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Pesantren at the Crossroads of Time: The Anthropology of Islamic Education in the Negotiation of Local Identity and Global Citizenship in Indonesia

Eka Firmansyah*[1], Tobroni[2], Muhammad Rizal Masdul[3], Hasmiza[4], Hendra[5]

[1]Universitas Muhammadiyah Palu, Indonesia, ekafirmansyah@unismuhpalu.ac.id
[2]Universitas Muhammadiyah Malang, Indonesia, tobroni@umm.ac.id
[3]Universitas Muhammadiyah Palu, Indonesia, rizalmasdul@unismuhpalu.ac.id
[4]Sekolah Tinggi Agama Islam Natuna, Indonesia, hasmiza.almaari@gmail.com
[5]Universitas Muhammadiyah Bima, Indonesia, hendra@umbima.ac.id
*corresponding author: ekafirmansyah@unismuhpalu.ac.id

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ABSTRACT: *This study examines how pesantren negotiate the tension between preserving local religious identity and cultivating global citizenship among their students, and identifies the cultural and institutional mechanisms that allow this negotiation to appear successful despite theoretical expectations of inherent contestation. Employing a qualitative ethnographic approach, data were collected through prolonged participant observation, in-depth interviews with kiai, ustadz, santri, and alumni, and document analysis, then analyzed inductively with triangulation and member-checking to ensure credibility. Findings reveal that local identity is preserved through non-negotiable core practices, while global citizenship values are absorbed gradually through religiously reframed idioms rather than imposed as external impositions. The apparent harmony observed does not indicate an absence of tension but reflects a distinctive anthropological strategy involving symbolic translation, kiai-centered legitimacy, and relational mediation that internalizes and diffuses contestation. These findings contribute to a more grounded understanding of Islamic educational transformation and offer pesantren as a viable model for reconciling cultural preservation with global integration, directly supporting Sustainable Development Goal 4 on quality education and Sustainable Development Goal 16 on peaceful, just, and strong institutions.*

Keywords: *Parenting, Reading interest, Elementary school students, Literacy development.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Across Indonesia, pesantren have long served as the backbone of grassroots Islamic education, and in many regions this role has grown even more prominent in recent years. Local communities continue to entrust their children to pesantren not only to learn religious knowledge but also to build character, discipline, and social competence. Field observations show that pesantren graduates are increasingly visible in wider social spaces, actively participating in community organizations, local governance forums, and inter-village cooperation programs, without losing their distinct religious identity markers such as dress, greeting customs, and modes of address rooted in the kiai–santri tradition.

This pattern reflects a form of educational success that is contextually maximal: pesantren in the research location have managed to produce graduates who are locally rooted yet socially mobile. Alumni are reported to hold positions of trust in village administration, small enterprises, and community religious councils, suggesting that the pesantren model of character formation translates effectively into practical social capital. Parents in the area consistently express confidence that pesantren education equips their children with resilience and adaptability that general schooling alone does not provide.

At the same time, pesantren in this setting are seen as sites of harmony rather than tension, where traditional religious practice coexists comfortably with everyday exposure to modern communication tools, inter-regional mobility, and interaction with people from different cultural backgrounds. Community leaders describe this coexistence as evidence that pesantren have successfully absorbed contemporary social dynamics into their traditional structure, achieving a level of local-global balance that appears, on the surface, remarkably smooth and largely free of visible friction.

However, this apparent success stands in contrast to what contemporary scholarship considers ideal or expected under conditions of rapid globalization. Scholars argue that the encounter between deeply localized religious education and the demands of global citizenship rarely produces such frictionless outcomes; rather, it is expected to generate visible tension, negotiation, and even resistance.

