

Kyai's Leadership in Fostering Alumni Harmony and Solidarity through the Halaqah Approach in Islamic Boarding Schools

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Abstract: *The leadership of the kyai in Islamic boarding schools (Pesantren) plays a vital role in fostering alumni harmony and solidarity. This study explores how the halaqah approach (regular spiritual gatherings) serves as a medium through which kyai maintain deep emotional and spiritual ties with alumni. Using a qualitative ethnographic method at Pondok Pesantren Kutasari, Purbalingga, this research reveals that the kyai acts as a unifying figure through participatory and inclusive leadership, encouraging alumni engagement across generations. The findings show that the kyai's charismatic and spiritual leadership fosters a strong collective identity among alumni, enabling continued collaboration in religious, social, and educational fields. The halaqah is not merely a learning forum but a cultural space for renewing values and reinforcing brotherhood. This highlights how traditional leadership rooted in Islamic values ensures alumni cohesion amid a changing society.*

Abstrak: Kepemimpinan *kyai* di pesantren memiliki peran sentral dalam membangun kerukunan dan solidaritas alumni. Studi ini mengkaji bagaimana pendekatan *halaqah* (forum pengajian rutin) dimanfaatkan oleh *kyai* untuk menjaga keterikatan emosional dan spiritual dengan alumni. Melalui metode etnografi kualitatif di Pondok Pesantren Kutasari, Purbalingga, ditemukan bahwa *kyai* berperan sebagai pemersatu melalui gaya kepemimpinan yang partisipatif dan inklusif, mendorong keterlibatan alumni lintas generasi. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa kepemimpinan *kyai* yang karismatik dan spiritual memperkuat identitas kolektif alumni sehingga memungkinkan kolaborasi berkelanjutan dalam bidang keagamaan, sosial, dan pendidikan. *Halaqah* tidak hanya menjadi media belajar, tetapi juga ruang budaya untuk memperbarui nilai-nilai dan mempererat ukhuwah. Hal ini menunjukkan bahwa kepemimpinan tradisional berbasis nilai Islam mampu menjaga kohesi alumni di tengah perubahan masyarakat.

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INTRODUCTION

In the information era, the success of an institution heavily depends on the quality of its leadership. In the educational context, leadership is not merely about administrative management, but also about moral and spiritual authority in shaping individual character. Within Islamic educational institutions such as pesantren, this aspect becomes increasingly complex. Although management in pesantren often goes unnoticed, it is the backbone of institutional operations. If leadership is not executed effectively, the sustainability of the institution becomes fragile and threatened (Nasution, 2015; Sumantri, 2013).

Leadership in Islam is not only oriented toward outcomes, but also toward the process of moral cultivation. In pesantren, the *kyai* holds a central role, not only managing the institution structurally but also shaping the values of both students and alumni. This leadership style encompasses spiritual development, character formation, and cross-generational social relationships. However, in an increasingly plural and complex social reality, pesantren alumni face challenges in maintaining solidarity and collective identity. In this context, the role of the *kyai* as a unifying figure remains highly relevant but has yet to be thoroughly explored (Waedoloh et al., 2022; Syafar, 2017).

Various studies have examined the role of pesantren as an institution for character and moral education deeply rooted in Indonesia's Islamic tradition. Pesantren is not only a place of learning but also a center for shaping the collective identity of Indonesian Muslims (Widyatmoko, 2023). Its educational system, built on exemplary leadership and the close relationship between the *kyai* and *santri*, distinguishes it from other educational institutions. Pesantren is also considered a *sui generis* social reality with its own distinctive system of values and culture (Lailiyah et al., 2024).

Other studies emphasize that the *kyai* plays a role not only in religious education but also in influencing the socio-political dynamics of society (Pamulang, 2023). The charisma of the *kyai*, born from scholarly knowledge, moral example, and spirituality, makes them a central figure highly respected not only by students but also by alumni and the wider public (Hayani, 2024; Suryana, et al., 2021). However, these studies have not specifically explored how the *kyai*'s role directly affects harmony and solidarity among alumni after they have graduated from the pesantren.

Additional research highlights the importance of shared values and social awareness in forming community solidarity, drawing on Durkheim's concepts of mechanical and organic solidarity (Dila, 2022; Dan et al., 2025; Manu & Tampake, 2023). In this context, pesantren and their alumni are examples of communities with strong homogeneous values, consistently reinforcing collective traditions through socialization of pesantren values (Putra & Amalih, 2023; Fathoni, 2024). Yet, the dynamics of alumni solidarity remain underexplored, particularly through the lens of *kyai* leadership as a symbolic and spiritual binder.

