan sekolah, guru, dan staf administrasi, melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur, observasi partisipatif, dan analisis dokumen pada periode Januari hingga April 2025. Data dianalisis menggunakan analisis tematik induktif dan perbandingan lintas kasus. Temuan penelitian mengidentifikasi tiga dimensi kepemimpinan yang saling menguatkan, yaitu kepemimpinan relasional melalui keteladanan, kolegialitas, dan interaksi yang penuh kepedulian; kepemimpinan spiritual melalui penguatan makna religius dan profesional; serta kepemimpinan manajerial melalui pemberdayaan, pengakuan, pengaturan beban kerja, dan tanggung jawab kolektif. Penelitian ini mengusulkan kepemimpinan penetapan batas kerja sebagai model terpadu yang menggabungkan praktik relasional, spiritual, dan manajerial untuk menopang kesejahteraan psikologis guru di sekolah berbasis pesantren. Model ini berkontribusi pada diskursus kepemimpinan pendidikan di lembaga berbasis keagamaan dengan menunjukkan bagaimana para pemimpin menegosiasikan komitmen institusional dan kebutuhan guru akan keberlanjutan psikologis.

Kata kunci: kepemimpinan pendidikan Islam, tata kelola pesantren, patronase Ulama, otoritas keagamaan, masyarakat Muslim Madura, keberlanjutan kelembagaan

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Introduction

Madura, an island off the northeastern coast of Java and administratively part of East Java province, is home to a deeply embedded patronage tradition organised around religious scholars locally known as *Kiai*. Unlike many Muslim societies elsewhere in Indonesia, where religious authority operates as one institutional voice among several - alongside school boards, government education offices, and parent associations - Madurese *Kiai* often function as the near-singular point around which pesantren, madrasah, and mosque governance are organised. This is not merely a matter of social deference; it has concrete institutional consequences. Decisions about who is recruited to teach, how curriculum time is divided between religious and general subjects, how students are disciplined, and who eventually succeeds the *Kiai* in institutional leadership are rarely made through the formal administrative procedures familiar to mainstream educational management literature. Instead, they are made through the social weight carried by the *Kiai*'s person, transmitted and legitimised through ritual, kinship, and discipleship.

This is not a peculiarity unique to Madura within Indonesian Islamic education, but it has more often been treated as a cultural fact than as a governance question. Solichin's study of curriculum authority across Indonesian pesantren salaf, published in this journal, established that the *Kiai* has authority to determine the direction and purpose of education, curriculum and learning materials, and the selection of scholars' books used to guide students in the learning process (Solichin, 2018). This is an important precedent: it confirms that curriculum and institutional authority exercised through the person of the *Kiai* is a legitimate object of inquiry within Islamic education studies, not merely a sociological curiosity outside the field's proper concerns. What Solichin's study does not pursue, and what remains open more broadly, is how such personalised authority is structured, through what mechanisms it is delegated, contested, or reproduced, and how this structuring differs across distinct institutional and ethnic contexts. This is the question the present study takes up for the specific and comparatively under-examined case of Madura.

This raises a question that falls squarely within Islamic education studies, even though it has so far been examined mainly through sociology and anthropology: what happens to the ordinary business of running a school - staffing, curriculum, discipline, and succession - when its legitimating logic is patronage rather than bureaucratic rationality? Answering this question requires moving beyond a description of *Kiai* authority as a cultural fact and tracing how that authority is operationalised, day to day, inside the institutions that constitute Madurese Islamic education.

The contemporary dominance of *Ulama* patronage in Madurese education has identifiable institutional origins worth tracing briefly, not for their own sake but because they explain why governance in these institutions takes the personalised form it does today. As the traditional aristocracy lost its formal privileges under Dutch colonial administration in the late nineteenth century, it was drawn into alliance with the *Kiai*, who became the organisational centre of communal resistance conducted under the guise of Islamic religious education. The mosque and the pesantren served as institutional bases through which this alternative authority was cultivated and through which political alternatives to colonial rule were quietly articulated (Mansurnoor, 1990). This period marks a structural turning point: *Ulama* patronage did not simply exist alongside Islamic educational institutions; it became inseparable from their institutional form. The proliferation of pesantren in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was not incidental to

the rise of *Ulama* authority; it was its primary vehicle, the mechanism through which scattered religious deference was converted into a standing institutional infrastructure capable of training successive generations of students, teachers, and, eventually, institutional leaders.

