



The Social Construction of Religious Moderation among Madurese Kiai: A Multi-Site Study of Indonesian Pesantren

Busahwi¹

Universitas Islam Negeri
Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang
INDONESIA

Umi Sumbulah²

Universitas Islam Negeri
Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang
INDONESIA

Samsul Susilawati³

Universitas Islam Negeri
Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang
INDONESIA

Article Info

Article history:

Received: Feb 22, 2026
Revised: April 25, 2026
Accepted: May 28, 2026

Keywords:

*Islamic boarding school; Kiai;
Madura; Religious moderation;
Social construction;
Wasathiyah.*

Abstract

Indonesia's pesantren have long been regarded as institutional centers of Islamic moderation. However, the socio-pedagogical processes through which religious moderation is constructed, transmitted, and internalized remain theoretically underexplored. This study examines how Madurese kiai construct and implement religious moderation across different pesantren typologies in Madura, Indonesia. Using a qualitative multi-site case study approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis at three pesantren during 2025. The findings reveal that all sites share a common wasathiyah theological foundation based on tawassuth, tasamuh, tawazun, and ta'adul, while differing in their institutional implementation. Al-Hikam integrates moderation into the formal curriculum, Assirojiyyah embeds it through contextual kitab kuning interpretation within the salaf tradition, and Nurul Hikmah promotes it through dialogic-participatory pedagogy. Applying Berger and Luckmann's framework of externalization, objectivation, and internalization, the study demonstrates that religious moderation in pesantren is not merely a state-driven normative agenda but a socially constructed reality shaped through kiai authority, pedagogical traditions, and everyday institutional interaction. The study contributes to the growing scholarship on Islamic education by conceptualizing religious moderation as a dynamic socio-cultural construction rather than solely a curricular project.

To cite this article: Busahwi. (2026). *The Social Construction of Religious Moderation among Madurese Kiai: A Multi Site Study of Indonesian Pesantren*. Al Qodiri: Jurnal Pendidikan, Sosial dan Keagamaan, 24(2), 406-419.

INTRODUCTION

The discourse on Islamic moderation in Indonesia has become increasingly urgent amid the growing influence of religious extremism, sectarian polarization, and the rapid circulation of exclusivist ideologies through digital media (Hatta, 2025) (Hadiyanto et al., 2025; Saleh, 2025). Within this context, pesantren, Indonesia's traditional Islamic boarding schools, have frequently been regarded by scholars, policymakers, and religious leaders as institutional foundations of moderate Islam (Saifuddin, 2019). However, despite this widespread assumption, the socio-pedagogical processes through which religious moderation is constructed, transmitted, institutionalized, and internalized within pesantren communities remain insufficiently theorized. Existing studies have largely focused on moderation values and curricular strategies without adequately explaining how moderation becomes a socially lived reality within pesantren life (Mukhibat et al., 2024).

Madura provides a particularly important setting for examining these issues. The island is home to more than 1,300 pesantren and is widely recognized for its strong religious culture and the central authority of the kiai in social and educational life. Despite its overwhelmingly Muslim population, Madura has historically maintained relatively stable patterns of social coexistence and communal harmony. In this context, the kiai functions not only as a religious leader but also as a cultural broker who shapes and

*** Corresponding author:**

Busahwi, et al Universitas Islam Negeri Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang
busahwi@iainmadura.ac.id

reproduces the moral and epistemic frameworks through which communities understand social reality (Geertz, 1960). Recent ethnographic studies further demonstrate that kiai authority operates not merely through formal institutional structures but through embodied daily interactions in pesantren life, where the kiai's conduct simultaneously functions as pedagogy, legitimation, and social reproduction (Rofiqi, Zainiyati, Niam, & Kusaeri, 2026).