Mursalin, Yusuf, and Ramadhan (2024) contend that the incorporation of moderation and global-citizenship values into Islamic curricula is a deliberate, contested pedagogical project rather than a spontaneous byproduct of tradition. Similarly, Ibrahim et al. (2024) demonstrate that institutional transformation in pesantren typically unfolds gradually and unevenly, constrained by the persistence of kiai-based legitimacy structures that resist rapid external change. Sumanti, Nunzairina, and Salminawati (2024) further emphasize that the evolution of Islamic educational institutions is historically marked by struggle between preservation and adaptation, not by seamless integration. From an intercultural perspective, Setiawan et al. (2025) argue that identity negotiation in religiously plural contexts is inherently a process of friction and renegotiation of symbolic boundaries, rather than harmonious coexistence. Meanwhile, Jemmy Harto et al. (2025) assert that the dialectic between tradition, modernity, and transnational Islamic currents inevitably produces internal contestation within pesantren communities. Taken together, these theoretical positions suggest that the ideal trajectory of pesantren negotiating local identity and global citizenship should be marked by visible tension and incomplete resolution, not by the smooth, maximal success observed in the field.

This contrast reveals a significant gap between empirical reality and theoretical expectation. While field conditions indicate that pesantren in the research location have achieved a notably successful and largely frictionless negotiation between local religious identity and the demands of global citizenship, established scholarship insists that such negotiation should, in principle, be fraught with contestation, institutional resistance, and unresolved tension. This discrepancy raises a fundamental question about the actual mechanisms at work: either the harmony observed on the surface conceals deeper, unarticulated negotiations, or the pesantren in question has developed a distinctive anthropological strategy of identity management that existing theoretical frameworks have not yet adequately captured.

This gap therefore constitutes the core problem of this research. If the prevailing theoretical consensus assumes that tension is the natural condition of local–global negotiation in Islamic education, then the empirical appearance of success and

harmony demands closer anthropological scrutiny rather than acceptance at face value. The central research problem is thus to understand how, and through what cultural and institutional processes, pesantren are able to negotiate local identity and global citizenship in ways that appear to transcend the friction theoretically anticipated by scholars, and what this reveals about the hidden dynamics of Islamic education in a globalizing Indonesia.

Recent scholarship on pesantren and globalization has produced a rich but fragmented body of knowledge. Several studies focus on curricular and pedagogical transformation, showing how Islamic boarding schools incorporate moderation, tolerance, and civic values into their teaching (Mursalin, Yusuf, & Ramadhan, 2024; Kurniasih, Sastradiharja, & Syaida, 2024; Hadi, Syairozi, & Oktapiani, 2024). Others emphasize institutional adaptation, documenting how pesantren balance traditional authority structures with modern administrative and pedagogical demands (Ibrahim et al., 2024; Muzammil et al., 2022; Kawakip & Sulanam, 2023). A further cluster of research addresses the phenomenon of "glocalization," in which global Islamic and educational trends are selectively filtered and reinterpreted through local cultural lenses (Pomalingo et al., 2024; Jemmy Harto et al., 2025; Sumanti, Nunzairina, & Salminawati, 2024). Meanwhile, studies on identity negotiation in multi-ethnic and religiously plural settings highlight the symbolic and communicative strategies individuals use to navigate competing cultural demands (Setiawan et al., 2025; Suryandari et al., 2025; Raya et al., 2023).

Despite this substantial body of work, most existing studies isolate either the pedagogical, institutional, or symbolic dimension of pesantren transformation, rarely integrating them within a single anthropological framework that treats local identity and global citizenship as co-constitutive rather than opposing forces. Studies such as Mainuddin et al. (2024) and Ruslana and Mulyono (2022) note institutional disorientation and cultural strain, yet few works examine cases where this negotiation appears to succeed without visible contestation, nor do they explain the anthropological mechanisms that might account for such an outcome. This scarcity of holistic, ethnographically grounded analysis—particularly one attentive to everyday cultural practice rather than curriculum documents alone—

constitutes the scholarly gap this research seeks to address, distinguishing it from prior studies and avoiding mere repetition of existing institutional or pedagogical analyses.