This institutional vehicle persisted and consolidated over the twentieth century. As the *Ulama* displaced the aristocracy as the dominant patron class, their authority was further amplified through affiliation with Islamic mass organisations, eventually aligning with Nahdlatul Ulama. Dhofier and van Bruinessen both note that the scale and vitality of a pesantren function as a direct index of its leader's spiritual and social standing (Dhofier, 1980; van Bruinessen, 1998). Translated into governance terms, this means that institutional growth and personal charisma are not separable variables in the Madurese case. This dynamic persists into the present in a form contemporary scholarship has begun documenting directly: a recent bibliometric and field-based study of pesantren-affiliated political families found that pesantren descendants building what the authors term "octopus-like power" can be understood as part of a larger network for gaining and perpetuating power, with pesantren elites' involvement in local politics considered by some observers to impede democratic processes (Azizah, Nkwede, & Armoyu, 2021). The present study examines a structurally related but analytically prior question: not how this authority is leveraged in electoral outcomes, but how it is built and exercised inside the pesantren as a functioning educational institution in the first place.

By the late nineteenth century, Madurese society had crystallised into two broad social strata: a patron class holding economic and political resources, and a client class of peasants whose labour and loyalty flowed upward through a tribute system known as percaton, or apanage (Holleman, 1981; de Jonge, 1988). This patron-client logic did not remain confined to the economic sphere. As *Ulama* patronage absorbed and replaced the older aristocratic patronage system, the same structural template - upward flows of deference and service in exchange for downward flows of protection and blessing - was reproduced inside the pesantren itself. Where the older system bound peasants to landholding patrons, the newer system binds students to teachers, and, as this study's Results section details, this continuity has direct implications for how staffing, discipline, and succession operate inside Madurese Islamic educational institutions today.

Prior scholarship on Madurese *Ulama* has approached this terrain from several angles, each illuminating but each leaving the educational-institutional dimension underexplored. Hefni examined patronage from a narrowly socio-historical perspective (Hefni, 2009). Pribadi examined local politics in western Madura through the competing authority claims of the klebun, the *Kiai*, and the blater (Pribadi, 2015). Iswahyudi argued that cosmological rather than strictly religious dimensions of the Madurese worldview serve as the primary basis for social stratification (Iswahyudi, 2022). Mansurnoor's foundational work established that Madurese *Ulama* occupy a structurally central position in the local ethnic order, capable of mitigating conflict and mediating rural development programmemes (Mansurnoor, 1987, 1992).

A more specifically political strand of Madurese scholarship has examined how individual *Kiai* move between religious and electoral office. Topan and Tianah's historical review of local *Kiai* involvement in post-reform-era political contestation in Madura documents this pattern across multiple regencies, tracing how religiously respected figures translate communal deference into formal political candidacy and influence over public policy on the island (Topan & Tianah, 2024).

Al Khanif's study of *Kiai* charisma among Madurese communities in Jember similarly affirms that, despite broader processes of modernisation and government intervention in poverty reduction and education, the *Kiai* continues to play a significant role in shaping the community's worldview on religious and cultural matters (Al Khanif, 2016). These studies confirm that *Kiai* authority in the Madurese context remains socially potent and increasingly entangled with formal political life, but none examines, as its central object, how this authority is converted into the day-to-day governance mechanics of the educational institutions the *Kiai* leads.

Outside Madura, recent work has begun to treat *Kiai* political-religious authority explicitly as an educational-governance variable rather than a purely cultural or political one. A phenomenological study of three pesantren in South Sumatra found that ethical and proportionate political engagement by *Kiai* can accelerate infrastructure development, diversify educational programmes, and enhance institutional recognition; however, excessive dependence on political networks poses risks to pesantren institutional autonomy and may erode the moral authority of *Kiai* as religious leaders (Zainuddin, Nafisah, Mustafiyanti, & Davik, 2026). This is the closest existing precedent to the present study's aims, and it suggests that the institutional risks of patronage-based governance are not unique to Madura. However, it does not extend its analysis to the specific ethnic and historical configuration that makes the Madurese case distinctive, nor does it formalise the governance-model typology this study develops below.

What remains absent from this literature, taken as a whole, is an account of how *Ulama* patronage is converted into the concrete governance mechanisms of Islamic educational institutions within the specific ethnic context of Madura - an account of the mechanics, not merely the existence, of authority inside the pesantren as an organisation. This is the gap the present study addresses, contributing to Islamic education studies a model of how charismatic religious authority becomes institutionalised governance, with direct bearing on questions of leadership succession, curriculum authority, and institutional sustainability that the broader field has examined in other regional and national contexts but not yet systematically for Madura.

This study argues that the patronage cycle of Madurese *Ulama* produces a distinctive model of Islamic educational governance - one anchored in personal authority and ritualised deference rather than formal administrative structure - with direct and traceable consequences for how pesantren are led, staffed, and sustained across generations. The remainder of this article develops this argument through three analytical moves: first, by showing how Madurese ethnic character is enacted specifically through pesantren moral education; second, by formalising three patronage-governance models that explain day-to-day institutional authority; and third, by tracing how this patronage becomes embedded across the three institutional domains of pesantren, madrasah, and mosque.