Previous scholarship on religious moderation in pesantren has made important contributions. Existing studies have documented the presence of moderate Islamic values, explored moderation-oriented curricula, and examined institutional responses to contemporary social challenges (Aziz, 2020; Gunawan, 2022; Mahatma, 2022; Andiono, 2024; Nasution et al., 2026). Comparative studies have also shown that moderation education operates differently across institutional and socio-cultural contexts (Bahri et al., 2025). Meanwhile, research on pesantren leadership transformation in Madura reveals that pesantren adapt to contemporary policy demands through institutionally specific leadership patterns rather than through uniform modernization trajectories (Rofiqi, Zainiyati, Niam, Kusaeri, et al., 2026). Nevertheless, these studies predominantly adopt descriptive and normative approaches that emphasize what moderation teaches rather than how moderation itself is socially constructed and reproduced within pesantren communities.

To address this gap, this study brings Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's theory of the social construction of reality into dialogue with empirical evidence from three pesantren in Madura. The theory is particularly relevant because religious moderation in pesantren is shaped not only through formal instruction but also through everyday interaction, institutional culture, and kiai authority. This study investigates three interrelated questions: (1) how Madurese kiai construct their understanding of religious moderation education; (2) how moderation is implemented across different pesantren typologies; and (3) what implications this implementation has for santri character formation, pedagogical systems, and institutional culture. Unlike previous studies that primarily focus on moderation content or curriculum, this study conceptualizes religious moderation as a socially constructed institutional reality reproduced through pedagogical practice, religious authority, and communal interaction. The study therefore contributes to the growing scholarship on Islamic education by extending social constructionist theory into the field of pesantren studies while also providing comparative insights into moderation practices across diverse pesantren contexts in Madura.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative multi-site case study design grounded in a constructivist orientation. The approach was selected to explore how kiai, ustadz, and santri interpret, construct, and enact religious moderation within pesantren life rather than merely measuring its presence through predefined indicators (Creswell et al., 2014; Alhazmi & Kaufmann, 2022). A multi-site design enabled systematic cross-site comparison while preserving the contextual specificity of each pesantren as a bounded social and educational system (Yin, 2018). This methodological approach is particularly appropriate for examining religious moderation as a socially constructed institutional reality shaped through interaction, pedagogy, and religious authority.

Research site selection was guided by two principal criteria: pesantren typology and organizational affiliation. The first criterion distinguished between khalaf pesantren, which integrate formal schooling with religious education, and salaf pesantren, which emphasize traditional kitab kuning learning. The second criterion differentiated pesantren led by kiai holding formal Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) organizational roles from those characterized primarily by cultural or ideological proximity to non-NU traditions. Based on these criteria, three pesantren in Madura were selected: Al-Hikam Bangkalan, Assirojjiyah Sampang, and Nurul Hikmah Pamekasan.

Date 1. Research Site Profiles and Key Characteristics

COMPARATIVE PROFILE OF RESEARCH SITES

CRITERION	AL-HIKAM BANGKALAN	ASSIROJIYAH SAMPANG	NURUL HIKMAH PAMEKASAN	DATA SOURCES & PERIOD
				
 Pesantren Type	Khalaf (modern)	Salaf (traditional)	Khalaf (modern)	Institutional profile documents; March–June 2025
 NU Affiliation	NU-structural (kiai as MWCNU chair)	NU-structural (kiai as PCNU chair)	Non-NU ideological proximity	Institutional documents; kiai interview
 Formal Schooling	SMP & SMK integrated	None; santri attend external schools	RA, MIS, MTs, SMA integrated	Curriculum documents
 Key Kiai Informant	Prof. Dr. KH Mohammad Hasan, M.Ag	KH Moh. Itqon Busiri	KH Anis Cipta Dewata, M.HI	In-depth interviews; multiple sessions
 Santri Population	Hundreds (est.)	2,772 (2023 data)	Hundreds (est.)	Institutional records 2023–2025
 Moderation Approach	Formal curriculum integration; Matnus Syarif & Rahmatul Ummah as obligatory texts	Contextual kitab kuning interpretation; dual-channel external schooling	Classical-contemporary text integration; <i>Dialog Jum'at Pagi</i> tradition	Activity schedules; kitab lists; observation

 Data Collection Period: March – June 2025	 Methods: In-depth interviews, participant observation, document analysis
--	---

The comparative design was intended to capture institutional variation in the construction and implementation of religious moderation. The inclusion of both khalaf and salaf pesantren, as well as NU-structural and non-NU affiliated institutions, enabled the study to examine whether moderation practices were shaped primarily by institutional typology, organizational affiliation, or broader patterns of kiai leadership. Differences in santri population size also allowed comparison between smaller community-based pesantren and larger regional institutions.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis conducted between March and June 2025. Participants were selected purposively based on their institutional roles and involvement in pesantren educational activities. Primary informants consisted of the kiai at each pesantren, supplemented by interviews with senior ustadz and santri to obtain broader perspectives on moderation practices and institutional culture.

