



Islamic Boarding School-Based Education in Challenging Ethnic Stereotypes and Social Resistance: Lessons from a Multicultural Community in Indonesia

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the role of Islamic education based on pesantren in challenging ethnic stereotypes and reducing social resistance in multicultural societies in Indonesia. Pesantren has so far not only functioned as a religious education institution, but also as a social space that brings together students from various ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and social class backgrounds. In the context of increasing identity polarization, social prejudice, and societal fragmentation, pesantren have strategic potential in building social cohesion through the values of ukhuwah, tolerance, deliberation, and respect for diversity. This study uses a qualitative approach with a multi-site study design in several multicultural Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia. Data was obtained through in-depth interviews, participatory observations, documentation, and targeted group discussions with caregivers, teachers, students, alumni, and the surrounding community. Data analysis is carried out through data reduction, theme categorization, source triangulation, and critical interpretation. The results of the study showed that pesantren education practices were able to deconstruct ethnic stereotypes through collective life in dormitories, collaborative learning, shared religious traditions, and inclusive kiai leadership. In addition, social resistance from the surrounding community can be minimized through community service programs, cultural dialogue, and cross-community social networks. This research emphasizes that pesantren is a transformative Islamic education model that is relevant in strengthening national integration and caring for Indonesia's diversity. The implications of this study encourage the strengthening of a multicultural curriculum based on moderate Islamic values in religious education institutions.

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Introduction

Indonesia is a plural nation shaped by diversity in ethnicity, language, culture, religion, and local traditions. This plurality serves as both a national asset and a social challenge when not supported by inclusive and equitable education. Studies show that unmanaged diversity may lead to prejudice, symbolic exclusion, horizontal conflict, and fragmented citizenship (Aini et al., 2020; Suyadi & Widodo, 2021; Hasanah et al., 2022). Ethnic stereotypes persist in everyday life through negative labeling, suspicion, and discriminatory attitudes. Certain groups are still perceived as harsh, closed, or difficult to adapt, with such views reproduced through family narratives, social interaction, media, and selective historical memory (Nuryana, 2019; Rahman et al., 2021; Hidayat & Salim, 2023). If unaddressed, these stereotypes can evolve into latent conflicts that weaken social cohesion and national integration.

In this context, education plays a transformative role beyond knowledge transfer by shaping civic values, empathy, and social responsibility. Research in the sociology of education highlights that inclusive schooling significantly promotes tolerance, reduces prejudice, and strengthens democratic participation (Azra, 2018; Mulyasa et al., 2020; Fitriani & Wahyudi, 2022). Within Indonesia, Islamic education—especially pesantren—holds a unique position. As one of the oldest indigenous institutions, pesantren integrates religious, social, cultural, and moral dimensions. Thousands of pesantren exist across regions with diverse ethnic identities, including Javanese, Madurese, Sundanese, Bugis, Sasak, and others (Dhofier, 2019; Arifin et al., 2021).

Beyond their traditional role in teaching *kitab kuning* and moral values, pesantren function sociologically as spaces of intercultural encounter. Students from different regions live together, share routines, and engage in long-term communal life. Empirical studies show that sustained intergroup interaction reduces prejudice, normalizes diversity, and strengthens bridging social capital (Putnam, 2018; Sulaiman et al., 2020; Fauzi & Karim, 2023). Thus, pesantren can be seen as a social laboratory for fostering interethnic understanding.

Pesantren traditions are grounded in values such as *ukhuwah islamiyah*, *tawadhu'*, *tasamuh*, *ta'awun*, and *musyawarah*, which support inclusive citizenship. Differences are not treated as barriers but as opportunities for *ta'aruf* (mutual recognition), aligning with Qur'anic principles of human diversity. Research shows that value-based Islamic education effectively promotes tolerance and peaceful coexistence when embedded in daily institutional practices rather than taught only normatively (Mukhibat, 2019; Anwar et al., 2021; Syafe'i & Rohman, 2023). This demonstrates that pesantren possess both theological legitimacy and practical experience in advancing multicultural education.

However, pesantren also face contemporary challenges. Digitalization and social media often amplify identity-based polarization through hate speech, misinformation, and stereotypes. Algorithm-driven exposure and online echo chambers contribute to intolerance

and social division (Lim, 2020; Nugroho et al., 2021; Prasetyo & Hamid, 2023). Additionally, some still perceive pesantren as less relevant to modern issues, despite evidence that many have evolved into centers of community empowerment, entrepreneurship, literacy, environmental awareness, and civic education (Maksum, 2019; Rofiq et al., 2022).

