


Symbolic Power and the Discursive Construction of Obedience: Media Representations of *Kiai–Santri* Relations in the Context of *Bida’ah* Series

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Abstract

This study examines the dynamics of power and obedience in the *kiai-santri* relationship as represented in the Malaysian series *Bida'ah*, by emphasizing the *pesantren* institution as a space for the production of symbolic power. The focus of this study is in the realm of sociology of power, media, and religious culture. This research is important because media representations play a role in shaping public perceptions of traditional authority structures in Malay Islam. The research method used is qualitative-ethnographic with a sociological-cultural approach, through narrative observation of the *Bida'ah* series and in-depth interviews with seven alumni of *pesantren salaf* in Jember, East Java. The results show that the *kiai* figure is represented as a symbolic power center with inviolable spiritual-charismatic authority, while *santri* show structural and emotional obedience within a patron-client framework. Non-verbal communication symbols and a culture of “*pekewuh*” reinforce this structure of domination. The findings also show symbolic resistance and reinterpretation of values by *santri* as a form of negotiation against the *kiai*’s authority. This research contributes to broadening the understanding of power relations in traditional Islamic education and how popular media reproduce or criticize these structures. The findings suggest the importance of revisiting the dominant narrative in *pesantren* culture to be more inclusive of social change and critical thinking.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent developments in the study of the sociology of power, attention to traditional educational institutions as spaces for the reproduction of power relations has become increasingly significant. Islamic boarding schools, as the oldest Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia, play a central role in shaping social structures supported by the symbolic and charismatic authority of a *kiai*. This model of relations is not only prevalent in Indonesia but also shapes Malay culture in general, including in popular cultural representations such as the Malaysian series *Bida'ah*. *Bida'ah* is a religious drama series that explores the inner life of a *pesantren* community, focusing on the strict and often unquestioned obedience of *santri* (students) toward their *kiai* (spiritual leader). The series portrays power dynamics through symbolic gestures, mystical narratives, and authoritative silence, making it a valuable cultural text for analyzing how spiritual authority is constructed and maintained in visual media. Observations of the early episodes of *Bida'ah* show that the figure of the *kiai* is depicted as having absolute authority over every aspect of the *santri*’s spiritual and social life. This power is exercised through religious symbols and nonverbal communication such as gazes, silence, and body movements, all of which indicate a symbolic power relationship. Initial interviews with eight respondents with a *pesantren* background confirm that the narrative of *Bida'ah* is quite representative of *pesantren* life practices, particularly in showing the structural obedience of *santri* to *kiai*, who are regarded as sources of blessings (*barakah*) and moral truth (Faline & Widiyanto, 2024).

Previous studies reinforce these findings. For example, research by Nauval, (2024) identified that *kiai* not only act as spiritual leaders, but also as the highest authority in shaping religious

discourse and practices. By utilizing Weber's theory of authority and Bourdieu's theory of domination, it was found that *kiai* combine charismatic and traditional authority, supported by the accumulation of symbolic and cultural capital that makes their power almost unchallengeable. Symbolic power, in this context, refers to the ability to impose visions of reality and social hierarchies without the use of physical force, but through culturally accepted symbols, language, and behavior that are perceived as legitimate (Alam, 2018). Charismatic authority, as theorized by Weber, arises from the belief in the exceptional sanctity or heroism of an individual, which grants them influence beyond institutionalized norms. Within the framework of communication, the *kiai-santri* communication pattern is a form of ethical-pedagogical communication that shapes collective *habitus* in the *pesantren* environment. Habitus, as Bourdieu explains, is a system of internalized dispositions formed through socialization that unconsciously structures an individual's perceptions, thoughts, and actions in a way that aligns with the dominant social order. This communication is closed-distant, based on emotional relationships and symbolic hierarchies reinforced through the tradition of the yellow book and the *ijazah* system (Abu Aman et al., 2023). The symbolic dimension of this relationship is also explained by Firmansyah et al., (2024), who found that *santri* demonstrate obedience through interactions such as kissing hands, using honorific titles like *akhi* and *ukhti*, and maintaining symbolic distance in daily communication. These symbols are not merely cultural expressions but also representations of the power structure institutionalized in the social values of the *pesantren*. A similar point is emphasized in the concept of "*pekewuh*," which refers to a sense of reverence that limits *santri*'s ability to critically challenge *kiai*. This relationship reinforces symbolic domination that is accepted as social normality without significant resistance. *Normative obedience* in this framework refers to compliance driven by internalized values and social expectations rather than coercion, often manifesting as moral submission to perceived legitimate authority.

On the other hand, there is also an emphasis on the aspect of exemplary leadership among *kiai*. *Kiai* are often portrayed as charismatic, humble, and diligent spiritual educators (*murabbi*). Their leadership not only influences the structure of education but also shapes the moral habitus of *santri*, which forms the basis of structural obedience beyond the pedagogical context (Khiyarusoleh, 2020). Similarly, it is noted that charismatic spiritual leadership in Salafi *pesantren* also determines the direction of educational policies and strategies, making *kiai* central figures who combine ideological, administrative, and moral roles in one authoritative body (Sari Hernawati et al., 2024). The purpose of this study is to examine in depth the representation of power relations between *kiai* and *santri* in the *Bida'ah* series narrative, as well as how this representation reveals the social construction of symbolic power and normative obedience in traditional religious institutions. This study seeks to bridge the gap between the empirical reality of *pesantren* and popular cultural narratives, while also examining how media shapes and reproduces power structures through visual narratives.