The novelty of this research lies in its anthropological approach to examining pesantren not merely as educational institutions undergoing policy-driven reform, but as living cultural spaces where local identity and global citizenship are negotiated through everyday practice, symbol, and social relation. By foregrounding lived experience over institutional documentation, this study offers a fresh lens that connects micro-level cultural negotiation to macro-level global citizenship discourse, filling a gap left by studies that treat these dimensions separately. In doing so, the research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how religious education can simultaneously preserve cultural rootedness and cultivate globally competent citizens, an understanding directly relevant to Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education), particularly its emphasis on education that fosters global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity.

The urgency of this research is underscored by the growing need for educational models capable of reconciling local cultural preservation with global integration amid accelerating social change in Indonesia. As religious institutions face increasing pressure to remain relevant without losing their identity, understanding the anthropological mechanisms behind successful negotiation becomes critical not only for academic knowledge but also for policy and practice. This urgency aligns with the broader agenda of the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 4 and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions), as pesantren that successfully balance local identity with global citizenship potentially serve as models for social cohesion, tolerance, and sustainable community development in pluralistic societies.

Based on the contextual gap identified above, this research is guided by the following problem formulations. First, this study seeks to explain how pesantren, as anthropological and educational spaces, negotiate the tension between preserving local religious identity and cultivating global citizenship values among their students in practice. Second, this study seeks to explore the cultural and institutional mechanisms that enable this negotiation to appear successful and

largely free of visible contestation, despite theoretical expectations that such processes are inherently fraught with tension and resistance.

II. METHOD

This study employs a qualitative ethnographic approach to capture the lived, everyday negotiation of local identity and global citizenship within the pesantren under study. Data were gathered through prolonged participant observation of daily pesantren routines, including classroom instruction, religious rituals, dormitory interaction, and informal santri gatherings, allowing the researcher to trace how global values are enacted in embodied practice rather than merely stated in curricular documents. This was complemented by in-depth, semi-structured interviews with kiai, ustadz, santri, and alumni, selected through purposive sampling to represent diverse roles within the pesantren's social structure, alongside document analysis of institutional materials such as curricula, activity records, and internal policies to triangulate observational and interview data.

Data analysis followed an iterative, inductive process consistent with ethnographic tradition: field notes and interview transcripts were coded thematically to identify recurring patterns of cultural negotiation, symbolic practice, and institutional strategy, which were then organized into broader analytical categories linking local identity preservation with global citizenship formation. Triangulation across observation, interview, and documentary sources was used to strengthen the credibility of findings, while member-checking with key informants ensured that interpretations remained grounded in participants' own understanding of their practices. This combination of methods was specifically chosen to move beyond institutional or policy-level analysis, enabling the study to surface the anthropological mechanisms, often tacit and unarticulated, through which pesantren achieve a seemingly frictionless balance between tradition and global engagement.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The negotiation between preserving local religious identity and cultivating global citizenship values among students in practice

Findings from prolonged observation and interviews reveal that this negotiation does not occur as a single deliberate policy but as a diffuse, everyday practice embedded in the rhythm of pesantren life. Local identity is preserved through a set of non-negotiable core elements: the santri's mode of address to the kiai, the structure of religious ritual, the Arabic-Javanese hybrid idiom used in classical text recitation (bandongan and sorogan), and the dormitory-based communal discipline that has defined pesantren life for generations. These elements function as an anchoring core that santri rarely question, and which alumni continue to reproduce even after leaving the institution. Global citizenship values, by contrast, enter not through wholesale curricular overhaul but through selective, incremental insertion, inter-school exchange activities, exposure to digital communication tools for religious discourse, invitations to inter-faith or inter-ethnic dialogue events, and the gradual normalization of critical discussion during study circles. Santri and ustadz alike describe this as a process of filtering, in which new ideas are evaluated against the pesantren's core religious-cultural logic before being accepted, resembling the adaptive-accommodative pattern found by Muzammil et al. (2022) in other pesantren settings.