Existing research on pesantren has largely focused on curriculum reform, leadership, or economic roles, while studies examining their contribution to reducing ethnic stereotypes and social resistance remain limited. This gap is critical, as Indonesia continues to face identity politics, urbanization, migration, and socio-economic inequality that may intensify group boundaries (Yusuf & Haryanto, 2020; Maulana et al., 2022; Santoso, 2023). Furthermore, the relationship between pesantren and surrounding multicultural communities offers an important area of inquiry. Open and socially engaged pesantren tend to function as bridges of integration, while more insular institutions may experience greater social distance (Basri et al., 2019; Kurniawan & Saleh, 2021).

This study is based on the assumption that ethnic stereotypes cannot be effectively addressed through normative discourse alone but require sustained social interaction. Pesantren provides such an environment through communal living, where daily interaction fosters empathy, corrects prejudice, and builds intercultural competence. This aligns with contact theory, which emphasizes meaningful interaction as a key mechanism for reducing bias (Harahap et al., 2020; Wibowo & Lestari, 2022).

In addition, the leadership of *kiai* plays a crucial role in shaping the Pesantren culture. Inclusive leadership that promotes dialogue, respects diversity, and rejects discrimination tends to be replicated by students and institutional networks. Conversely, exclusive leadership may hinder social integration. Studies show that charismatic and participatory leadership significantly influences organizational climate and student behavior (Rijal, 2019; Fadli et al., 2021; Nurhayati, 2023).

This research aims to analyze ethnic stereotypes and social resistance in multicultural communities, examine pesantren strategies in reducing prejudice, assess the role of *kiai* leadership and dormitory culture in strengthening social cohesion, and formulate an adaptive pesantren-based Islamic education model. The study contributes theoretically to Islamic education, sociology of education, and multiculturalism, while offering practical insights for educational institutions and policymakers. In an era marked by polarization and declining social trust, pesantren represent a locally rooted yet globally relevant model for fostering peaceful coexistence.

Methods

This study uses a qualitative approach with a multi-site study design. The research location was chosen for several Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia that have students from various ethnic backgrounds and interact directly with the surrounding multicultural community. The selection of the location was carried out purposively by considering the diversity of the region, the number of students, institutional openness, and social programs (Pinheiro et al., 2016)

The data collection technique was carried out through in-depth interviews with *kiai*, *ustaz*, pesantren administrators, students, alumni, community leaders, and local residents. In addition, participatory observations were carried out on dormitory life, learning activities,

deliberative forums, public recitation, community service, and cross-group social interaction (Cossyleon, 2018). Documentation in the form of institutional archives, curriculum, rules, and activity records was also analyzed to strengthen field data.

Data analysis uses an interactive model through data reduction, data presentation, theme categorization, and a conclusion drawn. The validity of the data is maintained through source triangulation, method triangulation, member checking, and peer discussion. The focus of the analysis is directed at the dynamics of ethnic stereotypes, forms of social resistance, pesantren education strategies, and their impact on intergroup relationships.

Results and Discussions

1. Forms of Ethnic Stereotypes in Multicultural Communities

Ethnic stereotypes remain a persistent social reality in multicultural communities surrounding Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*), manifesting both subtly and explicitly. These stereotypes often appear as jokes, labeling, and assumptions about intellectual ability, personality traits, and economic status of particular ethnic groups. Among students, especially during the early stages of adaptation, visible differences such as language, accent, clothing, and eating habits become identity markers that create psychological distance. Certain groups may be perceived as harsh, emotional, slow, introverted, dominant, or individualistic. Although such expressions are frequently framed as humor, they can influence self-confidence and hinder the development of healthy interpersonal relationships.

In the broader community, stereotypes are shaped by historical experiences and intergenerational narratives. Migration patterns, economic competition, land ownership, and cultural change often contribute to the formation of biased perceptions. Immigrant groups may be viewed as threats to local identity, while indigenous communities are sometimes labeled as resistant to change. Interviews with community leaders reveal that minor social tensions are often rooted not in religious differences but in long-standing ethnic prejudices. Digital media further reinforces these stereotypes. Social media narratives that highlight conflicts or criminal acts involving individuals from specific ethnic backgrounds are frequently generalized to entire groups. This process strengthens cognitive bias and limits opportunities for constructive dialogue. Some students reported entering pesantren with preconceived prejudices shaped by such media exposure. However, these perceptions tend to shift after direct interaction and shared living experiences within the pesantren environment.