Despite this growing body of literature on *kiai-santri* relations and symbolic power in *pesantren* settings, a significant gap emerges: most studies still emphasize social practices within the *pesantren* institution itself, while rarely exploring how power and obedience are represented, maintained, or even contested through visual media such as television series. For example, a study on *da'wah* and *kiai* authority in the digital era by Harnadi et al., (2021) shows that online media-through streaming yellow books and lectures-has actually expanded and strengthened the traditional authority of *kiai* in *pesantren* communities, while a study by Wasta Utami, (2018) highlights that social media has led to the fragmentation of religious authority, where alternative public figures emerge as millennial leaders who also have strong influence. However, both of these studies focus more on online communication in the realm of education and *da'wah*-not on dramatic representations in the form of narratives and visual aesthetics in entertainment media, which can have broader symbolic and ideological effects on public perception and young *santri*.

Thus, this study addresses this gap by analyzing *Bida'ah* as an interventional media text: a television series that not only reflects *pesantren* life, but also shows the conflict, legitimacy, and

negotiation of *kiai*'s authority dramatically and visually. The novelty of this study lies in the interdisciplinary approach that combines the theories of Bourdieu (symbolic domination), Weber (charismatic authority), and Foucault (discursive power) with narrative analysis and media aesthetics-providing a new perspective on how *pesantren* authority is visualized, legitimized, or criticized in the public imagination, especially for young *santri* audiences shaped by media representations.

The novelty of this study lies in its interdisciplinary approach, which combines theories of sociological power (Weber, Bourdieu, Foucault) with media studies and symbolic representation. While previous studies have focused on direct practices in *pesantren* environments, this study explores how the construction of power in traditional institutions is presented, criticized, or reinforced in popular narrative spaces. This approach opens up space for criticism of the legitimacy of spiritual power in Malay-Islamic culture and its potential for transformation in contemporary society. Considering the above, the *Bida'ah* series presents representations of *kiai* power in a symbolic-charismatic pattern that is accepted and reproduced by *santri* through normative obedience, and shows the negotiation of values between traditional structures and modern religious discourse.

This study aims to critically examine how *Bida'ah*, a contemporary Malaysian television series, constructs and negotiates *pesantren* authority by dramatizing symbolic domination, charismatic leadership, and discursive power within a televisual narrative. This objective integrates sociological frameworks from Bourdieu, Weber, and Foucault with a media analysis approach, responding to calls in recent literature that emphasize the mediatization of religious authority and its dynamic representation in popular culture. Digital media profoundly transform how religious meaning and community authority are communicated, necessitating interdisciplinary methods to capture these shifts. Nurfiana, (2021) finds that online platforms can simultaneously reinforce and fragment traditional religious authority, underscoring the importance of analyzing visual and narrative strategies in televised texts. By situating *Bida'ah* at the intersection of televised aesthetic production and *pesantren* socio-religious reality, this research offers a novel, focused, and concise contribution demonstrating how *pesantren* authority is mediated, legitimized, or contested in popular culture, especially among younger *santri* audiences who internalize media logic.

METHODS

Although this study initially adopted an ethnographic orientation, data collection was not based on full immersion within *pesantren* environments. Instead, this research employs a focused ethnography approach, aligned with recent methodological adaptations in qualitative social research. Focused ethnography is characterized by targeted exploration of specific phenomena through short-term, intensive data collection, often in contexts where the researcher brings substantial prior knowledge (Rashid et al., 2019). In this case, primary data were gathered via in-depth interviews with alumni and media observation rather than long-term participant engagement, reflecting the structure and limitations typical of focused ethnography (Kelly, n.d.). The researcher's engagement spanned several weeks of episodic field visits, supported by audiovisual analysis of the *Bida'ah* series, aligning with best practices for media-oriented ethnographic research (Kelly, n.d.). While this approach enhances efficiency and specificity, it naturally constrains depth of lived experience within *pesantren* settings and limits observation of unmediated daily interactions. These limitations temporal, participatory, and contextual access are acknowledged as boundaries of this focused ethnographic design, in line with recent critiques calling for clarity around researcher positionality and engagement intensity in applied ethnographies (Trundle & Phillips, 2023).

In the context of this study, Islamic boarding schools are positioned not merely as religious educational institutions, but as normative institutions that shape, transmit, and reinforce social power structures and cultural habits. Islamic boarding schools not only teach Islamic knowledge, but also serve as vehicles for the internalization of values, practices of symbolic domination, and

institutionalized hierarchical relationships. Therefore, the ethnographic approach in this study is used to capture the symbolic and ideological nuances of the daily practices of *santri* and *kiai*, as well as how these representations are reflected and critiqued in the *Bida'ah* serial narrative. In addition to visual observation, in-depth interviews also explore how alumni interpret the role of the *pesantren* in shaping their religious identity and social attitudes after leaving the *pesantren*. This approach allows researchers to analyze power relations not only as formal structures but also as the result of symbolic constructions deeply rooted in the cultural practices of traditional Islamic education.