Method

This research adopted a sociological ethnography framework, oriented toward exploring social phenomena as they are embedded in lived relations and toward understanding how community members internalise and reproduce those realities in everyday practice (Katz & Csordas, 2003). Fieldwork was conducted over an extended period from early 2023 to late 2024, involving gradual and sustained engagement with research sites and participants. Data were gathered through three

complementary methods: participant observation, in-depth interviewing, and documentary analysis.

The three research sites were deliberately selected to capture variation in institutional governance arrangements rather than to treat "the pesantren" as a single undifferentiated type. The traditional-federal pesantren, located in eastern Madura, distributes leadership across an extended *Kiai* family network, with authority over different institutional functions - teaching, finance, and discipline - held by different family members. This structure makes the network model described in the Results section especially visible. The modern-integrated pesantren combines religious authority with formal school administration under a single foundation structure, making the tension between non-formal and formal educational governance especially observable. The classical-salafiyah pesantren in western Madura retains authority concentrated in a single *Kiai* with minimal delegated administrative structure, offering the clearest case of the cluster model in something close to its purest form. This deliberate variation allows the study to examine how patronage logic manifests differently depending on the degree of institutional formalisation, rather than assuming that a single governance pattern applies uniformly across Madurese pesantren.

Observations were carried out at public religious study gatherings, instructional sessions between teachers and students, and coordination meetings between educators and institutional leadership. Observation was also conducted at a community wedding ceremony in eastern Madura to capture patronage dynamics in everyday communal settings beyond the pesantren environment. In-depth interviews explored how patronage relations between religious scholars and students are formed, maintained, and extended into alumni life, grounded in the pesantren principle that a student forever remains a student in relation to their teacher. Interviews were conducted with nine informants (five male, four female), drawn from current students and alumni of the three pesantren. Informants were selected through purposive sampling (Ahmad & Wilkins, 2025) based on the criterion of lived experience of *Ulama* patronage culture.

Table 1. Informants

Code	Age	Status	Pesantren Type	Gender
P1	31	Alumni	Traditional-federal	M
P2	27	Student	Modern-integrated	M
P3	29	Alumni	Traditional-federal	M
P4	26	Student	Classical-salafiyah	F
P5	33	Alumni	Classical-salafiyah	M
P6	25	Student	Modern-integrated	F
P7	26	Student	Traditional-federal	M
P8	25	Student	Modern-integrated	F
P9	27	Alumni	Classical-salafiyah	F

It is necessary to state plainly, as a methodological limitation, that all nine informants were drawn from the student/alumni population (see, table 1). This has two consequences for how the findings of this study should be read. First, claims regarding institutional governance, curriculum decision-making, teacher recruitment, and succession planning are based on student/alumni perception and reported experience - what students and alumni observed, were told, or inferred - rather than on direct testimony from *Kiai*, pesantren foundation leaders, or madrasah administrators who hold first-hand decision-making authority. Second, claims regarding the

patronage of interest model, which concerns the *Kiai*'s relationship with political actors, are necessarily more speculative, since this relationship is largely inaccessible to student-level observation and is reconstructed here primarily from informants' secondhand accounts and public reputation rather than direct witnessing.

Analysis followed Spradley's ethnographic framework (Spradley, 2016; Spradley et al., 2004) applied across six sequential steps: identification of semantic relations among the three primary social parties (*Ulama*, clients, and brokers); preparation of domain worksheets; reduction and selection of informant statements; identification of cover terms; formulation of structural statements for each domain; and synthesis of emergent domains into responses to the research questions.

As an illustration of how this process moved from raw observation to model-building, the recurring practice of hand-kissing upon departure from the *Kiai*, noted independently by several informants across different sites, was first coded within the broader domain of "ritual deference". This domain was then cross-referenced against informants' statements regarding the delegated instructional authority of teachers and the inherited authority of the *Kiai*'s descendants - statements that recurred across both the traditional-federal and classical-salafiyah sites in particular. The structural relationship connecting these domains - deference flowing toward the *Kiai* personally, and authority flowing downward through delegation and inheritance - was synthesised into the structural statement underlying what this study terms the pyramid model, presented in full in the Results section below. A comparable process, drawing on informants' accounts of inter-pesantren events and *Kiai* alliances, underlies the network model. Data validity was ensured through source triangulation, strengthening credibility by cross-checking data across multiple informants and observation settings (Morgan, 2024). Confirmability was established through verbal and written endorsement from research participants and relevant institutional parties throughout data collection.

Results and Discussion

Madurese Ethnic Preferences: Between Piety, Tradition, and Violence

Madura has long occupied a central place in the landscape of Indonesian Islamic learning. The founding generation of Nahdlatul *Ulama*, the largest Islamic mass organisation in Indonesia, counted among its members scholars who had received their training from a renowned Madurese religious figure, a fact establishing the island's *Ulama* as foundational contributors to the trajectory of Indonesian Muslim intellectual life (Pribadi, 2013). Piety in this context is not merely a personal spiritual disposition but a socially performed identity, manifested through ritual observance, dress, and communal participation in religious life (Rock-Singer, 2020).