What distinguishes this pesantren is the relative absence of visible resistance during this filtering process, which is unusual compared to the tension typically documented in prior literature. Rather than confrontation, the negotiation unfolds through role distribution among ustadz, quiet institutional endorsement from the kiai, and gradual habituation of santri to new practices without explicit reframing of tradition as being under threat. This pattern aligns with Kawakip and Sulanam's (2023) observation that pesantren often adapt through internal management strengthening and human resource development rather than open ideological confrontation. The kiai's authority operates as a stabilizing mechanism: because legitimacy is vested primarily in the kiai's person rather than in fixed institutional rules, the kiai retains flexibility to endorse global-citizenship-oriented activities without these being perceived by santri as a departure from tradition. This

supports Ibrahim et al.'s (2024) argument that kiai lineage functions as the basis of legitimacy through which institutional change is absorbed gradually rather than resisted outright.

The cultural and institutional mechanisms enabling this negotiation to appear successful and largely free of visible contestation, despite theoretical expectations that such processes are inherently fraught with tension and resistance

Several interlocking mechanisms account for this apparent smoothness. First, symbolic layering allows global values to be reframed in local religious vocabulary rather than introduced as foreign imports; concepts such as tolerance, moderation, and civic responsibility are taught through classical religious texts and hadith rather than through secular global-citizenship language, so santri experience them as extensions of religious obligation rather than as external impositions. This resonates with the glocalization pattern identified by Pomalingo et al. (2024) and Harto et al. (2025), in which transnational and global currents are absorbed by being translated into locally legible religious idioms rather than adopted wholesale.

Second, the pesantren's hierarchical yet relationally close social structure functions as a buffer against contestation. Because santri relate to ustadz and kiai through deeply personalized, almost familial bonds, disagreement over new practices tends to be processed privately and gradually rather than surfacing as institutional conflict. This finding extends Setiawan et al.'s (2025) argument regarding identity negotiation as an inherently frictional process by showing that friction can be internalized and diffused through relational proximity rather than eliminated, producing an outward appearance of harmony that conceals ongoing, low-visibility adjustment. Third, selective exposure management plays a role: the pesantren does not expose santri to the full range of global discourse at once but sequences exposure according to seniority and perceived readiness, echoing the filtering logic described in earlier institutional adaptation literature (Muzammil et al., 2022; Kawakip & Sulanam, 2023), which reduces the likelihood of abrupt value conflict.

Taken together, these mechanisms suggest that the apparent success and low visibility of contestation observed in this pesantren do not indicate the absence of tension predicted by theory, but rather reflect a distinctive anthropological strategy of tension management, symbolic translation, and relational mediation.

This finding refines existing theoretical assumptions such as those advanced by Mursalin et al. (2024) and Sumanti et al. (2024), which position curricular and institutional evolution as inherently contested; instead, the evidence here indicates that contestation is not absent but is absorbed, translated, and rendered invisible through culturally specific mechanisms rooted in kiai authority, symbolic reframing, and relational hierarchy. This offers a more grounded, ethnographically informed account of how pesantren manage the negotiation between local identity and global citizenship, extending rather than contradicting the broader theoretical literature on Islamic educational transformation.

IV. CONCLUSION

This research demonstrates that pesantren negotiate local religious identity and global citizenship not through open confrontation but through a subtle anthropological strategy of symbolic translation, relational mediation, and kiai-centered legitimacy. Local identity is preserved as a non-negotiable core, while global values are absorbed gradually through religiously reframed idioms rather than imposed as foreign impositions. The apparent harmony observed in the field does not signify the absence of tension theorized in prior scholarship, but rather reflects tension that is internalized, sequenced, and rendered culturally invisible through mechanisms rooted in personalized authority and communal trust.

These findings carry direct implications for the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 4 on quality and inclusive education and SDG 16 on peaceful, just, and strong institutions. By showing that religious institutions can cultivate globally competent, tolerant citizens without eroding local cultural and religious identity, this study offers pesantren as a viable model for education that advances global citizenship while strengthening social cohesion. Such a model contributes meaningfully to national and global efforts toward inclusive education and sustainable, peaceful pluralism.

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