The main focus of this research is to examine in depth the dynamics of power and obedience in the *kiai-santri* relationship as represented in the Malaysian series *Bida'ah*, by relating it to the socio-cultural reality of the traditional *pesantren* community in Jember, East Java. Although this study initially adopted an ethnographic orientation, data collection was not based on full immersion within *pesantren* environments. Instead, this research employs a focused ethnography approach, which emphasizes short-term, in-depth exploration of specific cultural phenomena where the researcher holds prior familiarity with the context (Wall, n.d.). This method is suitable when access to continuous participant observation is limited or impractical. Primary data were gathered through in-depth interviews with alumni and media observation of the *Bida'ah* series. The ethnographic positioning is therefore better described as a form of media-focused cultural ethnography, combining symbolic analysis of televisual narratives with retrospective participant accounts. Research engagement occurred over approximately six weeks, with episodic field visits and non-participatory media observation as its core. This approach enhances specificity while acknowledging limitations in temporal depth and immersion. The decision to focus on alumni of *pesantren salafiyah* in Jember is strategically justified by their capacity to provide longitudinal insight into how symbolic power is internalized and retained beyond formal education. Alumni perspectives offer a retrospective lens to explore the enduring effects of *pesantren* authority, as they are no longer embedded in institutional dynamics that may restrict open reflection. Sandberg, (2020) defines this approach as retrospective ethnography, where memory becomes a resource for analyzing long-term symbolic internalization. To address the methodological limitations of memory recall, structured life-history interviews were used and triangulated with narrative analysis of *Bida'ah*, ensuring validity through repeated thematic cross-checks. Thus, this focused and retrospective ethnographic design offers both temporal reach and cultural depth while remaining attentive to the limits of researcher involvement and participant memory.

Secondary data was obtained from a literature review of scientific journals published in the last ten years that discuss the power relations between *kiai* and *santri* in Islamic boarding schools. Research by Nauval (2024) provides an important framework by showing how *kiai*, as the highest authority, control religious discourse and practices by utilizing symbolic and cultural capital, within the framework of Weber and Bourdieu's theories. Research by Suparjo (2013) reinforces this by describing a pattern of interpersonal communication that is closed and distant, based on a patron-client social structure in the *kiai-santri* relationship. Additional data was obtained from a study by Firmansyah et al., (2024), which explains the symbolic meaning of *santri* social practices such as kissing hands, maintaining body language, and using honorific greetings as a form of internalizing the hierarchical structure within *pesantren* (Firmansyah et al., 2024). The entire research series was conducted from March to April 2025, with the research location centered in Jember Regency, East Java. This area was chosen because it has a high concentration of traditional *pesantren* institutions and access to an active *santri* community, both culturally and discursively. Additionally, Jember has a population of *pesantren* youth familiar with popular Malay media, making this location strategic for exploring the relationship between symbolic narratives and real social experiences.

In this study, the Malaysian television series *Bida'ah* is conceptualized as a multifaceted analytical object it is treated simultaneously as a cultural artifact, a narrative text, and a form of visual ethnography to justify and strengthen the analytic procedures employed. First, as a cultural artifact, *Bida'ah* embodies *pesantren* values, symbols, and rituals commodified through televisual

production, allowing us to investigate how symbolic power is materialized in visual culture. Second, as a narrative text, the series is examined for its storyline, character arcs, dialogue, and representational strategies to trace discursive constructions of *kiai* authority, using thematic narrative analysis methodologies (Victor, 2016). Third, adopting a visual ethnographic lens enables scrutiny of *mise-en-scène*, camera work, nonverbal cues, and audio-visual symbolism to uncover embodied power relations and affective dimensions of domination (Pink et al., 2016). This holistic approach aligns with current best practices in media ethnography, which emphasize the importance of integrating cultural, narrative, and visual dimensions when analyzing mediated expressions of social authority. By positioning *Bida'ah* within this triple-analytical framework, the study ensures methodological rigor and theoretical coherence, enabling robust interpretation of how televised representation mediates, legitimizes, or contests *pesantren* authority.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Visual Representation of *Kiai* Authority in the *Bida'ah* Series

Observations of the *Bida'ah* series show a consistent visual pattern in framing the figure of the *kiai* as the center of moral, spiritual, and social authority. In many key scenes, the *kiai* character is always shown occupying a dominant spatial position, sitting higher, in the center of the room, or highlighted with warm lighting that emphasizes his authority. His body movements are minimal but meaningful: long gazes, pauses, and slow nods are part of a non-verbal communication strategy that signifies symbolic power. The elements of clothing are also chosen specifically: the *kiai* always wears white, a large turban, and is often surrounded by *santri* wearing simpler clothing. This combination of visual elements not only creates a symbolic distance between the *kiai* and the *santri*, but also reinforces the hierarchy of authority that does not need to be explained through words.

These observational findings are consistent with the semiotic analysis in the study of the film *Sang Kiai*, which concludes that the affirmation of the *kiai*'s power in the visual narrative is conveyed through symbolic myths based on religiosity and nationalism. In the film, the *kiai*'s presence as the main character is constructed with visual symbols that carry connotations of *ta'zīm* (absolute respect), which are translated through the *santri*'s gestures, such as bowing, kissing hands, and avoiding direct eye contact (Nurfiana, 2021). This visual representation aligns with findings in *Bida'ah*, where power relations are formed and accepted through visual signals that convey dominance subtly yet firmly. Additionally, another study examining the representation of *Gus* (sons of *kiai*) on Instagram found that the visualization of authority in *pesantren* culture is also reproduced in digital platforms through religious symbols such as clothing, book backgrounds, and body gestures. In this digital context, visual semiotics becomes a new form of *da'wah* that combines symbolic power and moral narratives, demonstrating that the *kiai*'s authority extends not only to the physical space of the *pesantren* but also to the public visual space (Nasution, 2017).