Some studies on alumni solidarity tend to focus solely on structural or institutional aspects, such as alumni forums or religious outreach programs. However, there is a relational aspect that is cultural and spiritual in nature: the

emotional and symbolic attachment of alumni to the *kyai*. This element, in fact, becomes the emotional and cultural driver of solidarity. Research that positions the *kyai* as a strategic actor in maintaining sustainable alumni networks, especially through the halaqah tradition, is still very limited (Nasrulloh, 2022; Pratiwi et al., 2024).

This study offers novelty by positioning the *halaqah* as a strategic instrument in building and nurturing pesantren alumni solidarity. The *halaqah* is not merely a religious study forum but also a symbolic and cultural space for reaffirming pesantren values, strengthening brotherhood, and enabling intergenerational dialogue. It serves as a participatory arena that is inclusive and communicative, where the *kyai* acts not as a one-way instructor but as a catalyst of unity and dialogue.

Furthermore, this study integrates an ethnographic approach with Durkheim's theory of social solidarity to examine *kyai* leadership within alumni networks. In doing so, this research not only contributes to the discourse on Islamic educational leadership but also expands understanding of how symbolic structures and pesantren values continue to live on within alumni communities. This offers both theoretical and practical insights into a spiritual-social leadership model grounded in pesantren traditions.

This study aims to analyze the role of *kyai* leadership in fostering harmony and solidarity among alumni through the *halaqah* approach at Pondok Pesantren Kutasari, Purbalingga. The main focus is on how the *kyai* operates symbolically, spiritually, and relationally to preserve value integration and alumni networking across generations.

This research argues that the sustainability of pesantren alumni solidarity is not merely shaped by formal organizational structures but is substantially influenced by the inclusive, charismatic, and spiritual leadership style of the *kyai*. The *halaqah* becomes an effective cultural space for reinforcing this bond as it combines teachings, nostalgia, and value renewal.

This study is significant as it offers a deeper understanding of traditional leadership models in a modern context, particularly in preserving value-based alumni networks. The findings are expected to serve as a reference for pesantren administrators, alumni forums, and Islamic education researchers in developing strategies for strengthening alumni cohesion through approaches rooted in local tradition and spiritual values.

METHOD

The success of educational research is highly dependent on the appropriateness of its data collection methods, as this stage is crucial for obtaining relevant and in-depth information (Ardiansyah & Jailani, 2023). A well-structured study provides sharp insights into a phenomenon and allows researchers to grasp the complexity of social reality. In this context, a qualitative approach was chosen, as it is best suited to explore processes, meanings, and social relations in pesantren life, particularly in relation to spiritual leadership and alumni solidarity.

The qualitative approach was selected because it can explain social reality in depth by understanding the views, perceptions, and experiences of participants. This approach relies on the interpretation of data collected through direct interaction in the field, allowing researchers to grasp the subjective meaning behind social actions (Bado, 2021). The focus of this research is the dynamics of *kyai* leadership in building and maintaining alumni solidarity through the *halaqah* practice at Pondok Pesantren Kutasari, Purbalingga.

However, qualitative methods also require high levels of reflection, logical reasoning, and sensitivity to social and cultural contexts. If not implemented carefully and systematically, this approach is prone to bias and subjective interpretations (Wiraguna et al., 2024). To address this, the researcher adhered strictly to methodological procedures, beginning with data identification, reduction, presentation, and then conclusion drawing. This research begins from real phenomena and proceeds toward the inductive development of theoretical understanding (Prayogi, 2021).

An ethnographic approach serves as the main research framework. This paradigm was chosen for its ability to describe cultural patterns, social relations, and value systems within communities in a comprehensive manner. Ethnography requires the researcher to be directly involved in the daily lives of participants to gain an insider (emic) perspective on their social behaviors. The researcher directly observed *halaqah* activities, interactions between the *kyai* and alumni, and alumni participation in both formal and informal pesantren-related events.

Informants in this study were selected purposively, based on their active roles in *halaqah* dynamics and alumni networks. Key informants included: (1) the *kyai* as the pesantren leader, who serves as the central figure in *halaqah* and alumni relations, offering a holistic understanding of its vision, mission, and function; (2) alumni from various graduating cohorts (at least five individuals) who actively participate in *halaqah* and alumni events, and can provide perspectives on their sustained connection to the *kyai* and pesantren values; (3) active students or daily pesantren administrators who serve as intermediaries between alumni programs and institutional activities; and (4) local community leaders who understand the alumni's contributions and the *kyai*'s social influence beyond the pesantren environment.