Participant observation was conducted through repeated visits to each pesantren site. The researcher attended formal classroom instruction, pengajian sessions, and informal pesantren activities to document moderation practices within everyday institutional interaction (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011). Document analysis included institutional profiles, curricula, activity schedules, kitab lists, and relevant publications produced by the pesantren and kiai. These materials were used to triangulate findings from interviews and observations (Bowen, 2009).

Data analysis followed Miles et al.'s (2014) interactive model consisting of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. Interview transcripts, observational notes, and institutional documents were coded thematically to identify recurring patterns related to moderation construction, pedagogical implementation, and institutional culture. Cross-site comparison was subsequently conducted to identify convergences, divergences, and institution-specific characteristics across the three pesantren.

Research credibility was established through methodological triangulation, prolonged engagement at each site, and member checking with key informants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Reflexive

bracketing was also employed to critically examine the researcher's positionality as a member of Muslim scholarly communities and to minimize interpretive bias throughout the research process (Yip, 2024).

RESULTS

1. Kiai Construction of Religious Moderation: A Shared Theological Foundation

Across all three research sites, the kiai consistently defined religious moderation not as a state-imposed agenda but as a theological orientation rooted in the Quranic concept of *ummatan wasathan* (the middle community) as articulated in Surah al-Baqarah verse 143. Despite institutional differences, all three pesantren emphasized four central *wasathiyyah* principles: *tawassuth* (moderation), *tasamuh* (tolerance), *tawazun* (balance), and *ta'adul* (justice). This shared theological foundation represents a major finding of the study, indicating that the legitimacy of moderation within Madurese pesantren derives primarily from internal Islamic epistemology rather than external political discourse.

At Al-Hikam Kemayoran Bangkalan, Prof. Dr. KH Mohammad Hasan described moderation as a religious conviction grounded in authoritative Islamic texts. He emphasized that moderation requires contextual theological understanding, particularly regarding concepts such as jihad, to prevent extremist misinterpretation. This perspective reflects a textually grounded approach in which moderation is constructed through classical Islamic scholarship and theological legitimacy. It also suggests that moderation is understood not merely as social accommodation but as an interpretive religious framework rooted in doctrinal authority.

At Assirojiyyah Kajuk Sampang, KH Moh. Itqon Busiri framed moderation primarily through the lens of social coexistence and mutual respect. He emphasized the importance of ensuring that both Muslims and non-Muslims can live safely and peacefully within diverse social environments. Compared with Al-Hikam's stronger textual emphasis, KH Itqon's construction foregrounds the practical social outcomes of moderation, particularly harmony, tolerance, and reciprocal security. This orientation reflects the pesantren's salaf environment, where moderation is communicated less through formal curricular structures and more through socially embedded ethical practices.

Meanwhile, at Nurul Hikmah Blumbungan Pamekasan, KH Anis Cipta Dewata conceptualized moderation as a balanced position between two opposing ideological extremes: radical rigidity and excessive liberal permissiveness. He argued that moderation does not imply compromising Islamic principles but rather adopting wise and constructive approaches in religious engagement and dakwah. Unlike the previous two kiai, KH Anis explicitly framed moderation as a protective response against both radicalism and liberalism. This formulation reflects an effort to construct moderation as an independent theological position grounded in Islamic ethics rather than organizational affiliation alone.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that religious moderation across the three pesantren shares a common theological foundation while remaining institutionally and discursively differentiated. The kiai externalize moderation through distinct interpretive frameworks, objectify it within pesantren educational culture, and facilitate its internalization among santri through everyday pedagogical interaction. These processes reflect Berger and Luckmann's social construction framework, in which religious moderation emerges as a socially reproduced institutional reality rather than merely a formal normative doctrine.

