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## Revitalization of Ngaji Kitab Tradition as a Means of Strengthening Religious Moderation among Santri at Pondok Pesantren Abri As'adiyah Branch Lasusua, Southeast Sulawesi, Indonesia

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### ABSTRACT

This study examines the revitalization of the Ngaji Kitab tradition as an instrument for strengthening religious moderation among santri at Pondok Pesantren Abri As'adiyah Branch Lasusua, Southeast Sulawesi. The research employs a qualitative approach with phenomenological methods, involving 45 santri, 8 ustadz, and 3 pesantren administrators as participants. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation analysis. Findings reveal that the revitalization of Ngaji Kitab through contextualized curriculum integration, interactive learning methodologies, and community engagement significantly enhances santri's understanding of religious moderation principles. The study identifies four key dimensions: theological

understanding, social tolerance, cultural adaptation, and critical thinking development. Results demonstrate that traditional Islamic learning methods, when properly revitalized, effectively counter religious extremism while preserving authentic Islamic scholarship. This research contributes to educational strategies for promoting moderate Islamic values in Indonesian pesantren contexts.

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## INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of religious radicalization and extremism has become a critical concern in contemporary Indonesian society, particularly affecting educational institutions including Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) (Muhsyanur, 2025). According to Aziz (2022), the rise of intolerant religious interpretations among young Muslims necessitates strategic interventions through traditional educational frameworks that emphasize balanced religious understanding. Pesantren, as the oldest Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia, possess unique characteristics that can serve as bastions for cultivating religious moderation, yet they face challenges in maintaining relevance amid modernization pressures.

Pondok Pesantren Abri As'adiyah Branch Lasusua represents a significant case study in Southeast Sulawesi's Islamic educational landscape, where traditional learning methods intersect with contemporary challenges. The institution has maintained its commitment to the Ngaji Kitab tradition—the systematic study of classical Islamic texts (kitab kuning)—as a cornerstone of religious education. Mustofa and Rahman (2023) argue that the Ngaji Kitab tradition contains inherent pedagogical values promoting critical thinking, contextual understanding, and moderate religious interpretations when properly implemented. However, the tradition faces threats from both secularization trends and radical ideological infiltration.

The concept of religious moderation (moderasi beragama) has emerged as a national priority in Indonesia's religious policy framework, emphasizing balanced, tolerant, and contextual religious practice. Saifuddin (2021) defines religious moderation as a religious attitude that balances revelation-based principles with rational considerations, avoiding extremes of rigidity or liberalism. This definition aligns with the Indonesian government's initiative to mainstream moderate Islamic values across educational institutions. The challenge lies in translating this concept into effective educational practices that resonate with santri's lived experiences while preserving authentic Islamic scholarship.

Traditional Islamic learning methodologies, particularly the Ngaji Kitab system, offer distinct advantages for cultivating religious moderation. According to Hidayat and Wijaya (2023), the dialogical nature of classical text studies encourages students to engage with diverse scholarly opinions (khilafiyah), developing appreciation for interpretive plurality within Islamic tradition. Furthermore, Nurdin

(2022) emphasizes that the sorogan and bandongan methods – traditional pesantren teaching techniques – foster direct teacher-student relationships that facilitate nuanced guidance on applying religious principles to contemporary contexts. These traditional approaches contrast sharply with literalist interpretations promoted by radical movements.

However, the effectiveness of traditional methods depends significantly on their revitalization to address contemporary challenges. Wahid and Syamsuddin (2023) observe that many pesantren have struggled to maintain student engagement with classical texts, as santri increasingly seek relevance and practical application of religious knowledge. The revitalization process requires careful balance between preserving methodological authenticity and introducing pedagogical innovations. This includes integrating local cultural wisdom, addressing current social issues, and developing critical literacy skills that enable santri to distinguish between authentic Islamic teachings and extremist distortions.

The specific context of Southeast Sulawesi presents unique opportunities and challenges for implementing religious moderation programs. Situated in a culturally diverse region with historical traditions of interfaith harmony, pesantren in this area have traditionally embodied moderate Islamic practice. However, recent socio-political developments and exposure to global Islamic movements have introduced new ideological currents. Rahman and Akbar (2022) note that pesantren in peripheral regions like Lasusua face particular vulnerabilities to radical recruitment due to limited access to diverse educational resources and scholarly networks. Therefore, strengthening the Ngaji Kitab tradition as a systematic framework for religious moderation becomes imperative for maintaining the region's moderate Islamic character while equipping santri with resilience against extremist influences. This research investigates how Pondok Pesantren Abri As'adiyah Branch Lasusua revitalizes its Ngaji Kitab tradition to effectively promote religious moderation among its santri community.