Data collection techniques involved participant observation, where the researcher attended *halaqah* and alumni activities to record verbal and non-verbal interactions and cultural symbols; in-depth interviews with the selected informants to explore their experiences, perspectives, and interpretations of *kyai* leadership and alumni solidarity; and documentary analysis of pesantren archives such as *halaqah* minutes, alumni activity records, and internal documentation.

Data analysis was conducted thematically, through processes of coding, categorization, and interpretation of patterns that emerged from the field. Data validity was ensured through source triangulation and member checking to align the researcher's interpretation with participants' perspectives (Mahendra et al., 2024). With this methodological design, the study aims to present a holistic and in-depth picture of *kyai* leadership in fostering alumni solidarity, while enriching the

methodological landscape of Islamic education research grounded in communal values and traditions.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

RESULT

The Kyai as a Central Figure

Within the pesantren community, the kyai is not only a formal leader but a symbolic and cultural figure whose influence extends deeply into the spiritual, social, and emotional dimensions of the pesantren environment, especially among alumni across generations. Based on field observations, the kyai serves as the core axis that unites all pesantren elements through his profound spirituality and moral authority.

Findings show that during every *halaqah* session, alumni demonstrate deep reverence for the kyai, standing to greet him, kissing his hand, and bowing their heads in respect. However, beyond these symbolic gestures lies a strong inner bond. The kyai is remembered not merely for his knowledge but for his formative role in shaping alumni character in lasting ways.

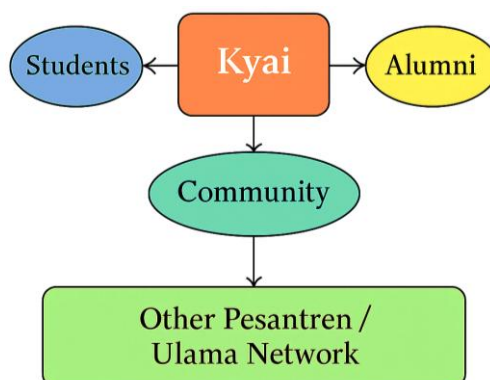


Figure 1. Kyai as a Central Figure

From in-depth interviews, informant A1 stated: *"Our kyai was not just a teacher. He shaped us from within (how we think, speak, and even how we treat our parents) all were formed through his guidance."* This suggests that the kyai's influence is internalized, not merely normative instruction. He becomes a source of values, not just a transmitter of information.

Similarly, informant A2 added: *"I probably wouldn't be who I am today without the values I received from him. And every halaqah feels like a reminder of who I truly am."* This indicates that the *halaqah* functions as a space of identity reconnection, where alumni reflect on the foundational identity shaped by their pesantren experience.

Deeper analysis of this phenomenon reveals that the kyai acts as a symbolic leader through three roles: (1) a central source of meaning (*meaning-maker*); (2) a guardian of collective values; and (3) a conflict mediator. When alumni experience differences of opinion, the kyai functions as a neutral center and a source of moral

legitimacy, as confirmed by informant S1: *“The kyai brings calm. When alumni disagree, he comes as a unifier.”*

Table 1. The Kyai as a Central Figure

No	Informant	Key Quotes
1	Kyai (pesantren leader)	☞: <i>“Halaqah is not just a religious study. It is a place where we bind our hearts, maintain ties, and renew our commitment to pesantren values.”</i>
2	A1 (Alumni)	☞: <i>“This halaqah is more than a study circle. It’s where we rediscover the spirit of togetherness we learned when we were students.”</i>
3	A2 (Alumni)	☞: <i>“Every time I attend a halaqah, I feel like I’m coming home—not just to the pesantren, but to the values we learned together.”</i>
4	S1 (student administrator)	☞: <i>“The kyai brings calm. When alumni disagree, he comes as a unifier.”</i>

This study highlights a novel interpretation of the kyai not only as a spiritual guide within pesantren, but also as a long-term symbolic anchor who preserves the collective identity of alumni across generations, a perspective rarely captured in prior leadership literature.

The Kyai’s Active Role in Alumni Activities

The kyai’s active involvement in alumni activities highlights his function not just as a spiritual leader but as a consistent intergenerational connector. The kyai maintains strong, personal ties with alumni long after they graduate. This relational continuity is one of the key strengths of the pesantren system that sets it apart from other educational institutions.