2. Implementation of Moderation Education: Institutional Differentiation

While the theological foundation is shared, the implementation of moderation education is systematically differentiated across the three sites in ways that reflect each pesantren's institutional type, organizational resources, and community context. The three implementation models are presented comparatively in Table 2 and elaborated in the sections that follow.

Table 2. Cross-Site Comparison of Moderation Education: Construction, Implementation, and Implications

Dimension	Al-Hikam Kemayoran Bangkalan	Assirojiyyah Kajuk Sampang	Nurul Hikmah Blumbungan Pamekasan
Theological Basis	Wasathiyyah as protective social necessity in religiously intense Madurese context	Wasathiyyah as everyday coexistence praxis; aqidah integrity with social openness	Ummatan wasathan as dual-threat defense against radicalism and liberalism
Curriculum Approach	Formal curricular integration in SMP/SMK; Matnus Syarif & Rahmatul Ummah as obligatory moderation texts	Contextual kitab kuning interpretation; no formal moderation curriculum; dual-channel external schooling	Classical-contemporary text integration; comparative madhhab study; Dialog Jum'at Pagi tradition
Pedagogy	Integrative contextualization; tausiah and diklat program; NU organizational activities	Repetitive-persuasive tausiah; sorogan and bandongan; cooperative SKPD collaboration	Dialogic-participatory; sorogan/bandongan modernized with group discussion and case analysis
Cultural Markers	National holiday ceremonies; cooperative entrepreneurship; reception of diverse guests by kiai	Upacara kemerdekaan & hari santri; kesenian (banjari, samman, zapin); SKPD training programs	Karnaval; uldaul; kuda menari; santriwati in hijab singing Hubbul Wathan at formal events
Santri Implications	Moderation + leadership + entrepreneurial competence; cooperative management skills	Reinforced salaf identity as inherently moderate; pride in traditional heritage as moderation resource	Shift from exclusivist to inclusivist epistemology; critical moderation competence
System Implications	Methodological modernization; library enriched with moderation and entrepreneurship texts	Strengthening of sorogan, bandongan, munazharah; evaluation of akhlak and adab alongside textual mastery	Paradigmatic shift toward dialogic-reflective learning; comprehensive competency-based evaluation

Dimension	Al-Hikam Kemayoran Bangkalan	Assirojiyyah Kajuk Sampang	Nurul Hikmah Blumbungan Pamekasan
Cultural Implications	Religious-entrepreneurial culture; NU organizational networks; productive moderation ecosystem	Culture of ta'dhim and barakah; communal ziarah and khataman as tolerance socialization	Tolerant and inclusive dialogic atmosphere; integration of local cultural appreciation

Table 2 surfaces a finding of considerable analytical weight: the three pesantren arrive at functionally equivalent moderation outcomes through institutionally non-equivalent routes. This is not merely a trivial observation about organizational diversity but a substantive claim about the nature of moderation itself. If effective moderation socialization can be achieved through formal curricular integration at Al-Hikam, through contextual kitab interpretation at Assirojiyyah, and through dialogic pedagogical innovation at Nurul Hikmah, then moderation is better understood as a social achievement produced through multiple pathways than as a specific content set that must be delivered through a particular institutional mechanism. This finding carries direct implications for policy design, which will be elaborated in the Discussion section.

The cultural markers column in Table 2 is particularly revealing. Across all three sites, moderation is expressed not only through formal educational structures but through symbolic and performative practices that embed moderate values in institutional identity: national holiday ceremonies, artistic traditions, and the memorable image at Nurul Hikmah of fully veiled santriwati singing a nationalist hymn. These practices collectively demonstrate that moderation in Madurese pesantren is not confined to the classroom but is woven into the institutional fabric of daily communal life, a dimension of implementation that formal curriculum analyses typically miss.