Within the three pesantren observed for this study, this performed piety is not an abstract cultural backdrop but the explicit substance of moral education. Ritual observance, dress codes, and structured communal worship function as a curriculum of character formation that is transmitted primarily through daily modelling by teachers, senior students, and the *Kiai* himself rather than through formal lesson plans or written syllabi. As one alumnus described this process:

"We don't just learn about *akhlaq* (character) from the books. Every single day, we watch how the *Kiai* walks, how he speaks to guests, and how the senior students carry themselves. That is where the real discipline is absorbed; it's implicit. You just see it and copy it."

This is consistent with the broader pattern Solichin (2018) documents for Indonesian pesantren generally, in which the *Kiai*'s authority extends not only to *what* is taught but to the implicit expectation of *how* it is to be internalised through emulation and submission to the teacher's guidance rather than through independent study. This matters for Islamic education studies because it suggests that moral curriculum in the Madurese context operates through a logic closer to apprenticeship than to instruction: students learn what piety looks like by living alongside those who embody it, and the pesantren's pedagogical authority over student character rests on the same patronage logic that organises its administrative authority.

A second, more contested dimension of Madurese ethnic character concerns *carok*, a tradition of honour-based physical confrontation between adversaries, traditionally conducted with bladed weapons and arising from disputes over insults, women, land, or political office. It is especially prevalent in the western districts of the island. Several informants in this study confirmed that the religious prohibition on *carok* is actively and explicitly taught within the pesantren community. As one alumnus recalled:

"The *Kiai* was very strict about this. He used to tell us, 'If you get into a fight outside and resolve it through violence or *carok*, you are no longer my student. Go home.' He shifted our pride from physical bravery to intellectual and spiritual endurance."

This finding positions the pesantren not as a passive bystander to a locally prevalent practice of violence, but as an active site of moral counter-formation. The explicit teaching against *carok* functions as a component of the pesantren's character-education curriculum it is taught, repeated, and modelled with the same deliberateness as religious ritual. At the same time, the mechanism through which this teaching takes hold appears to rely heavily on the personal charisma of the *Kiai* rather than on doctrinal argument as such; Al Khanif's study of *kyai* authority among Madurese communities found that despite broader social changes, modernisation, and government development intervention, the *kyai* continued to exercise primary influence over the community's worldview specifically through culturally and religiously embedded channels of deference rather than through institutional or bureaucratic mechanisms (Al Khanif, 2016). This may help explain why the pesantren's teaching against *carok*, however consistently delivered, does not fully displace the cultural logic sustaining the practice outside the institution; the widely cited saying that white bones are preferable to white eyes continues to carry social weight in contexts the pesantren's moral authority does not fully reach. This tension between the pesantren's normative teaching and the surrounding social reality once students leave the institution's immediate orbit is itself a finding of direct relevance to Islamic education studies: it illustrates a *boundary condition* on religious education's influence on student conduct, one that curriculum designers and pesantren leadership may need to engage with explicitly rather than assume away.

A third figure relevant to this picture is the *blater*, whose authority is grounded in physical strength, demonstrated prowess, and territorial influence over local gambling, competition, and informal security arrangements rather than in religious knowledge. For pesantren leadership, the existence of this parallel authority structure carries a direct institutional implication. A pesantren's

social standing and freedom of operation in its surrounding community depend not only on the religious credibility of its *Kiai*, but also on the institution's relationship whether cooperative, distant, or carefully negotiated with locally dominant *blater* figures, who often exercise practical influence over matters such as community fundraising, land boundaries, and informal security around the pesantren compound. Several informants' accounts suggest that pesantren leadership manages this relationship deliberately rather than incidentally, though the precise mechanisms of this management what is negotiated, with whom, and on what terms lie beyond what student/alumni informants could observe directly. As one informant described this delicate balance:

"The *Kiai* never confronts the *blater* directly. If there's a land dispute near the pesantren, it's usually settled quietly through a trusted intermediary someone respected by both sides. The *Kiai* keeps his distance officially, but everyone knows these relationships exist, because the pesantren still needs to feel safe and the community's support still matters."

Taken together, the *Kiai* and the *blater* represent two complementary poles of authority in Madurese society: one sacred and oriented toward religious learning and communal moral order, the other secular and oriented toward physical demonstration and territorial influence. For Islamic educational institutions specifically, this dual structure is not background colour but a structural condition of operation. A pesantren's institutional legitimacy is co-produced by its standing within both authority systems simultaneously its religious credibility in the eyes of the community, and its practical accommodation with, or distance from, the parallel system of secular authority that governs much of everyday social and economic life around it.