Field observations show that in alumni gatherings, the kyai regularly delivers *tausiyah*, offers moral reflection, and calls alumni by name, even after decades. This personalized attention signals a relationship based not on institutional formality, but emotional and spiritual depth. The *halaqah* becomes not just a religious session, but a space for rekindling affection and identity.

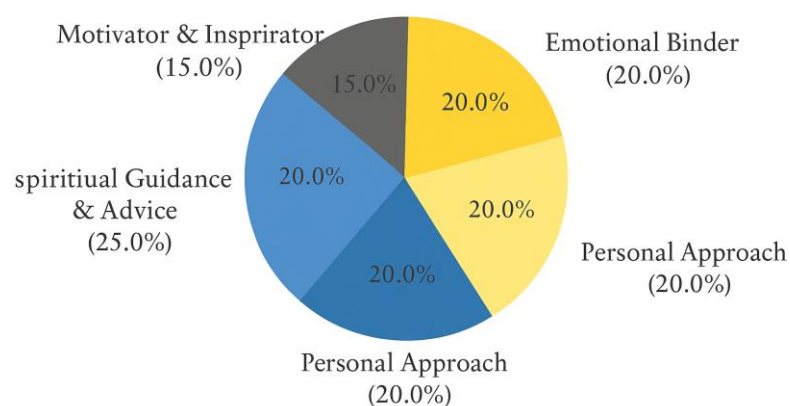


Figure 2. The Kyai’s Active Role in Activities

Informant A3 stated: *"He still remembers my name, even though I graduated over 15 years ago. That moved me deeply and reminded me that I'm still part of this pesantren."* Additionally, the kyai's communication style is personal and familial. During one observed *halaqah*, he greeted alumni using their old student nicknames. The atmosphere was warm but respectful. The kyai also acts as a peacemaker in the event of alumni disagreements. Instead of dictating solutions, he facilitates dialogue and gently concludes with collective reflections. In this way, the kyai embodies the social and emotional "glue" that binds alumni across time and difference.

In-depth analysis indicates that the kyai performs two main roles in alumni engagement: as a custodian of pesantren values and as a symbolic-emotional anchor. His physical presence is important, but his symbolic function is what truly preserves continuity and loyalty.

Table 2. The Kyai's Active Role in Alumni Activities

No	Kyai's Role	Description	Implications
1	Active Presence in Activities	Regularly attends halaqah, reunions, and forums	Alumni feel seen and appreciated
2	Moral and Spiritual Advisor	Delivers talks, guidance, and inspiration	Strengthens values and personal motivation
3	Emotional and Social Symbol	Unites alumni through spiritual ties and pesantren nostalgia	Reinforces cross-generational connections
4	Familial Approach	Treats alumni as family, not merely former students	Fosters loyalty and emotional attachment

This study reveals a unique dynamic in pesantren culture where the kyai serves not just as a figurehead, but as an emotional institution, actively sustaining alumni commitment through continuous, personal engagement, a dimension rarely explored in alumni relations studies.

Inclusive and Communicative Leadership

Although the term "inclusive leadership" is not explicitly used within the pesantren context, the leadership style of the kyai strongly reflects these principles in practice. Field observations indicate that the kyai regularly opens *halaqah* sessions by inviting input from alumni, asking, *"What would you like to discuss today?"*

Informant A4 shared: *"We don't just come to listen; we're also invited to contribute ideas. One time, our suggestion even became part of the pesantren's official program."* The kyai involves alumni in strategic decisions such as scholarship allocations, social initiatives, and pesantren development plans. Alumni are not treated as ceremonial guests, but as collaborative partners. This shows the kyai's openness and belief in participatory leadership, grounded in mutual trust and respect.



Figure 3. The Kyai's Inclusive and Communicative Leadership

Analysis confirms that the kyai's leadership model is dialogic and transformational. He nurtures an environment where alumni can express ideas, help design programs, and reflect on pesantren values in new social contexts. His leadership does not rely on command or authority, but on sincerity, moral integrity, and shared ownership.