At Al-Hikam Kemayoran Bangkalan, the implementation of moderation education is most visibly accomplished through formal curricular integration. Two texts are designated as obligatory moderation reference works: *Matnus Syarif*, authored by the revered Madurese classical scholar Syaikhona Kholil Bangkalan, and *Kitab Rahmatul Ummah*. KH Mohammad Hasan explained the rationale:

We integrate moderation education into the formal curriculum of our educational institutions. By incorporating it into the formal curriculum, we ensure that every santri receives a systematic and structured understanding of the values of religious moderation, not merely as an addition but as an integral part of their education. In addition, there are specific books that have become obligatory material for santri: the Rahmatul Ummah and the Matnus Syarif in the field of fiqh. This text contains the remarkable views of Syaikhona Kholil on how to address differences. The explanation of the text is reinforced by multiple references so that the internalization of religious moderation in the santri becomes increasingly robust.

The pedagogical logic embedded in this statement repays careful attention. By designating a text authored by Syaikhona Kholil Bangkalan, the most venerated Madurese Islamic scholar of the modern era, as the primary moderation reference, KH Mohammad Hasan accomplishes something that no nationally produced moderation curriculum could achieve: he grounds the pesantren's moderation education in locally authoritative scholarly capital. Santri who revere Syaikhona Kholil as a spiritual ancestor receive moderation not as an external prescription but as an inheritance from within their own tradition. This is a sophisticated legitimation strategy that amplifies the social force of moderation

content by attaching it to the highest available source of community authority. Classroom observation on 21 April 2025 corroborated this, documenting santri actively applying wasathiyah concepts to analyze social media polarization in group discussion, indicating that the curricular integration had progressed from content transmission to analytical application.

At Assirojiyyah Kajuk Sampang, as a pure salaf pesantren without formal schooling infrastructure, implementation takes a structurally different form. KH Moh. Itqon Busiri described the approach:

Pondok Pesantren Assirojiyyah Kajuk is a salaf pesantren. We have no formal school here, so moderation education is not implemented formally through an institutional curriculum. Instead, we embed it in the explanation of kitab kuning study sessions using moderate interpretations. However, many of our santri do attend formal schools outside the pesantren, and in those institutions moderation education is already incorporated in the national curriculum. So although we do not have a formal curriculum, the values of moderation are still communicated through the way we explain the books we study.

This statement reveals a dual-channel implementation architecture of considerable sophistication. Assirojiyyah does not simply lack a moderation curriculum; it has constructed an alternative pedagogical ecology in which the kitab kuning tradition and external formal schooling mutually reinforce one another as moderation transmission mechanisms. The kiai's interpretive commentary in kitab sessions provides depth and theological grounding while external schooling provides formal curricular coverage of moderation as a civic and religious principle. What appears from the outside as a limitation, namely the absence of formal moderation programming, is from within a deliberate institutional response to the constraints of the salaf model that leverages available resources creatively. Observation of a Durusul Fiqih study session on 20 May 2025 confirmed this: when a santri asked how to relate to neighbors of different religions, the ustadz responded with a hadith-grounded answer that seamlessly integrated theological authority with practical social guidance, demonstrating moderation instruction embedded within classical text study.

At Nurul Hikmah Blumbungan Pamekasan, implementation combines classical text study with deliberate methodological innovation. KH Anis Cipta Dewata described the multi-channel approach:

We apply a comprehensive educational approach, not focusing only on the cognitive dimension. First, in terms of curriculum, we incorporate moderation-related materials into several subjects, from tafsir, hadith, and fiqh to civic education. Second, we use a dialogic learning method where santri do not merely listen but actively discuss and ask questions. Third, we create a heterogeneous pesantren environment where santri come from diverse regional and socioeconomic backgrounds. Fourth, we organize programs that allow santri to interact with the outside community, such as community service programs and cultural appreciation activities, while never abandoning the characteristics of Islam itself.

The structural comprehensiveness of this description is itself analytically significant. KH Anis explicitly addresses all three dimensions of learning, cognitive, affective, and psikomotorik, and all three contexts of educational experience, formal classroom, community interaction, and cultural participation. This reflects a holistic educational philosophy that treats moderation not as a subject to be learned but as a disposition to be formed through the cumulative effect of diverse learning experiences. Particularly noteworthy is the mention of heterogeneous student composition as a deliberate institutional feature rather than an incidental circumstance: by drawing santri from diverse regional and socioeconomic backgrounds, Nurul Hikmah creates an intrinsic social laboratory for moderation where the experience of managing difference is part of the educational design itself. The observation of a kitab kuning session led by KH Anis on 27 June 2025 confirmed this approach: rather than presenting a single authoritative

interpretation, the kiai offered multiple scholarly perspectives and invited santri to evaluate their relative evidential strength, enacting moderation as an epistemological practice of pluralist reasoning.