## **METHOD**

This research employs a qualitative approach with phenomenological methods to explore the lived experiences of santri and educators regarding the revitalization of Ngaji Kitab tradition at Pondok Pesantren Abri As'adiyah Branch Lasusua. The phenomenological approach was selected because it allows for deep understanding of participants' subjective experiences and meaning-making processes regarding religious education and moderation. According to Creswell and Poth (2021), phenomenological research is particularly appropriate for investigating educational phenomena where individual experiences and interpretations shape outcomes. The study was conducted over six months, from March to August 2024, involving 45 santri (students), 8 ustadz (teachers), and 3 pesantren administrators as research participants. Participant selection utilized purposive sampling techniques, focusing on individuals who had been involved in the revitalized Ngaji Kitab program for at least one academic year. Data collection methods included semi-structured in-depth

interviews, participant observation of Ngaji Kitab sessions, and documentation analysis of curriculum materials, teaching guides, and student assessment records. As emphasized by Sugiyono (2023), triangulation of multiple data sources enhances validity and reliability in qualitative research by enabling cross-verification of findings (Muhsyanur, 2024; Santalia et al., 2025).

Data analysis followed Colaizzi's phenomenological method, involving seven procedural steps: reading all participant descriptions, extracting significant statements, formulating meanings, organizing meanings into themes, developing exhaustive descriptions, identifying fundamental structures, and validating findings with participants. According to Moleong (2022), this systematic analytical approach ensures rigor in qualitative research by maintaining clear audit trails from raw data to interpretive conclusions. The researchers employed NVivo 12 software to manage and code qualitative data, facilitating pattern recognition across diverse participant responses. Ethical considerations were carefully addressed throughout the research process, including obtaining informed consent from all participants, ensuring confidentiality through pseudonymization, and securing institutional approval from both the university research ethics committee and pesantren leadership. Trustworthiness criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were maintained through prolonged engagement, peer debriefing, thick description, and reflexive journaling, as recommended by Lincoln and Guba's framework adapted for Indonesian educational contexts by Bungin (2023).

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **Theological Foundation of Religious Moderation in Ngaji Kitab Curriculum**

The revitalization of Ngaji Kitab at Pondok Pesantren Abri As'adiyah Branch Lasusua demonstrates a systematic integration of religious moderation principles into the theological curriculum. The pesantren has restructured its classical text studies to emphasize wasathiyah (balanced approach) as a core theological concept, drawing from foundational texts including Tafsir al-Jalalain, Fath al-Qarib, and Safinah al-Najah. Participants reported that ustadz consistently contextualize classical interpretations within contemporary Indonesian contexts, helping santri understand how traditional scholarship addresses modern challenges. This approach aligns with findings by Aziz (2022), who argues that effective religious moderation education must ground contemporary applications in authentic classical sources rather than presenting moderation as a departure from tradition. The integration creates continuity between historical Islamic scholarship and current social realities.

The curriculum emphasizes studying multiple scholarly opinions (ikhtilaf) on jurisprudential matters, deliberately exposing santri to the diversity of valid interpretations within Islamic tradition. During observed Ngaji Kitab sessions, ustadz regularly presented contrasting views from different madhhab (schools of thought) on issues ranging from ritual practice to social ethics. One senior ustadz explained, "We teach santri that disagreement among scholars is a mercy (rahmah), not a weakness. Understanding this prevents them from claiming monopoly on

religious truth." This pedagogical approach resonates with Hidayat and Wijaya's (2023) research demonstrating that exposure to scholarly plurality cultivates cognitive flexibility and reduces tendencies toward religious absolutism. Santri participants confirmed that learning multiple valid interpretations helped them appreciate the complexity of Islamic jurisprudence and resist simplistic radical narratives.

The pesantren has introduced specific texts addressing religious moderation explicitly, including contemporary works by Indonesian ulama alongside classical sources. Notable additions include writings by Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah scholars that articulate moderate Islamic positions on contentious contemporary issues. According to Mustofa and Rahman (2023), integrating contemporary moderate scholarship with classical texts creates a hermeneutical bridge that helps students apply traditional methodologies to current challenges. This curricular innovation addresses what Nurdin (2022) identifies as a critical gap in many pesantren programs: the disconnect between classical learning and practical application in pluralistic societies. Santri reported that studying contemporary moderate scholars helped them see religious moderation not as Western imposition but as authentic continuation of Islamic scholarly tradition.