In the context of the *Bida'ah* series, these visual symbols not only reinforce the position of the *kiai* as the main character, but also create a system of influence that is integrated into the narrative structure. The placement of the *kiai* character in a calm space, with minimal conflict, and surrounded by religious symbols such as the yellow book or the pulpit for sermons, makes the narrative a tool for legitimizing power that is cultural and spiritual in nature. Through this visual mechanism, viewers are invited to interpret the *kiai*'s power as something natural, unquestionable, and even sacred. The visual representation of the *kiai*'s power in the *Bida'ah* series is not merely part of the narrative aesthetics but an ideological process that reinforces the patriarchal social structure within the traditional *pesantren* education system. This observation shows that visuals are not passive elements but a dominant medium in shaping collective perceptions of who has the right to lead, determine truth, and establish social norms within the *pesantren* community.

In a follow-up observation of popular Southeast Asian media, the visual representation of *kiai* in the *Bida'ah* series shows similarities to the figure of *ustaz* in the *Tanah Kubur* series aired in Malaysia. In the series, religious authority is reinforced by visuals that emphasize mystical elements and spiritual tension, such as the use of creepy background music and close-ups of students' fearful

expressions. While in *Bida'ah* the authority of the *kiai* is emphasized through silence and symbolic lighting, in Tanah Kubur moral dominance is reinforced by metaphysical intervention. This comparison reveals a pattern of visualizing religious power in Malay media as a combination of traditional symbolism and dramaturgy of submission. Hjarvard's (2008) theory of mediatization states that media not only represent religion but also shape religion itself through narrative logic and media aesthetics. In the context of *Bida'ah*, this is evident in how the *kiai*'s authority structure is not only displayed but also reshaped by visual layout, color choices, and camera dynamics. Through what Couldry (2003) refers to as "media rituals," the *kiai*'s power is not only displayed but also legitimized by visual forms that imply grandeur, silence, and submission. Therefore, media is not neutral but an active actor in the formation of religious habitus.

Empirical Experiences of Islamic Boarding School Alumni Related to the Symbolic Dominance of *Kiai*

The empirical experiences of seven Islamic boarding school alumni in Jember who were informants in this study show a collective awareness of the symbolic dominance structure inherent in the *kiai-santri* relationship. The informants described that the form of obedience they practiced during their time at the boarding school was not merely compliance with formal boarding school rules, but also included spiritual aspects such as reverence, deep respect, and recognition of the *kiai* as an absolute authority. In some narratives, the informants mentioned that they responded more quickly to the *kiai*'s commands than to those of the *ustāz*, even when the content of the commands was similar. One informant said, "*The kiai's orders have a different aura. Even if they are simple, they make us feel that we must obey immediately, without thinking*" (Aa, 2025). This pattern of obedience shows that the power relations that are formed are not based solely on structural rules but are formed through symbolic internalization that shapes the *santri*'s habitus from the beginning of their stay at the *pesantren*.

This phenomenon can be understood within the framework of Pierre Bourdieu's theory of symbolic domination, which explains how certain social structures are maintained without direct coercion because they have become part of the way of thinking and feeling of individuals in subordinate groups. Research by Arifin (2015) on Salafiyah Islamic boarding schools in Mlangi, Yogyakarta, found that *kiai* leadership combines three forms of authority according to Weber: traditional, charismatic, and rational. *Kiai* not only act as teachers but also as ideological figures who shape the way *santri* think through the study of religious texts, *tafaqquh fī al-dīn* activities, and the regeneration of Nahdlatul Ulama cadres. The result is the internalization of a fanatical attitude toward the *kiai*'s religious views, which *santri* accept as a form of truth that does not need to be questioned (Arifin, n.d.). This finding aligns with the discussion on the culture of *pekewuh* among *santri*, which involves a sense of reverence and reluctance to criticize the *kiai*, even in matters that are open to discussion. In traditional *pesantren* culture, *kiai* are often seen as extensions of divine authority, so resistance to their commands is associated with ungrateful or disobedient behavior. This results in one-way and closed communication within the *pesantren*, with *santri* primarily receiving and rarely questioning the *kiai*'s decisions (Yusuf & Taufiq, 2020).

Furthermore, a study of the practices of praise and criticism by *kiai* toward *santri* shows that criticism from *kiai* is conveyed in an indirect and figurative manner. This technique creates communication that pragmatically avoids open conflict, yet maintains symbolic control over the actions of the *santri*. In interviews with informants, there was acknowledgment that criticism from *kiai* is often not directed explicitly, but rather conveyed through stories or allusions to third parties, which are implicitly understood by the *santri* as reprimands aimed at them. This shows that power relations are maintained through symbolic communication techniques that shape normative awareness in the students, that submission is the highest form of obedience, even without explicit orders (Sofyan et al., 2023). From the various narratives of informants in Jember and the literature review above, it can be concluded that the empirical experiences of *pesantren* alumni confirm the existence of symbolic domination that is culturally formed and reproduced through communication

practices, social rituals, and value structures within the *pesantren* environment. The relationship between *kiai* and *santri* is not merely a pedagogical relationship but a system of power institutionalized through symbols, language, and the social structure of the *pesantren*. Thus, the obedience of *santri* does not stem solely from structural pressure but from their internalization of the symbols of authority associated with the figure of the *kiai*, making it the most effective and enduring form of domination.