3. Implications of Moderation Implementation Across Three Dimensions

The implementation of moderation education generates transformative implications that manifest distinctively at each site across three analytically separable dimensions: santri character formation, pedagogical system transformation, and institutional academic culture. These implications are documented here through the voices of santri and ustadz informants, whose accounts provide ground-level evidence of the degree to which moderation values have been internalized and enacted.

Regarding santri character transformation at Al-Hikam, KH Mohammad Hasan observed:

At Al-Hikam, we do not focus only on forming the moderate character of santri but also on developing leadership spirit and entrepreneurship grounded in the values of Islamic wasathiyah. Our santri are trained to become future leaders who are not only tolerant but also forward-thinking and self-reliant. They are equipped with entrepreneurial and social awareness. The results we see are very encouraging: santri have become more confident, capable of leading their peers, and some have already successfully developed their own businesses at home.

This account reveals that moderation internalization at Al-Hikam has ramified beyond attitudinal tolerance into the formation of practical social agency. The kiai's explicit linking of wasathiyah values to entrepreneurial and leadership development is not a rhetorical ornament but a substantive pedagogical claim: that moderate Islamic character and worldly competence are co-constitutive rather than competing orientations. This represents an implicit critique of the dichotomization of religious and secular formation that plagues much Islamic educational discourse. An ustadz informant, Turmudzi, corroborated this from the student perspective, reporting that he had moved from being 'shy and lacking confidence' to serving as head of the santri organization and launching a small enterprise at home, attributing this transformation directly to the kiai's consistent message that Islam encourages independent creativity as long as it remains permissible and beneficial to others.

At Assirojiyyah, the character implications take a form that the moderation literature has rarely theorized: the reinforcement of traditional identity as a moderation resource. KH Moh. Itqon Busiri stated:

At Assirojiyyah we do not change the existing system, because the traditional pesantren has fundamentally been practicing religious moderation since ancient times. What we do is strengthen the santri's understanding that the way of pesantren life they have been living all along is already consistent with moderate Islamic teaching. Our santri are taught to understand the kitab kuning with an open heart, not fanatically attached to one opinion, and always respecting differences between madhahib.

This statement contains a finding that inverts a common assumption in the moderation policy discourse: the kiai does not need to introduce moderation as new content because it is already latent within the salaf tradition as properly interpreted. The pedagogical task is therefore not innovation but recovery, helping santri recognize that the tradition they have inherited is already a tradition of moderation. This is confirmed by santri informant Maftuh, who reported: 'I now understand that moderation is already in the blood of Madurese people and in the traditions of our pesantren.' This kind of identity-level internalization, where moderation is experienced as an expression of who one is rather than something one has been taught, is arguably the deepest and most durable form of socialization. It suggests that salaf pesantren may possess a distinctive moderation socialization resource that is systematically undervalued by policy frameworks that equate moderation education with formal curriculum delivery.

At Nurul Hikmah, the character implications center on epistemological transformation. Santri informant Moh. Yusni, who had become a teacher after graduating, reflected:

I experienced a great change after following this learning. Previously I was rather rigid in viewing people who were different from me, but now I am more patient and wise. The kiai always said that we must be a blessing for all people, not a calamity. Now I prefer to listen first to other people's opinions before commenting. And the most memorable thing is that I have come to appreciate Madurese culture, which turns out to be in harmony with moderate Islamic teaching.

The transformation described here is not merely attitudinal but cognitive: a shift from a closed, authoritative epistemology toward a pluralist, dialogic one. This is consistent with the pedagogy observed at Nurul Hikmah, where multi-opinion presentation and student-led evaluation of evidential strength are normalized classroom practices. The additional observation that Moh. Yusni now applies these dialogic approaches in his own teaching practice confirms that the moderation formation achieved at Nurul Hikmah has a multiplier effect beyond the pesantren walls, shaping the next generation of Islamic educators in ways that the pesantren's own enrollment figures do not capture. The alumni's integration of local Madurese cultural pride with Islamic moderation further demonstrates that effective moderation education does not require the erasure of local identity but can build upon it as a foundation.