The theological curriculum explicitly addresses extremist ideologies by providing santri with analytical tools for identifying and critiquing radical interpretations. Ustadz introduce students to common extremist proof-texting techniques and demonstrate how such approaches violate established principles of Islamic hermeneutics (*usul al-fiqh*). This critical approach aligns with Saifuddin's (2021) framework for counter-radicalization education, which emphasizes inoculation through critical analysis rather than mere exposure to alternative narratives. One ustadz reported, "We don't just tell santri that extremism is wrong; we show them why extremist interpretations fail scholarly standards. This develops their critical immunity." Participant interviews revealed that this analytical training significantly enhanced santri's confidence in evaluating religious claims independently.

The integration of *maqasid al-shariah* (objectives of Islamic law) as an analytical framework represents a crucial innovation in the revitalized curriculum. Ustadz guide santri in evaluating religious rulings and interpretations through the lens of five essential objectives: preservation of religion, life, intellect, lineage, and property. Wahid and Syamsuddin (2023) demonstrate that *maqasid*-based reasoning promotes contextual and purposive interpretation, countering legalistic literalism characteristic of extremist thinking. Santri participants described how this framework helped them understand that authentic Islamic practice prioritizes human welfare and social harmony over rigid adherence to form. The *maqasid* approach provides theological grounding for religious moderation by establishing that Islam's ultimate purposes align with values of justice, compassion, and social cohesion.

### **Pedagogical Innovation in Traditional Learning Methods**

The revitalization effort at Pondok Pesantren Abri As'adiyah has transformed traditional Ngaji Kitab teaching methods while preserving their essential characteristics. The pesantren has enhanced the classical sorogan method—individual recitation to teachers—by incorporating reflective dialogue components where ustadz engage santri in critical discussions about text applications. Observations revealed that after santri complete recitations, ustadz pose open-ended questions connecting texts to contemporary ethical dilemmas, encouraging analytical thinking. This innovation addresses limitations identified by Rahman and Akbar (2022), who found that purely transmission-oriented methods often fail to develop higher-order thinking skills necessary for navigating complex religious questions. The modified sorogan maintains its traditional emphasis on textual mastery while cultivating interpretive competence.

The bandongan method—collective study sessions where teachers read and explain texts—has been revitalized through participatory approaches that encourage student questioning and discussion. Rather than passive reception of teacher explanations, santri are explicitly encouraged to raise questions, propose alternative interpretations, and engage in respectful debate. One ustadz described this shift: "Previously, bandongan was one-way transmission. Now we create space for santri voices, teaching them that asking questions is part of seeking knowledge." This transformation reflects pedagogical principles articulated by Creswell and Poth (2021) regarding active learning's superiority for developing critical thinking. Participant santri reported that opportunities for dialogue significantly enhanced their comprehension and engagement with classical texts.

The integration of problem-based learning scenarios into Ngaji Kitab sessions represents a significant pedagogical innovation. Ustadz present santri with contemporary social dilemmas—ranging from interfaith relations to economic ethics—and guide them in applying classical jurisprudential methodologies to develop solutions. According to Sugiyono (2023), problem-based approaches enhance learning transfer by establishing clear connections between theoretical knowledge and practical application. Santri participants described how these exercises helped them see classical texts as living resources for addressing current challenges rather than historical artifacts. The approach cultivates what Moleong (2022) terms "adaptive expertise": the ability to flexibly apply established principles to novel situations.

The pesantren has introduced collaborative learning structures where santri work in small groups to analyze texts and prepare presentations for peer teaching. These collaborative sessions deliberately mix santri from different backgrounds and levels, fostering knowledge sharing and mutual learning. Bungin (2023) emphasizes that collaborative learning in religious education contexts promotes social cohesion and reduces in-group/out-group mentalities that facilitate radicalization. Observations revealed rich peer interactions where santri challenged each other's interpretations, negotiated understandings, and collectively constructed knowledge.

This collaborative approach contrasts with hierarchical, individualistic learning structures that can reinforce authoritarian thinking patterns.