Table 3. Inclusive and Communicative Leadership of the Kyai

No	Element	Percentage	Practice
1	Alumni Dialogue and Aspirations	25%	Kyai opens forums for alumni input and discussion
2	Shared Decision-Making	20%	Alumni are involved in strategic agendas, not just symbolically
3	Strengthening Moral and Cultural Values	20%	Kyai ensures pesantren values are preserved as a foundation for alumni conduct
4	Participatory Empowerment	20%	Alumni are encouraged to contribute directly to pesantren activities
5	Open Two-Way Communication	15%	Kyai builds reciprocal dialogue grounded in sincerity and mutual respect

This finding presents a novel perspective on pesantren leadership, demonstrating that inclusive and communicative practices, typically associated with contemporary management, are deeply embedded in traditional Islamic leadership, especially through the kyai's dialogic, participatory approach with alumni.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that the role of the *kyai* within the pesantren environment is not merely administrative or ritualistic but reflects a strategic function as a central figure with spiritual, social, and symbolic authority. This aligns with Sumpena & Dewi (2022), who argue that in Indonesian Muslim communities,

titles such as *kyai*, *ulama*, and *alim* are social recognitions of religious and moral authority rather than formal academic degrees. The strength of the *kyai* in establishing intellectual, spiritual, and social networks both within and beyond the *pesantren* is also consistent with Ilham et al. (2023), who assert that the *kyai* connects *pesantren* with alumni, society, and external institutions.

The *kyai's* leadership in shaping the character of students and alumni is evident through a value-driven and spiritual approach rooted in daily moral modeling. This supports Triwinarti, et al. (2024), who emphasize that *kyai* leadership creates a holistic learning environment that balances cognitive, affective, and spiritual dimensions. In practice, the *kyai* not only transmits religious knowledge but also internalizes *pesantren* values through *halaqah*, personal mentorship, and emotional guidance with long-lasting impact.

The *kyai's* charismatic leadership, unifying alumni across generations, reflects the value-based leadership model described by Arifin et al. (2025). In religious and agrarian societies, such as the one studied, the *kyai* serves as both an educational and social authority trusted in communal decision-making (Malindra, et al. 2024). This characteristic is clearly seen in the field data, which illustrates the *kyai's* active participation in alumni gatherings as a symbol of emotional and spiritual attachment.

The *kyai's* inclusive and communicative leadership reflects the principles of inclusive leadership as discussed by Biahimo & Rachman (2024), which emphasizes mutual respect, open communication, and collective participation. In this study, the *kyai* does not position alumni as mere recipients of programs but as strategic partners in sustaining *pesantren* values. This confirms Tamengkel's (2025) notion that inclusive leaders uphold transparency and empower their communities through active involvement.

Historically, *pesantren* is a *sui generis* institution (Widyatmoko, 2023), a unique cultural-religious entity where the deep bond between *kyai* and students becomes a collective memory shaping identity and alumni loyalty. As Zubedi et al. (2022) note, the boarding school system led by the *kyai* fosters character and spirituality that persist long after students graduate. This is confirmed by findings in which alumni describe *halaqah* as a space to "return" to the values they once embodied.

Strong, strategic, and adaptive *kyai* leadership, as described by Sukataman et al. (2023), remains a pillar of *pesantren* success. In contemporary contexts, *kyai* must manage curriculum reform, external relations, and alumni engagement (Pamulang, 2023; Hayati et al., 2023). Findings in this study show that the *kyai* relies not on formal authority but on charisma and moral standing to influence alumni. This reinforces insights from Hayani (2024) and Suryana et al. (2021), who emphasize the enduring impact of *kyai's* spiritual authority and exemplary conduct.

From an educational leadership perspective, Lamirin, et al. (2023) highlight the importance of leaders who inspire through example and foster positive learning environments. The *kyai* fulfills this role through warmth in communication, consistent presence in alumni forums, and unwavering value transmission. His sincerity and openness to feedback strengthen the collaborative ethos described by

Nailatsani et al. (2021), where educational quality and sustainability depend on stakeholder participation.

Sociologically, this study reaffirms Durkheim's theory of society as a *sui generis* entity (Lailiyah et al., 2024), where pesantren serves as a value-producing institution shaping behavior through socialization (Putra & Amalih, 2023). The *kyai's* leadership fosters mechanical solidarity, as described by Dila (2022), formed through shared values and traditions. Furthermore, moral leadership strengthens group cohesion and trust (Saingo et al., 2023), while in the modern context, alumni solidarity also reflects Durkheim's organic solidarity (Manu & Tampake, 2023), built through differentiated roles and mutual interdependence across alumni networks. This is supported by Fathoni (2024), who describes pesantren alumni as upholding pesantren values as a form of social capital that binds them together.

Culturally, the title *kyai* historically signified sacredness and spiritual reverence (Nasrulloh, 2022). Over time, it evolved into a social title given to respected figures known for their knowledge, moral integrity, and spiritual influence. The findings show that the *kyai's* communicative and persuasive leadership style enables cross-generational unity among alumni, fostering loyalty and engagement in religious, social, and educational programs.