Pesantren plays a critical role as a space for social correction. Through communal living, students engage in daily interactions that challenge prior assumptions. Individuals initially perceived negatively are often found to possess positive traits such as solidarity, cooperation, and leadership. This demonstrates that ethnic identity cannot serve as a reliable basis for judging personal character. From a sociological perspective, stereotypes persist due to limited equal contact between groups. Pesantren disrupts this pattern by fostering intensive interaction, shared responsibilities, and mutual dependence, leading to the gradual erosion of prejudice. Nevertheless, stereotypes do not disappear entirely. During early adaptation, students may still cluster based on shared regional identity, indicating the enduring emotional appeal of primordial ties. Therefore, institutional strategies such as

mixed dormitory arrangements, cross-regional collaboration, and structured collective activities are essential to encourage meaningful interaction.

Overall, these findings confirm that ethnic stereotypes are embedded within broader social structures and require sustained educational intervention. Pesantren holds significant potential in this regard, as it integrates communal discipline, religious values, and character formation into a holistic system that supports long-term social cohesion.

2. Islamic Boarding School Education Strategy in Deconstructing Social Prejudice

Pesantren do not face ethnic stereotypes through a punitive approach alone, but through the engineering of educational culture that encourages a change in perspective. The main strategy found in the study was the co-living system in the dormitory. The placement of students in mixed rooms from various regions is an effective method to bring together previously separate identities. Daily interactions such as cleaning rooms, sharing meals, studying evenings, and solving small problems form real solidarity.

The second strategy is collaborative learning in class and halaqah. Teachers and ustaz deliberately form heterogeneous discussion groups so that students are used to hearing different logics, experiences, and communication styles. In many cases, students who were initially reluctant to interact ended up respecting each other after working together to complete academic assignments. This shows that collaboration based on shared goals is effective in eroding prejudice. The third strategy is the internalization of moderate Islamic values. The recitation of the book of morals, tafsir, and hadith often emphasizes brotherhood, justice, respect for human dignity, and the prohibition of degrading other groups. These values do not stop as teaching material, but are translated into the rules of the pesantren. For example, the prohibition of mocking regional origin, language, skin color, and cultural customs. Violations of these norms are processed through coaching, not just administrative sanctions.

The fourth strategy is collective religious rituals. Congregational prayers, dhikr, mutual cooperation, and Islamic holiday activities strengthen the common identity as a community of faith. This inclusive religious identity serves to reduce narrow ethnicity-based identities. Students began to see fellow residents of the pesantren as brothers and sisters, not representatives of certain regional groups. The fifth strategy is cultural dialogue. Several Islamic boarding schools hold regional cultural nights, language performances, archipelago culinary, and discussions of local traditions. This program is important because differences are not erased, but rather introduced positively. Students learn that other people's cultures are not a threat, but a shared wealth.

The findings of the study show that the most powerful change in attitude occurs when students experience a combination of personal interaction, value education, and cooperative experiences. Moral lectures without direct experience are less effective. In contrast, social experiences without a value framework are potentially superficial. Pesantren succeeds because it combines the two simultaneously. From the perspective of multicultural education, pesantren strategies are relevant as a model of indigenous pedagogy. Local values such as mutual cooperation, respect for teachers, deliberation, and simple living are combined with universal Islamic teachings. This becomes a distinctive force that is difficult to find in modern formal education systems that tend to be individualistic.

3. The Role of Kiai Leadership and Dormitory Culture in Building Social Cohesion

The study finds that the success of pesantren in challenging ethnic stereotypes is strongly influenced by the role of the *kiai* as moral leaders, cultural authorities, and key figures shaping institutional values. In pesantren structures, the *kiai* does more than teach religious knowledge; they define social norms followed by students, teachers, and surrounding communities. When *kiai* demonstrate openness to diversity, reject discrimination, and treat all students equally, an inclusive culture tends to develop organically within the institution.

One crucial moment is the admission period of new students, where *kiai* deliver messages emphasizing that diversity is a divine trust and part of Islamic brotherhood. Such statements carry strong symbolic power, leading students to view ethnic-based ridicule not only as a rule violation but also as contrary to religious and moral values. This moral framing strengthens internal commitment to respect diversity.

Kiai leadership is also evident in conflict resolution. When minor disputes arise, often triggered by ethnic jokes, language differences, or cultural misunderstandings, effective pesantren prioritize restorative approaches rather than punitive measures. Students are brought together through dialogue and deliberation, allowing clarification and reconciliation. In this way, conflict becomes a medium for character education rather than a threat to harmony.

Beyond leadership, dormitory culture plays a central role in fostering social cohesion. Dormitories serve as shared living spaces where students engage in daily routines, sleeping, studying, eating, and maintaining cleanliness together. These interactions create strong interdependence, teaching students that harmonious living depends on mutual respect and cooperation. A culture of sharing is particularly prominent, with students helping one another through lending resources, sharing food, and caring for sick peers. Such practices gradually dissolve ethnic boundaries and build relationships based on emotional closeness rather than origin.