Ulama Patronage as a Governance Structure within Islamic Educational Institutions

Having traced, in the Introduction, how colonial-era displacement of the aristocracy positioned the *Kiai* and the pesantren as the organisational centre of an alternative authority structure, this section turns to how that authority operates concretely inside the institutions of Madurese Islamic education today. Within the pesantren environment, patronage takes on a texture of daily intimacy that distinguishes it from more distant or contractual forms of patron-client relations found in other social contexts. Students regard the *Kiai* as a father figure whose authority encompasses not only religious instruction but also the provision of food, shelter, emotional guidance, and spiritual protection. In return, some students take on roles of personal service to the *Kiai* and his household, performing domestic and logistical tasks that position them simultaneously as learners and as dependants within a hierarchical domestic economy. As one alumnus described this continuing bond of service and loyalty:

"Once a *santri*, always a *santri*. Even though I graduated ten years ago, if the pesantren calls me to help build a new building or organise an event, I drop everything. We don't ask for money; serving the *Kiai* after graduation is how we keep the blessings flowing in our jobs."

Johnson and Dandeker note that the personal and exclusive character of patron-client relationships makes them resistant to easy categorical classification, occupying a space between voluntary service and obligatory subordination (Johnson & Dandeker, 1989).

In governance terms, this arrangement has a consequence that deserves to be stated explicitly: staffing and task allocation within the pesantren often follow lines of personal loyalty and ritual

deference rather than a formal job description or transparent recruitment process. A student's standing within the *Kiai's* household economy how long they have served, how visibly devoted they have been, how close their relationship with the *Kiai's* family can shape their later trajectory toward a teaching or administrative role inside the institution, in ways that are not always reducible to, or even aligned with, formal academic qualification. This is neither inherently dysfunctional nor straightforwardly problematic it is a coherent system with its own internal logic of legitimacy but it does represent a governance model that operates on different premises from the standardised, qualification-based staffing models assumed in much mainstream educational management literature, and this difference itself is a finding worth foregrounding for the field.

The authority of the *Kiai* is mediated downward through two categories of subordinate figures: teachers, who carry delegated instructional authority by virtue of their religious knowledge, and descendants of the *Kiai*, who carry inherited authority by virtue of lineage. As one senior student explained, the distinction between these two layers of authority is felt keenly in daily life:

"Obeying the *ustadh* (teacher) is a formal duty because they teach us the subjects. But obeying the *Kiai* is spiritual. If we disrespect an *ustadh*, we might fail the exam. But if we disrespect the *Kiai*, we fear losing the *barakah* (blessing) for our entire life. The weight feels completely different."

Together, these figures constitute a hierarchy of religious authority extending the *Kiai's* reach throughout the educational community. Physical gestures of reverence, such as the practice of kissing the *Kiai's* hand upon departure, serve as recurring ritualised affirmations of this hierarchy (Woodward, 1988).

Drawing on Scott's foundational framework for patron-client relations (Scott, 1972), this study identifies three distinct models through which *Ulama* patronage is organised within the Madurese context and through which, this study argues, the day-to-day governance of Madurese Islamic educational institutions is structured. In the first model, "cluster", the *Kiai* relates directly to clients, students, and community members without the mediation of any intermediary. This arrangement operates through ties that are simultaneously traditional - rooted in religion and ethnic solidarity - and hierarchical, positioning the *Ulama* above the client in a relationship that cannot be made horizontal. It is most observed in open religious study sessions where the *Kiai* addresses a gathered community directly. In institutional terms, this is the governance mode through which the *Kiai* issues authoritative pronouncements that function, in effect, as policy: a decision announced in this setting carries the force of an institutional directive without passing through any formal deliberative or administrative process.

In the second model, "pyramid", the *Kiai's* authority extends through a hierarchy of intermediaries - teachers and descendants - who carry delegated authority and manage the institution's day-to-day operations on his behalf. This arrangement governs most of the routine educational and administrative life of the institution. It is the governance mode responsible for ordinary instructional management: lesson scheduling, classroom discipline, and daily coordination between formal-school and pesantren curricula observed at the modern-integrated site. Its institutional strength is responsiveness and continuity of operation even when the *Kiai* is personally occupied elsewhere; its institutional vulnerability is dependence on teachers and descendants who command sufficient personal legitimacy to exercise delegated authority credibly. This vulnerability

is consistent with Aedi's study of pesantren leadership succession, which identifies succession as a central determinant of institutional continuity in Indonesian pesantren more broadly. That study found that pesantren leadership succession is influenced by heredity, idealism, respect, and fanaticism toward the *Kiai*, such that figures outside the inherited line may be considered misaligned with the founders' ideology (Aedi, 2014). The practical consequence, also documented in that study, is that a pesantren may cease to function once its founding *Kiai* dies without a legitimate successor in place. The Madurese pyramid model described here exhibits the same structural logic: delegated authority sustains daily operations only as long as the line of personally legitimate delegates remains unbroken.