The *kyai's* charismatic leadership aligns with Max Weber's concept of *charismatic leadership*, which is based on personal magnetism and moral authority rather than institutional power (Hayati et al., 2023). In pesantren, the *kyai's* charisma stems from his consistency in embodying values, spiritual depth, and sustained relational bonds with students (Hutahaeen, 2021). He is seen not only as a formal leader but as a moral compass and role model in both personal and public spheres.

The collective identity of alumni is shaped through shared lived experiences and preserved through the ongoing relational ties with the *kyai*. This reflects the theory of collective identity by Will Kymlicka and Sari (2020), where identity is formed through shared values and collective action. In the pesantren context, the *kyai* serves as a symbol of tradition, guiding alumni from diverse backgrounds toward a shared moral vision.

Spiritually, the *kyai's* leadership embodies the prophetic model of Prophet Muhammad SAW, who led through *siddiq*, *amanah*, *tabligh*, and *fathanah* (Pratama & A, 2020). The *kyai* leads not only through religious rituals but by building a social-spiritual network that uplifts the community (Alimuddin, 2019). The findings confirm that the *kyai* is both a religious educator and a social unifier who fosters long-term alumni solidarity through moral consistency and shared values.

The findings of this study provide practical implications for pesantren leadership development and alumni engagement strategies. First, pesantren institutions should recognize the crucial role of the *kyai* not only as a spiritual leader but also as a strategic figure in fostering long-term alumni loyalty. The success of alumni relations, community development, and pesantren sustainability is strongly influenced by the *kyai's* active presence, inclusivity, and moral leadership.

Educational institutions can adopt aspects of the *kyai*'s leadership model, such as participatory forums, familial communication styles, and value-based decision-making, as strategies to enhance cohesion and ownership among alumni and stakeholders.

This study contributes to the scholarship on Islamic educational leadership by offering a comprehensive ethnographic insight into how the *kyai* functions as a central unifying force in maintaining alumni solidarity. It extends the theoretical discourse on charismatic, inclusive, and spiritual leadership within Islamic boarding schools and highlights the pesantren as a living *sui generis* community sustained by symbolic leadership. Furthermore, it offers a contextualized model of leadership rooted in Islamic values and indigenous wisdom, with practical relevance for pesantren, Muslim educators, and scholars of leadership in traditional educational systems.

CONCLUSION

The leadership of the *kyai* plays a central and transformative role in fostering harmony and strengthening solidarity among pesantren alumni. The findings of this study affirm that the *kyai*'s moral example, spiritual authority, and personal integrity serve as a strong foundation that goes beyond the boundaries of a formal leadership role. This leadership does not merely influence students during their time at the pesantren, but also shapes enduring loyalty and emotional attachment throughout the alumni's post-pesantren life.

Through an inclusive and communicative approach, the *kyai* of Pesantren Kutasari in Purbalingga establishes emotional and spiritual bonds with alumni. Halaqah sessions, personal interactions, and participation in alumni forums serve as means to revitalize pesantren values over time. Alumni feel respected, heard, and regarded as integral components in the sustainability of the pesantren. This demonstrates that the *kyai*'s leadership is not authoritarian but dialogic, participatory, and deeply rooted in the values of brotherhood (*ukhuwah*) and pesantren ethics.

Furthermore, the *kyai*'s charismatic and value-based leadership effectively bridges generational and social differences among alumni. He functions as a unifying symbol, representing the continuity of pesantren traditions and preserving the collective identity of the alumni community. Core values such as honesty, social responsibility, and commitment to Islamic mission (*dakwah*), instilled during their formative years at the pesantren, become the binding principles that sustain alumni unity and collaborative spirit, even amid the complexities of modern life.

The *kyai*'s leadership also embodies a spiritual-social model that extends beyond individual character development to promote active contribution to broader community development. Through close engagement with alumni, the *kyai* acts as a facilitator of cross-sector collaboration, fostering positive impact in education, social welfare, economics, and religious outreach. Thus, the *kyai* serves not only as a leader of the pesantren institution but also as a moral leader in society, cultivating solidarity through divine values and lived example.

At Pesantren Kutasari, the *kyai* is a living symbol of pesantren continuity and cultural resilience. His humanistic and visionary leadership preserves the legacy of pesantren values and strengthens the collective spirit among alumni—transforming the pesantren into more than just a place of learning, but a nurturing space of character formation and lifelong communal belonging.

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