DISCUSSION

The results presented above invite sustained theoretical analysis. This section develops three principal arguments that move from the empirical findings toward broader theoretical and policy implications, engaging with Berger and Luckmann's social construction framework, recent international scholarship, and the specific dynamics of the Madurese pesantren context.

Religious Moderation as a Socially Constructed Reality: The Dialectics of Pesantren Knowledge Production

One of the central findings of this study is that religious moderation in Madurese pesantren operates as a socially constructed reality rather than merely as a formally prescribed doctrine. Consistent with Berger and Luckmann's (1966) theory of the social construction of reality, moderation is produced through the interconnected processes of externalization, objectivation, and internalization. Previous studies of Indonesian Islamic education have similarly shown that pesantren values and institutional cultures emerge through ongoing social interaction rather than through top-down normative imposition alone (Muali et al., 2021; Yahya et al., 2021). The present study extends this literature by demonstrating how moderation is socially reproduced through institutionally differentiated pedagogical practices across multiple pesantren settings in Madura.

The process of externalization is most clearly visible in the kiai's role as moral exemplar (*uswah hasanah*). Across all three sites, moderation was enacted through everyday interpersonal conduct rather than conveyed solely through formal instruction. KH Mohammad Hasan demonstrated moderation through inclusive interaction with individuals from different ideological and religious backgrounds. KH Itqon consistently integrated messages of tolerance and coexistence into routine pengajian activities, while KH Anis encouraged dialogical reasoning and multi-perspective interpretation during kitab study sessions. These findings support previous research indicating that kiai authority operates through embodied pedagogical practices that shape santri ethical orientation and social understanding (Al-Ghifari et al., 2024; Rofiqi, Zainiyati, Niam, & Kusaeri, 2026). In this context, moderation becomes a lived social reality that santri observe, experience, and gradually reproduce within pesantren life.

The process of objectivation occurred through institutionally distinct but functionally comparable mechanisms. At Al-Hikam, moderation was formalized through curricular integration and the use of

authoritative texts such as *Matnus Syarif* and *Rahmatul Ummah*. At Assirojiyyah, moderation was objectified through contextual interpretation of kitab kuning within the salaf scholarly tradition, where the kiai's interpretive authority played a central role in shaping santri understanding. Meanwhile, Nurul Hikmah institutionalized moderation through multiple interconnected channels, including curriculum integration, dialogic learning traditions, and community-based educational activities. Although these mechanisms differed across sites, all three pesantren transformed moderation into an institutionalized and socially recognizable framework embedded within everyday educational practice.

The process of internalization was reflected in the formation of distinct but equally legitimate moderation orientations among santri. At Al-Hikam, moderation appeared to function as a practical disposition that informed organizational and entrepreneurial engagement. At Assirojiyyah, moderation was internalized as part of inherited traditional identity rooted in pesantren scholarly culture. At Nurul Hikmah, moderation emerged as a reflective epistemological orientation encouraging openness toward diverse perspectives and dialogical reasoning. These differences suggest that moderation internalization is shaped by institutional ecology rather than by a single standardized pedagogical model.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that moderation in Madurese pesantren is reproduced through dynamic interaction among religious authority, institutional culture, and pedagogical practice. Unlike previous studies that primarily focus on moderation curriculum or normative discourse, this study shows that moderation is sustained through socially embedded processes that transform religious values into everyday institutional reality. The findings therefore contribute to the growing scholarship on Islamic education by demonstrating how pesantren construct inclusive religious orientations through locally grounded and institutionally differentiated forms of knowledge production.