Normative Compliance and Patron-Client Patterns in *Kiai-Santri* Relations

Based on interviews with alumni of Islamic boarding schools in Jember, it was found that *santri*'s obedience to *kiai* is not solely motivated by personal respect or spiritual influence, but has become part of a broader social structure in the form of patron-client relations. In this context, *kiai* occupy the position of patrons who provide spiritual protection, education, and even political and economic guidance to *santri*. Conversely, *santri* demonstrate loyalty through absolute obedience, active participation in *pesantren* activities, and emotional attachment to the *kiai*, even after they leave the *pesantren* environment. One informant stated that major decisions in his life, including choosing a spouse and career, are still consulted with the *kiai*, even though he no longer resides at the *pesantren*. This reflects that the patron-client relationship is ongoing and encompasses a very broad aspect of life. This pattern is also reinforced by the fact that *kiai* often serve as mediators in family, social, and even local political conflicts, so that their authority is not limited to the educational sphere but extends to controlling community opinion.

This finding is in line with the results of Setiawan's (2016) research, which states that the patron-client relationship at the Darul Fikri Islamic boarding school in Malang takes place through an unequal exchange pattern: the *kiai* provides educational services, moral legitimacy, and social networks, while the *santri* provide loyalty, respect, and unconditional obedience. This relationship is personal, flexible, and long-term. This relationship makes the *kiai* a figure with great influence in the spiritual and social spheres of the *santri*, forming a system of dependency that is legitimized by the cultural and symbolic structure of the *pesantren* (Setiawan, 2016). Furthermore, the concept of "patronage plus" describes that the *kiai-santri* relationship encompasses not only social and educational aspects but also ideological and spiritual ones. In a study at the Ma'hadutholabah Babakan Tegal Islamic boarding school, it was found that the process of character formation among *santri* is carried out through modeling, habit formation, and the imposition of sanctions, all of which are directed by the *kiai* as the absolute authority. In this context, *santri* compliance does not emerge as a result of rationalization but as a form of internalization of *pesantren* values that are symbolically and continuously instilled (Habibah et al., 2023).

Durkheim explains that education serves to preserve social order and moral systems. In this context, the obedience of students to their teachers reflects the latent function of education as a social controller that symbolically transmits collective norms and values. However, studies highlight that this patron-client relationship is beginning to shift in some modern Islamic boarding schools, where the symbolic influence of teachers is weakening due to social changes and increased access to information and other educational options for students. In traditional *pesantren*, the patron-client relationship remains very strong, but in *pesantren* undergoing modernization, the relationship becomes more egalitarian despite the formal preservation of the authority structure (Zaki, 2022). Theoretically, the patron-client relationship in the context of *pesantren* can be explained through a synthesis of James C. Scott's patronage theory and Pierre Bourdieu's symbolic domination. Patronage creates functional and psychological dependence, while symbolic domination ensures that the relationship is accepted as normal and unquestioned. The combination of the two creates a stable social system that is not always open to criticism or innovation. Within this framework, normative compliance is not the result of explicit pressure, but rather the result of a long process of internalizing the value structure that is symbolically inherited.

The patron-client relationship pattern in Islamic boarding schools shows how the spiritual and social power of the *kiai* is subtly but strongly institutionalized in long-term relationships. The

obedience of *santri* in this context is a form of obedience that is not only formal but also ideological and affective, reflecting the depth of the power structure in traditional Islamic educational culture. In the context of contemporary social development, the patron-client relationship between *kiai* and *santri* is beginning to show signs of transformation. One form of this is the shift of religious authority to the digital realm. The emergence of digital ulema through social media has disrupted the traditional monopoly of *kiai* authority. *Santri* now have access to various religious perspectives through YouTube, TikTok, or online study platforms, which provide them with alternatives in forming their religious views. This transformation shows that patronage in *pesantren* is no longer entirely hierarchical and exclusive. This relationship has shifted to a post-patronage form, where *santri* loyalty is divided between *kiai* as local figures and digital ulema as global figures. This phenomenon challenges traditional symbolic dominance and opens up the possibility of more dialogical and egalitarian relationships in *pesantren* education in the future (Zamili & Syamsi, 2024).

Narratives of Obedience as the Production of Truth in Islamic Boarding Schools

One of the main findings of this study is how the obedience of students to their teachers not only functions as a form of respect or administrative compliance, but has been institutionalized as a single narrative of truth that is inherent in the social structure of Islamic boarding schools. In this context, what the *kiai* says, how he positions himself, and how religious narratives are conveyed to him all form a truth regime a system of truth production that is collectively internalized by the *santri* community. Obedience to the *kiai* becomes an expression of obedience to truth itself, because the *kiai* not only conveys knowledge but also becomes the source of knowledge and truth itself. This indicates that *santri* are not only submissive to normative teachings but also to the *kiai*'s decisions in worldly matters such as career choices, political directions, and even marriage arrangements. One informant stated that when the *kiai* declared a fatwa that it was “not good” to participate in activities outside the *pesantren*, even though these activities were legal under state law, he and his friends refrained from doing so because they considered the decision to be moral and spiritual truth. This shows that the *kiai* not only holds religious authority but also becomes an institution of truth that regulates the normative boundaries of *santri* social behavior.

This finding corresponds directly with Nauval's (2024) research, which examined the construction of religious discourse at the LSQ Ar-Rohmah Islamic boarding school in Yogyakarta. In his study, Nauval showed that *kiai* hold complete power in shaping religious discourse, including defining what is considered correct and valid teachings within the boarding school environment. He mentions that “*santri as a dominated group can only practice religious discourse and practices as determined by the kiai*”, so that all of the *santri*'s religious experiences are framed within the *kiai*'s system of thought. This framework is also reinforced by Foucault's theory of the relationship between knowledge and power, in which the production of truth is part of the practice of power itself. In *pesantren*, truth is not accessed through dialectics or open discussion, but through *isnad keilmuan* (chain of transmission of knowledge), *barokah* (blessings), and recognition of the *kiai*'s spiritual capacity.