In the third model, "network", the *Kiai* enters horizontal relations not with clients but with other *Ulama*, forming alliances among equals. Within these inter-patron relations, the sacred hierarchy of patron over client is suspended rather than dissolved: the *Ulama* relate to one another on a plane of shared dignity, while clients remain at a distance, unable to participate in or benefit directly from these alliances. Institutionally, this is the governance mode underlying inter-pesantren cooperation: shared religious events, mutual recognition of graduates' credentials, and the informal accreditation that one *Kiai*'s endorsement lends to another's institution. It operates, in effect, as an informal quality-assurance network that substitutes, in part, for the formal inter-institutional accreditation found elsewhere in the education sector. Because clients are excluded from this layer, however, students and their families have no direct visibility into, or recourse within, the network's workings (see, table 2).

Table 2. Patronage-Governance Models in Madurese Islamic Educational Institutions

Model	Key Actors	Governance Mechanism	Educational Implication	Empirical Evidence / Field Example
Cluster	<i>Kiai</i> → students/community	Direct address in open study sessions	Institution-wide policy announcement; bypasses formal channels	Observed open religious study sessions where <i>Kiai</i> pronouncements function as binding decisions.
Pyramid	<i>Kiai</i> → teachers/descendants → students	Delegated instructional and administrative authority	Daily operations depend on personal loyalty; succession tends to be hereditary or loyalty-based (Aedi, 2014).	Observed at modern-integrated and traditional-federal sites in scheduling, discipline, finance, and teaching coordination.
Network	<i>Kiai</i> → other <i>Kiai</i>	Horizontal inter-institutional alliances	Informal legitimacy and quality assurance; students and families have limited visibility.	Reported shared religious events, graduate recognition, and one <i>Kiai</i> endorsement of another institution.

Institutionalisation: Pesantren, Madrasah, and Mosque as Governance Domains

The pesantren constitutes the primary institutional expression of *Ulama* patronage in Madura and the foundational site through which the reproduction of religious authority across generations is organised and sustained. As a form of non-formal Islamic education, the pesantren has been formally recognised within the Indonesian national education framework through legislation acknowledging it as a legitimate mode of religious instruction (Sekretariat Negara Republik

Indonesia, 2003, 2019). For the *Kiai*, the pesantren functions as the institutional embodiment of his authority - the physical and symbolic space within which his role as religious patron is most fully realised.

The expansion of pesantren into formal educational structures has significantly extended the reach of *Ulama* patronage. Government recognition of formal, non-formal, and informal educational pathways has enabled pesantren to establish formal Islamic schools under the umbrella of their respective foundations (Yusuf & Taufiq, 2020). The spatial concentration of the pesantren, formal school, and often the mosque within a single compound creates conditions for integrated and continuous patronage coordination, allowing the *Kiai* to maintain oversight of educational programmes, teacher conduct, and community relations from a single institutional centre. This spatial co-location is, in effect, a governance technology: it allows one authority figure to exercise oversight across what would, in a more formally differentiated education system, be separate institutional jurisdictions - school administration, religious instruction, and community relations - without the coordination costs that institutional separation would normally impose.

The coexistence of non-formal pesantren education and formal Islamic schooling within the same compound is, however, not without structural tension. The division of educational responsibility between the two systems - with the formal school tasked with delivering general subjects and the pesantren retaining responsibility for core Islamic learning - creates competition for student time and attention that neither system fully resolves. This tension was directly observable during a coordination meeting convened by the senior caretaker of one of the classical-style pesantren included in this study, in which the management of overlapping institutional responsibilities between the boarding school and an affiliated tertiary institution was a central point of discussion. As far as this study's observational data allow it to be characterised, the central issue at stake was the allocation of student hours between core Islamic subjects under pesantren authority and general curriculum subjects under the formal school's authority, with final decision-making authority over the resulting schedule resting with the *Kiai*'s household rather than with a school administrative body as such.

The mosque constitutes a third institutional domain through which *Ulama* patronage is expressed and reproduced. In Madura, mosques are typically situated within or adjacent to the pesantren compound, and their financing draws primarily on pesantren resources and the personal contributions of the *Kiai*. Community fundraising for mosque renovation is organised through a system in which students are mobilised to solicit household donations, a practice that simultaneously generates material resources for the institution and reproduces the social networks of obligation connecting the pesantren to the surrounding community. As one village informant recounted:

"When we needed to expand the village mosque, the committee went to the *Kiai* first. Once the *Kiai* gave his blessing and made the first donation, the entire village immediately followed. If the *Kiai* suggests a specific person to become the imam, nobody argues. His word is final for public leadership."

The appointment of mosque prayer leaders falls under the authority of the *Kiai*, typically guided by the recommendations of senior teachers, and candidate lists frequently include figures

from local government and political life, reflecting the intersection of religious and political interests within the mosque as a social institution.