Shared discipline further strengthens integration. Uniform schedules, collective worship, and communal responsibilities place all students within the same social framework, reducing external hierarchies related to wealth, region, or status. However, dormitory life can also reproduce exclusion if not properly managed. Excessive seniority, regional grouping, or lack of sensitivity to symbolic discrimination may allow stereotypes to persist. Therefore, continuous supervision and exemplary leadership are essential to maintain fairness and inclusivity.

From a social capital perspective, pesantren simultaneously cultivate bonding (internal solidarity) and bridging (cross-cultural interaction) social capital. This combination enables students to retain their identities while forming broader communal bonds. In the long term, this experience shapes alumni into individuals who are more adaptive, collaborative, and resistant to ethnic prejudice. Thus, the influence of pesantren extends beyond institutional boundaries, contributing to wider social integration and national cohesion.

4. Islamic Boarding School-Based Islamic Education Model for Multicultural Communities

A pesantren-based Islamic education model that is relevant to answer the challenges of ethnic stereotypes and social resistance in Indonesia's multicultural society. This model relies on the integration of Islamic values, direct social experience, moral leadership, and the

involvement of the surrounding community. Education is not enough to be done in the classroom, but must live in an institutional culture and daily proxy. The first component of this model is an inclusive curriculum. Islamic education materials need to contain the themes of *ukhuwah insaniyah*, social justice, manners towards differences, the history of the archipelago's Islamic diversity, and the ethics of digital communication. Students need to be equipped with the ability to read social reality critically so that they are not easily caught up in hoaxes, identity propaganda, or ethnic-based hate speech. Classics remain relevant, but need to be contextualized with contemporary challenges.

The second component is the design of planned social interactions. Islamic boarding schools need to ensure that students from various regions are not segregated in rooms, classes, or organizations. Orientation programs, group assignments, senior-junior mentoring, and extracurricular activities should be designed across identities. Intense and equal interaction is an important condition for the birth of mutual trust. The third component is transformative leadership. *Kiai*, *ustaz*, and administrators must be role models in the attitude of respecting differences. The language used by leaders greatly determines the culture of the institution. Stereotypical remarks from the *pesantren* elite can be reproduced by students, while the language of brotherhood will strengthen integration. Therefore, inclusive leadership training for *pesantren* managers is a strategic need.

The fourth component is collaboration with the surrounding community. *Pesantren* should not be an ivory tower separate from the social environment. Social service programs, community teaching, health services, citizens' forums, economic bazaars, and cultural dialogues will strengthen public trust. When people feel the direct benefits of the existence of *pesantren*, social resistance tends to decrease. The fifth component is peaceful digital literacy. The digital era presents a new threat in the form of spreading stereotypes through social media. Islamic boarding schools need to develop media literacy units that teach information verification, media ethics, and the production of positive content about diversity. *Santri* can become agents of peaceful narratives in the digital space.

The sixth component is the evaluation of institutional culture. *Pesantren* needs to have a mechanism for reporting discrimination, a forum for student aspirations, a social climate survey, and simple psychological assistance. In this way, potential conflicts can be detected early and resolved educationally. This model shows that *pesantren* are not only traditional institutions, but centers of social innovation based on religious values. In the plural Indonesian context, *pesantren* have the potential to become a national laboratory for multicultural education. If strengthened through state policies, networks between Islamic boarding schools, and academic support, this model can be replicated in *madrastas*, boarding schools, and even universities.

More broadly, the lessons of Indonesian Islamic boarding schools are important for the global Islamic world. Many countries are facing identity polarization and social fragmentation. The experience of *pesantren* shows that religion does not have to be a source of exclusivism, but can be an energy of integration when combined with humanist education.

Conclusion

This study confirms that ethnic stereotypes and social resistance are still present in Indonesia's multicultural society, including in the environment around educational

institutions. Stereotypes emerge through family narratives, historical experiences, social jokes, economic competition, and the influence of digital media. If left unchecked, these conditions can hinder social integration and reinforce identity polarization.

Islamic boarding schools have proven to have a strategic capacity to challenge these prejudices through an education system that unites religious values and shared life experiences. Dormitory life, collaborative learning, inclusive kiai leadership, collective rituals, and cultural dialogue are effective instruments in building empathy and social cohesion. Students learn to understand differences through direct experience, not just normative lectures.

Therefore, Islamic education based on pesantren deserves to be positioned as a model of social transformation for a pluralistic Indonesia. Strengthening multicultural curriculums, peaceful digital literacy, inclusive leadership training, and collaboration with Islamic boarding schools with the community need to be on the national policy agenda. Thus, pesantren can continue to play a role as a guardian of social harmony and a pillar of national diversity.

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