The *santri*'s belief in the “*barakah kiai*” (blessing of the *kiai*) is a major factor in the *sam'an wa t̃a'atan* model of obedience. *Santri* believe that their lives will be blessed if they obey the *kiai*, and conversely, they will be cursed if they oppose him. This belief reinforces the *kiai*'s position as the center of production of values of truth and norms (Tungal, 2014). Truth in *pesantren* is also performative. In practice, the repetition of the *kiai*'s statements by *santri* through forums such as *ngaji*, *bahtsul masail*, and public lectures forms a symbolic ritual that not only affirms the content of the teachings but also reinforces the *kiai*'s position as the sole authority. This is a form of “single truth rhetoric” in the context of *pesantren* in Sundanese society. In his research, he found that every statement made by the *kiai* is considered to have divine legitimacy, even when it concerns matters related to domestic norms for women, indicating that truth is not something that can be negotiated but is practiced obediently as part of the way of life in the *pesantren* (Ali Nasith, 2024).

The narrative of obedience in Islamic boarding schools forms an ideological ecosystem in which symbolic power, value structures, and the production of truth are systematically integrated. The obedience of students is not merely the result of fear or doctrine, but part of the formation of social reality based on the belief that truth lies in the words and actions of the *kiai*. This structure makes Islamic boarding schools institutions that not only educate but also define ways of thinking, feeling, and acting, instilling the idea that obedience is the path to truth and that truth is only valid if it comes from the authority of the *kiai*. Bourdieu's theory of habitus and cultural capital explains how Islamic boarding schools form structures of domination that are willingly accepted by *santri*. The habitus of *santri* formed within the *pesantren* environment makes obedience not merely an instruction but part of a “social reflex” that shapes their perception of the world.

Interestingly, the narrative of obedience institutionalized in Islamic boarding schools has structural similarities with the practice of producing truth in other religious communities. In Catholic Church institutions, for example, the concept of Magisterium makes ecclesiastical authority the main determinant of doctrinal truth. Similar to the position of *kiai* in Islamic boarding schools, priests or bishops in the Catholic Church function as guardians of orthodoxy and determinants of the limits of valid interpretation. Monastic leadership in Theravada Buddhist communities shows that obedience to senior monks is not only spiritual but also normative and social. This confirms that the single narrative of truth rooted in obedience to authoritative figures is a common feature in Asian religious institutions. This means that the position of the *kiai* as a truth maker in *pesantren* is part of a global practice of truth production based on charismatic authority. By placing this phenomenon in a cross-religious comparative context, we can understand that obedience in *pesantren* is not merely a local peculiarity, but a reflection of universal social mechanisms that combine symbolic power, moral legitimacy, and collective internalization of values (Buaban, 2021; Salgado, 2019; Schnoor, 2019).

Conflict and Resistance among Islamic Boarding School Students: The Unspoken Realm

Although the symbolic dominance of the *kiai* in *pesantren* is very strong and almost unquestionable, some narratives from informants reveal the existence of a hidden form of resistance that is passive, symbolic, and indirect. This resistance does not manifest itself in the form of open rebellion, but rather in the form of a reluctance to fully internalize the values conveyed by the *kiai*. Some informants revealed that they follow the *kiai*'s commands due to environmental pressure, not personal conviction. One respondent stated, “We cannot refuse to participate, but that does not mean we always agree.” This statement highlights the gap between formal compliance and internal acceptance, which serves as the space for symbolic resistance to exist.

This finding is consistent with Nadia Wasta Utami's (2018) research, which examined interpersonal communication between *kiai* and *santri* in modern *pesantren*. She showed that although communication was predominantly initiated by the *kiai*, there was a gap in the form of “silent discomfort” from *santri* who felt that some of the values taught were not relevant to the current context. This discomfort is rarely expressed explicitly but manifests in passive attitudes, feigned obedience, or facial expressions that suppress emotions. This form of resistance illustrates that the communication structure in the *pesantren* does not allow for open discussion and instead fosters implicit communication patterns as a means of hidden dissent (Wasta Utami, 2018).

Interestingly, *santri* resistance also manifests itself in the form of reinterpreting the values instilled by the *kiai*. In the *kiai*'s political involvement, it was found that some *santri* refused to follow the *kiai*'s political directives when they felt that the decisions were no longer spiritual in nature, but rather political and pragmatic. This shift in perception shows that the *kiai*'s position as the center of authority is no longer absolute in certain contexts, especially when that authority shifts from the religious domain to the realm of political power. This indicates that resistance can occur when *santri* separate the *kiai* as a spiritual teacher from the *kiai* as a political actor, meaning that the *kiai*'s authority is not always accepted in its entirety (Nawawi & Juandi, 2021). There is structural resistance from women in *pesantren* through the role of *nyai*. Freire criticizes the “banking” style of

education, in which students are considered passive objects. In this context, *pesantren* in *Bida'ah* display a one-way educational relationship, but the resistance of *santri* shows the potential for the emergence of critical consciousness (conscientization), as emphasized by Freire. Although not directly related to male *santri*, this study shows how subordinate actors in the *pesantren* system can negotiate power by creating new spaces that were previously unavailable to them. This marks a form of structural resistance that is not carried out in a confrontational manner, but rather through subtle penetration into the power system itself. Women, who were once only supporters of *kiai* in the domestic sphere, began to take on managerial roles in *pesantren* and education, shifting the boundaries of male authority in the patriarchal *pesantren* system.