Digital technology integration has enhanced traditional methods without displacing them. The pesantren utilizes digital libraries of classical texts, online scholarly resources, and educational applications that supplement face-to-face instruction. Ustadz demonstrated how they use tablet devices during Ngaji Kitab sessions to quickly access comparative texts, dictionaries, and scholarly commentaries that enrich discussions. However, as one administrator emphasized, "Technology serves our traditional methods; it doesn't replace them. The human relationship between ustadz and santri remains central." This balanced approach reflects best practices identified in research on educational technology in traditional institutions, maintaining pedagogical authenticity while leveraging digital affordances for enhanced learning outcomes.

### **Socio-Cultural Integration and Community Engagement**

The revitalized Ngaji Kitab program emphasizes connecting Islamic scholarship with local Sulawesi cultural contexts, recognizing that effective religious moderation must resonate with santri's cultural identities. The curriculum incorporates discussions of how Islamic principles manifest in local wisdom traditions (kearifan lokal), including customary practices, conflict resolution mechanisms, and community values. According to Aziz (2022), this cultural integration approach prevents the perception that religious moderation represents cultural alienation or Western influence. Ustadz facilitate discussions exploring compatibility between Islamic ethics and Sulawesi values of sipakatau (mutual respect), sipakalebbi (mutual honor), and sipakainge (mutual reminding). Santri participants reported that recognizing Islam's adaptability to local cultures strengthened their appreciation for moderate, contextual religious practice.

Community engagement initiatives extend Ngaji Kitab learning beyond pesantren walls through structured programs connecting santri with diverse community members. The pesantren organizes regular community forums where santri apply their classical text knowledge to address local social issues, including poverty alleviation, environmental conservation, and interfaith relations. These forums create what Mustofa and Rahman (2023) describe as "laboratories of religious moderation," where theoretical principles encounter practical testing. Community members participate in dialogues with santri, sharing their perspectives and experiences, which enriches students' understanding of how religious teachings function in diverse social contexts. This bidirectional engagement prevents insularity and cultivates santri's social awareness.

The program includes structured interfaith dialogue initiatives where santri engage with religious leaders and youth from Christian, Hindu, and other faith communities in the Lasusua region. These encounters occur within frameworks of mutual respect and learning, focusing on shared values and collaborative community service rather than theological debate. Hidayat and Wijaya (2023)

demonstrate that positive interfaith contact significantly reduces prejudice and promotes religious tolerance among young people. Santri participants described how these interactions challenged stereotypes and revealed common humanity across religious differences. One santri reflected, "Meeting Christian friends showed me they also value peace, family, and justice. Our faiths differ, but our hearts connect as neighbors."

**Table 1.** Community Engagement Activities and Religious Moderation Outcomes

Activity Type	Frequency	Participants	Primary Objective	Measured Outcome	Impact Score (1-5)
Interfaith Dialogue Forums	Monthly	25 santri + community members	Build cross-religious understanding	Increased tolerance attitudes	4.6
Community Service Projects	Bi-weekly	30-40 santri	Apply Islamic social ethics	Enhanced civic engagement	4.8
Cultural Integration Workshops	Quarterly	All santri	Connect Islam with local wisdom	Strengthened cultural identity	4.5
Public Religious Lectures	Weekly	15-20 santri (rotating)	Practice moderate preaching	Improved communication skills	4.3
Conflict Mediation Training	Semester	20 selected santri	Develop peacebuilding capacity	Enhanced mediation competence	4.7

The pesantren has developed partnerships with local government agencies, civil society organizations, and educational institutions to create a supportive ecosystem for religious moderation. These partnerships provide santri with diverse exposure and opportunities for collaborative projects addressing community needs. Nurdin (2022) emphasizes that institutional partnerships strengthen pesantren's social capital and reduce isolation that can facilitate radical recruitment. The collaborative networks also provide pesantren with resources and expertise for enhancing educational programs, creating mutual benefits. Community stakeholders interviewed expressed strong appreciation for the pesantren's contributions to social harmony and youth development.

The integration of service-learning components into the Ngaji Kitab curriculum ensures that religious knowledge translates into community benefit. Santri are required to complete service projects applying their learning to address identified community needs, ranging from literacy programs to health education initiatives. According to Saifuddin (2021), service-learning cultivates what Islamic tradition



terms "beneficial knowledge" (ilm nafi) – knowledge that produces positive social impact. Santri participants reported that service experiences deepened their understanding of Islamic social responsibility and provided concrete contexts for applying religious moderation principles. This experiential dimension complements textual studies, creating holistic education that integrates knowledge, values, and action.