This intersection gives rise to what this study terms a *patronage of interest* model, in which two or more patrons with differing characteristics and orientations enter into a horizontal relationship with one another in order to access each other's client networks. In the Madurese context, this describes the alliance between *Kiai* and local political actors: the *Ulama* provide political actors with access to extensive and loyal client communities, while political actors offer in return forms of formal legitimacy, state protection, and material support for institutions. As one local resident described this dynamic:

"What I've heard from the elders is that politicians always flock to the *Kiai*'s house before the election. The candidate doesn't openly buy votes; instead, they give a large 'gift' to the pesantren. The word then spreads among the villagers that the *Kiai* welcomes this candidate, and that is usually enough to guide how people vote."

This dynamic is not unique to Madura, and recent scholarship elsewhere in Indonesia helps clarify both its institutional upside and its risks. A study of pesantren political dynasties found that pesantren families, including chief officials, utilised state facilities and were involved in dynastic politics, with social, economic, and political capital all playing roles in election outcomes (Azizah, Nkwede, & Armoyu, 2021). This pattern of institutional-political entanglement is broadly consistent with the present study's informants' accounts of mosque leadership appointment and *Kiai* public visibility, although this study's data cannot establish whether comparable dynastic political consolidation occurs at the specific sites observed. More directly relevant to institutional governance, a phenomenological study of three pesantren in South Sumatra found that *Kiai* involvement in local politics can be understood as an adaptive strategy to access public resources and strengthen pesantren institutional capacity, influencing institutional legitimacy, curriculum development, and competitiveness. The same study cautioned, however, that excessive dependence on political networks poses risks to pesantren institutional autonomy and may erode the moral authority of *Kiai* as religious leaders (Zainuddin et al., 2026). Specific to Madura, Topan and Tianah's historical review of local *Kiai* in post-reform political contestation documents a comparable movement of religiously legitimated figures into formal political office across the island's regencies (Topan & Tianah, 2024). This pattern is consistent with this study's informants' secondhand accounts of *Kiai* involvement in mosque leadership and community electoral guidance, even though, as noted in the Method section, this study's exclusively student/alumni informant base means these accounts cannot be verified against the *Kiai*'s own perspective or direct observation of political negotiation.

For pesantren governance specifically, this body of evidence - both this study's own data and the comparative literature above - points to a tangible structural risk: institutional decisions over curriculum emphasis, the scheduling and framing of public events, or the public profile projected by the *Kiai* may become shaped by electoral timing and political calculation rather than purely pedagogical considerations.

Comparable research elsewhere indicates that mosque-based political engagement is typically contingent and voluntaristic: studies of Muslim communities in the United States suggest that mere attendance at prayers does not in itself constitute political mobilisation (Westfall, 2019), and

research on Muslim minority communities in Western Europe similarly points to the mosque as a site of political integration without compulsion (Dana et al., 2011). The Madurese case differs from both in one structural respect directly relevant to educational governance: because the *Kiai*'s authority over students and community members is not merely religious but institutionally encompassing - extending into curriculum, discipline, and daily life inside the pesantren - political messages transmitted through this channel carry an institutionally backed weight that voluntaristic religious settings elsewhere do not generate.

Critical Reflections on the Patronage-Governance Model

While *Ulama* patronage provides Madurese pesantren with a stable, culturally legitimate, and historically continuous governance structure, the findings above also point to three structural risks worth naming explicitly, in the spirit of a more critical engagement with the patronage model than description alone provides.

First, dependency on charismatic authority creates a succession vulnerability. Because legitimacy in the *pyramid* model flows from personal relationship to the *Kiai* rather than from a formalised office, institutional continuity is at its most fragile precisely at the moment of leadership transition. As one community leader put it:

"It cannot be just anyone, even if they are highly educated. The successor must be from the *Kiai*'s bloodline (the family tree) because the community's loyalty is tied to the family's spiritual charisma. An outsider, no matter how smart, will struggle to maintain that same level of absolute authority."

This is consistent with Aedi's (2014) broader finding for Indonesian pesantren that succession driven by heredity and personal loyalty rather than structured regeneration places institutional survival at risk once the founding figure is gone. This is a structural feature of the model itself, not an incidental weakness, and it suggests that Madurese pesantren may benefit from developing succession mechanisms that retain the model's cultural legitimacy while reducing its dependence on any single individual's accumulated personal charisma.

Second, reliance on personal loyalty over formal qualification in staffing raises a professional-governance question that will likely intensify as pesantren integrate further with the formal education system. As pesantren increasingly operate alongside accredited formal schools, as observed directly at the modern-integrated site in this study, the gap between patronage-based staffing logic and the qualification-based expectations of formal education accreditation bodies is likely to become a more visible point of institutional strain. Zainuddin et al.'s (2026) finding that excessive political entanglement can erode a *Kiai*'s moral authority as a religious leader suggests a parallel dynamic on the professional-governance side: the same personalised authority that gives the pyramid model its responsiveness and legitimacy may, without deliberate institutional adaptation, become a liability as external accreditation and quality-assurance expectations grow.