In addition to passive symbolic resistance, more productive and strategic forms of resistance have also emerged, such as the formation of informal discussion communities by senior *santri*. In follow-up interviews, two informants revealed that they regularly held small discussion forums outside of *pesantren* hours to discuss current issues and even collectively question some of the *kiai*'s views, albeit covertly. This phenomenon can be interpreted as a form of counter-public in Nancy Fraser's terms, where *santri* create alternative spaces to negotiate the dominant discourse in the *pesantren*. Resistance is also evident in the personal use of digital technology. Some *santri* actively follow studies by alternative figures on social media as a form of seeking a more open discourse. Access to this plurality of information shows that even though the structure of symbolic domination is still strong, *santri* have the agency to choose and interpret values more reflectively. Thus, *santri* resistance is not only a form of opposition but also an affirmation of identity and an effort to form subjectivity within the framework of a hegemonic institution.

Theoretically, these forms of resistance align with Michel Foucault's concept of micro-resistance, which refers to resistance that emerges in small, quiet, and hidden forms yet remains capable of disrupting hegemonic power structures. This resistance shows that the *pesantren* structure, however strong and symbolic it may be, still contains gaps that can be criticized, negotiated, and revised, especially amid rapid social change and increasingly complex expectations of *santri*. *Santri* resistance within *pesantren* does not necessarily manifest as open rejection or collective rebellion, but rather in subtle forms that highlight the gap between symbolic authority and personal acceptance. This area is important to analyze because it shows that even the established power system in *pesantren* still has room for negotiation, which in the long term can become a source of structural change from within.

The Encounter between Representation and Reality: *Bida'ah* as Criticism or Reproduction?

The Malaysian series *Bida'ah* narratively and visually portrays the relationship between *kiai* and *santri* in a form that is almost identical to the relationship patterns found in many traditional Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia, especially in the context of East Java. In observing several key episodes, the *kiai* is portrayed with classic symbols of authority: speaking little but decisively, surrounded by silent and obedient *santri*, and making unquestionable decisions. However, behind this portrayal, *Bida'ah* inserts a narrative gap in the form of implicit criticism of the long-standing cultural authoritarianism within the religious social structure. Several *santri* characters in the series are depicted as experiencing uncertainty, fear of asking questions, and even moral pressure due to being in a system of total obedience that is difficult to challenge. This raises the question: does *Bida'ah* reproduce the symbolic power of the *kiai*, or does it offer criticism of that structure?

This analysis corresponds strongly with a study of Rahman, (2015) that examines the relationship between *kiai* and digital media. It states that the representation of *kiai* in the media not only expands the reach of religious authority, but also normalizes symbolic power through mediatization, namely the framing of power to appear reasonable and absolute in popular narratives. In this context, *Bida'ah* can be understood as a cultural product that is not neutral but carries specific ideological constructions regarding power relations rooted in traditional religious structures. On the other hand, Fauzi, (2012) in his study on traditional Islam and the negotiation of modernity in Javanese society shows that *pesantren* and *kiai* are the main actors in the process of

collective identity construction, but at the same time face tensions between conservatism and social change. Series like *Bida'ah*, with its strong visual narrative yet infused with the anxieties of the *santri*, operates within this discursive realm: on one hand, it reinforces the image of the *kiai* as guardians of tradition, while on the other, it reveals value conflicts within the *santri* that reflect the failure of total dominance. The *kiai*'s utterances are regarded as absolute truth by female *santri* in Sundanese *pesantren*. In his research, this narrative of symbolic domination is not only reproduced in the domestic sphere but also through the social reinforcement of statements as social revelation. *Bida'ah*, in this case, presents narrative irony by showing how the *kiai*'s statements can contain moral ambiguity, especially when faced with doubt or criticism from *santri* something rarely depicted in mainstream media portrayals of *pesantren*.

In interviews, informants from Jember confirmed that some scenes in *Bida'ah* felt very "real," especially when depicting the inner tension of students who were afraid to express their opinions or question the decisions of their teachers. However, others felt that the series tended to overemphasize the mystical and scary aspects, causing them to worry that it would reinforce negative stereotypes about Islamic boarding schools. These comments reveal an ambivalence in the reception of the *Bida'ah* series: on one hand, it is seen as representative, but on the other, it is perceived as reinforcing an authoritarian structure that is actually being questioned by the younger generation of students. *Bida'ah* can be read as an ambivalent cultural text: it reproduces the traditional power structure of the *kiai* through familiar narratives, yet simultaneously creates space for resistance by depicting anxiety, discomfort, and uncertainty as part of the *santri*'s experience. This series becomes a meeting ground between hegemonic representation and a more complex reality, opening up space for criticism of a system that has long been considered stable and unshakable.

From Durkheim's perspective, educational institutions such as *pesantren* play a role in the transmission of collective values and the stabilization of social structures through the mechanism of moral internalization. Compliance with *kiai* in this context is not merely a form of individual respect but a social mechanism to maintain order and the legitimacy of traditional values. Meanwhile, Bourdieu views this obedience as the result of habitus formation: *santri* who have been educated in a certain symbolic system from the beginning will consider hierarchy and domination to be normal. Education in *pesantren* forms symbolic and cultural capital that makes *santri* feel that submission to the *kiai* is a form of legitimate "social truth."