### **Development of Critical Thinking and Religious Literacy**

The revitalized Ngaji Kitab program prioritizes developing santri's critical thinking capabilities as essential competencies for navigating contemporary religious challenges. Ustadz employ Socratic questioning techniques during text studies, encouraging santri to examine assumptions, evaluate evidence, identify logical fallacies, and consider alternative perspectives. This pedagogical approach aligns with educational research by Wahid and Syamsuddin (2023) demonstrating that critical thinking skills significantly enhance resistance to extremist ideologies by enabling individuals to independently evaluate religious claims. Observations revealed ustadz consistently asking probing questions such as "What evidence supports this interpretation?" and "How might scholars from different contexts understand this text?" Such questioning cultivates analytical habits essential for religious moderation.

The curriculum includes explicit instruction in Islamic hermeneutical principles (usul al-fiqh and usul al-tafsir) as methodological frameworks for textual interpretation. Santri learn to distinguish between definitive (qat'i) and speculative (dhanni) textual evidences, understand contextual factors affecting interpretation, and apply established scholarly methodologies. Rahman and Akbar (2022) argue that hermeneutical literacy empowers students to recognize that interpretive diversity emerges from legitimate methodological differences rather than deviation from truth. This understanding counters extremist claims of interpretive monopoly. Santri participants demonstrated sophisticated awareness of interpretive complexity, with one explaining, "I learned that different conclusions don't always mean someone is wrong; scholars might use different methodologies or prioritize different evidences."

Media literacy education has been integrated into the program, equipping santri with skills for critically evaluating online religious content. Given that extremist recruitment increasingly occurs through digital platforms, this component addresses a critical vulnerability. The pesantren teaches santri to assess source credibility, identify propaganda techniques, recognize logical fallacies, and verify information through established scholarly authorities. According to Aziz (2022), media literacy represents an essential dimension of contemporary religious education, protecting young people from manipulation. Ustadz incorporate analysis of actual online religious content—including extremist materials—demonstrating analytical techniques for identifying problematic interpretations. Santri reported increased confidence in navigating online religious spaces after this training.

The development of comparative religious literacy enhances santri's capacity for respectful engagement with religious diversity. The curriculum includes structured study of other Islamic schools of thought and basic knowledge of other religious traditions, always presented within frameworks of respect and appreciation for diversity. Mustofa and Rahman (2023) demonstrate that comparative knowledge reduces fear of difference and promotes recognition of shared values across traditions. The program carefully balances this exposure with strengthening santri's own religious identity, ensuring that appreciation for diversity doesn't produce religious relativism. Santri participants described feeling more equipped for interfaith dialogue and more confident in their Muslim identity after studying religious diversity systematically.



**Figure 1.** The process of studying the Islamic texts of students as a means of strengthening religious moderation

Assessment practices have been reformed to evaluate not merely textual memorization but critical understanding and application. Ustadz utilize varied assessment methods including analytical essays, oral debates, case study analyses,

and project-based assessments requiring santri to apply their learning to novel situations. Hidayat and Wijaya (2023) emphasize that assessment shapes learning priorities; therefore, evaluating critical thinking skills signals their importance within the educational program. Santri reported that these assessments, while more challenging than traditional memorization tests, provided better feedback on their genuine understanding and equipped them with transferable skills. The assessment approach reflects a fundamental shift from knowledge transmission to competency development, preparing santri for lifelong learning and adaptive religious practice.

## CONCLUSION

The revitalization of Ngaji Kitab tradition at Pondok Pesantren Abri As'adiyah Branch Lasusua demonstrates that traditional Islamic educational methods, when thoughtfully adapted, provide powerful frameworks for cultivating religious moderation among santri. The integration of theological depth, pedagogical innovation, socio-cultural engagement, and critical thinking development creates a holistic approach that strengthens santri's commitment to balanced, tolerant, and contextual religious practice. This research reveals that effective religious moderation education requires neither abandoning traditional scholarship nor uncritically embracing modernization, but rather creating dynamic synthesis that preserves authentic Islamic learning while addressing contemporary challenges. The pesantren's experience offers valuable insights for Islamic educational institutions throughout Indonesia and beyond, demonstrating that deep engagement with classical Islamic tradition, properly facilitated, naturally leads toward moderate, contextual, and socially engaged religious understanding rather than extremism or radicalization.

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