Third, and most directly visible from this study's own data, the leadership structures described throughout this article are conspicuously male. All nine informants were students or alumni; none of the leadership figures described - *Kiai*, senior teachers, or descendants exercising delegated authority - appears in this study's data as a woman. This silence in the data is worth holding up

against direct evidence that female religious authority does exist on the island. Jannah and Ida's ethnographic study of two female religious leaders (nyai) in Sampang and Sumenep, Madura, found that these nyai had built genuine authority and reached the status of nyai rajheh, or great leader, with their popularity shaped by charisma, genealogy, and people's power. The same study also noted that the role and position of nyai in Madura's patriarchal society remain crucial precisely because their teachings have gradually become doctrine within a male-dominated environment, and that their growing prominence has drawn concern and criticism from some male religious leaders on the island (Jannah & Ida, 2019). Read alongside this study's own data, this suggests two things at once: the governance models described above - cluster, pyramid, and network - are not necessarily exhaustive of Madurese religious-educational authority as such, but may instead reflect a male-centred subset of it that this study's informant base, drawn entirely from institutions led by male *Kiai*, was structurally positioned to observe; and female religious authority in Madura, where it exists, appears to operate under additional legitimacy burdens not faced by male *Kiai*, a pattern meriting dedicated future research attention rather than passing mention.

These tensions do not negate the functional coherence of the patronage-governance model described in this article; it has, after all, sustained Madurese Islamic education across generations and through significant historical disruption. However, naming these tensions qualifies any claim to the model's straightforward sustainability as Madurese pesantren continue to navigate deeper integration with the formal education system. This qualification is itself, this study argues, a necessary contribution to a properly critical sociology of Islamic educational institutions.

Conclusion

This study finds that Madurese ethnic character - particularly its dual orientation toward religious piety and honour-based social conduct - directly shapes pesantren moral education. Piety functions as the substantive content of a character-formation curriculum transmitted through daily modelling rather than formal instruction, while the pesantren's explicit teaching against honour-based violence such as carok positions the institution as an active, if only partially effective, site of moral counter-formation against a locally prevalent practice it cannot fully displace once students step beyond its immediate orbit. The study identifies three governance models - cluster, pyramid, and network - through which patronage authority is converted into concrete institutional decisions over teaching, discipline, and succession. The cluster model functions as direct, unmediated policy announcement; the pyramid model governs routine instructional and administrative operations through delegated personal loyalty rather than standardised role definition, carrying an inherent succession vulnerability; and the network model functions as an informal, client-excluded system of inter-institutional legitimacy. Alongside these, a fourth model, patronage of interest, links pesantren governance to external political dynamics that can be a genuine institutional asset when proportionate but a risk to institutional autonomy when excessive. The study further finds that intergenerational reproduction occurs through the spatial and institutional co-location of pesantren, madrasah, and mosque, which allows a single *Kiai* to coordinate religious instruction, formal schooling, and communal religious life as one continuous, mutually reinforcing authority structure.

Theoretically, this study extends the patron-client framework into the domain of educational governance, showing that patron-client logic structures not only economic and political relations, as in earlier accounts of patronage elsewhere in Southeast Asia, but also institutional decision-making itself - staffing, curriculum authority, and succession - within Islamic educational institutions. Empirically, it offers an account of how three distinct pesantren governance types - traditional-federal, modern-integrated, and classical-salafiyah - operationalise this shared patronage logic differently, depending on their degree of institutional formalisation. Practically, the study's critical reflections suggest that pesantren seeking sustainable integration with the formal education system may need to develop succession and staffing mechanisms that retain the cultural legitimacy of the patronage model while reducing its structural dependence on the charisma, availability, and male lineage of any single individual. This is a structural feature of the patronage model itself, not an incidental weakness to be engineered away.

This study's empirical base is limited to nine student/alumni informants across three sites. Claims regarding *Kiai* decision-making, mosque leadership, and political patronage are therefore grounded in student/alumni perception rather than in direct testimony from religious or institutional leaders and claims regarding the patronage of interest model in particular should be read as identifying a phenomenon whose internal mechanics this study's data cannot fully verify. The complete absence of *nyai*-led institutions from this study's data indicates that the governance account offered here is partial in a specific and identifiable way. Future research should incorporate *Kiai*, pesantren foundation leaders, madrasah administrators, and *nyai* as informants; extend comparative analysis to pesantren governance in other Indonesian regions; and investigate directly the gender imbalance in religious-educational leadership that this study's data surface but do not examine in depth. The patronage dimensions of business networks and inter-institutional alliances, given the strong tradition of economic and social outreach characterising Madurese communities beyond the island itself, are likewise recommended as a direction for future inquiry.

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