This study makes an important contribution to the study of power in Islamic education, particularly in understanding the *kiai-santri* relationship as a social phenomenon that is not only religious in nature, but also political and cultural. Findings from field research in Jember reveal that the authority of the *kiai* extends beyond the spiritual realm to encompass worldly aspects such as political direction, social morality, and the personal decisions of the *santri*. This shows that the position of the *kiai* in traditional *pesantren* is not only as an educator or formal leader, but also as a producer of social truth and a shaper of dominant values that are internalized without explicit resistance. Academically, these results expand our understanding of Max Weber's theory of charismatic authority, especially in the context of Islam in the Indonesian archipelago.

Kiai as charismatic figures in *pesantren* not only inherit power through genealogical and intellectual networks but also reproduce it within institutionalized value systems and social structures. Naufal Ahmad Rijalul Alam (2018) asserts that *kiai* have a dual role as spiritual leaders and institutional managers, whose success determines the very existence of the *pesantren*. He notes that the character of *santri* is not only shaped by the educational process but also by identification with the *kiai* as a figure to be emulated and obeyed (Alam, 2018). This context becomes even more complex when *kiai* begin to play a role in the public sphere and modernity, as explained by Zaki, (2022). In their research in Yogyakarta, they state that *kiai* serve as a cultural bridge between *pesantren* traditions and the outside world, including in responding to issues of multiculturalism and global challenges. The *kiai* in the two *pesantren* studied not only perform the role of guardians of tradition, but also as social actors who are active in the academic world and modern society. This

shows that the power of the *kiai* is not a static entity, but rather adaptive to the dynamics of the times, while expanding its sphere of influence outside the *pesantren* (Zaki, 2022).

This finding has significant implications for studies of Islamic educational leadership, particularly in understanding symbolic and spiritual authority models. In Usman's (2025) research on the Al-Syaikh Abdul Wahid Islamic boarding school, it is mentioned that the *kiai* not only acts as an educator but also as a value manager, interpreter of truth, and social direction guide. This reinforces the *kiai*'s dominant position in all aspects of the *santri*'s life, making Islamic education in *pesantren* have a strong and complex dimension of power (Usman, 2025). The main contribution of this research is in showing how power relations in Islamic education are not only built through doctrine or curriculum but also through symbolism, one-way communication, and the internalization of values in the *santri*'s daily practices. This study also shows that the power structure in *pesantren* can simultaneously serve as a vehicle for social control and the formation of collective identity.

Therefore, understanding obedience and authority in Islamic education cannot be separated from the broader framework of symbolic power. Overall, this study enriches the literature on the sociology of Islamic education by presenting empirical data and in-depth theoretical analysis of how power is reproduced, negotiated, and even resisted in traditional religious spaces such as *pesantren*. This research also opens up space for further studies that focus more on the transformation of *kiai* power in the digital age, gender relations in the *pesantren* system, and the dynamics of religious power politics in contemporary Muslim societies.

It is important to note that the narrative of *Bida'ah* contains a productive contradiction between affirmation and criticism. On the one hand, the representation of the *kiai* as an unshakeable central figure fosters the myth of established spiritual power. On the other hand, the visualization of the *santri*'s inner conflict, as shown in close-up shots, internal monologues, or restrained emotional expressions, reveals cracks in a system that appears to be tightly closed. This representation resembles what refers to as encoding/decoding in cultural studies, where media texts can be read dominantly, through negotiation, or in opposition, depending on the social position of the audience. For viewers from a *pesantren* background, the series can be read as a mirror of familiar experiences as well as a space for evaluating practices that have long been considered normative. For the general audience, however, *Bida'ah* may reinforce stereotypes of religious authoritarianism if not read critically. Therefore, the series is ambivalent: it affirms and disrupts structures at the same time, becoming a discursive arena that opens up possibilities for critical reflection on traditional religious institutions. In this framework, *Bida'ah* is not merely entertainment media, but also a cultural artifact that challenges and maintains power structures through subtle yet sharp means.

CONCLUSION

This study found that the Malaysian series *Bida'ah* represents the religious-power relationship between *kiai* and *santri* within a symbolic-charismatic framework institutionalized in the traditional *pesantren* education system. *Kiai* are portrayed as authoritative figures who hold absolute truth, not only in the spiritual domain, but also in social, moral, and even political decision-making, while *santri* exercise normative obedience within a patron-client structure that transcends the boundaries of formal education. These findings show that the media not only reflects power but also reproduces and legitimizes it through visual, symbolic, and narrative constructions, as outlined by mediatization theory and media ritual theory. The main contribution of this research to the study of religious power lies in its interdisciplinary approach, which combines media analysis with Bourdieu's theory of symbolic domination and Weber's theory of charismatic authority, and shows how power relations are reproduced not only in everyday practices but also in the symbolic space disseminated by popular media. Furthermore, this study adds to our understanding of the symbolic resistance and value negotiation carried out by *santri* in subtle and indirect ways, such as the formation of informal discussion spaces and access to digital ulema, marking a shift from a pattern of total obedience to a more dialogical structure. The implications of these findings challenge the

singular narrative of religious power as a static and unshakable structure, emphasizing the importance of understanding *pesantren* as dynamic institutions vulnerable to cultural and media transformations. This research complements the literature on symbolic power in Islamic education by providing empirical evidence that religious authority in *pesantren* is not only shaped by tradition and social structures, but also through media visualizations and narratives that are laden with ideological and hegemonic content.

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