Institutional Diversity as Moderation Strength: Against Standardization

The cross-site comparative evidence generates a second major analytical argument of direct policy significance: the institutional diversity of Madurese pesantren is a strength of the Indonesian moderation landscape rather than an inconsistency to be standardized. Bahri et al.'s (2025) demonstrate that moderation education operates differently depending on institutional context and socio-cultural configuration, with Indonesia's pesantren system exhibiting distinctive advantages precisely because of its decentralized, community-embedded character. This decentralization is structural rather than incidental: kiai hold authority over educational policies, curriculum direction, and community norms, producing contextually calibrated variation that reflects rational local adaptation rather than institutional incoherence (Faisal et al., 2022). Chotimah et al. (2025) reinforce this from the opposite direction, showing that standardized external moderation programs generate only surface compliance without genuine internalization. The present study provides granular empirical corroboration, demonstrating that effective moderation socialization is achieved through three structurally different mechanisms without any single one being necessary or sufficient.

The Assirojiyyah case is analytically most challenging to dominant policy assumptions because it demonstrates genuine moderation socialization in the complete absence of formal moderation curricula or explicit pedagogical innovation. This finding resonates with Nurdin & Syahrotin Naqqiyah's (2019) analysis of pesantren salaf Al-Anwar, which found that the salaf curriculum, in line with the kiai's strong credibility, becomes an effective medium for instilling moderate attitudes. Humaidi et al. (2024) provide direct corroboration from a parallel salaf context, showing that students demonstrate extraordinary tolerance precisely because the kiai's interpretive guidance shapes how classical texts are received, confirming that the kiai's role as contextual interpreter is the decisive moderation variable rather than formal curriculum. Qorib & Umiarso (2025) further demonstrate that moderation models anchored in institutionally specific identity values are more durably internalized than those imposed from external

frameworks. The present study extends these findings by documenting the specific mechanisms through which salaf kitab content is activated as moderation pedagogy through the kiai's contextual commentary in daily study sessions.

The Al-Hikam case demonstrates that when formal curricular integration of moderation is achieved, its effectiveness depends critically on content authenticity and local cultural legitimacy. Zulhimma et al. (2026) found that effective moderation management requires contextual learning activities resonating with the specific institutional context, while Mukhibat et al. (2024) similarly observed that moderation curricula must be grounded in each institution's particular educational ecology to generate meaningful outcomes. This is precisely what Al-Hikam achieves through the Matnus Syarif designation. The Nurul Hikmah case adds the dimension of deliberate pedagogical innovation and confirms Hanafi et al.'s (2022) finding that students' moderation perspectives are significantly shaped by approaches that create space for active meaning-making, further supported by Athoillah et al. (2024), who identified dialogic learning environments as among the most effective institutional practices for pesantren moderation. The Dialog Jum'at Pagi tradition exemplifies this: by institutionalizing open discussion on contemporary religious and social issues, Nurul Hikmah creates a structured space in which moderation is not taught but practiced, becoming part of the habitual rhythms of santri life.

The Kiai as Epistemic Authority and Cultural Broker in Moderation Construction

The third major analytical argument concerns the irreplaceable role of kiai authority in the social construction of pesantren moderation. Across all three sites, the evidence consistently demonstrates that curricular structures, pedagogical methods, and institutional programs derive their legitimating power from the kiai's charismatic and epistemic authority. Faisal et al. (2022) established that kiai possess high levels of cultural, social, and religious legitimacy that make them uniquely effective agents for strengthening moderation, a legitimacy that operates through informal moral influence as much as through formal institutional position. This is reinforced by research on educational authority construction in pesantren, which demonstrated that regulatory legitimacy in these institutions rests on religious texts, kiai authority, and centuries-old tradition rather than on bureaucratic rationality, making kiai authority structurally irreplaceable rather than merely functionally convenient (Rohman & Khotimah, 2024). Without this authority, moderation programs risk becoming empty administrative forms; with it, even informal interpretive commentary in a kitab kuning session becomes effective moderation pedagogy. This finding has consequences that extend beyond academic analysis into practical policy design.

Ma'arif et al. (2025) analyzed kiai leadership strategies across multiple pesantren, finding that kiai who combine religious authority with integrative curriculum development create learning environments where santri critically engage with religious texts and reject extremist interpretations. The present study deepens this finding by specifying the social mechanism through which kiai authority operates: not merely through formal institutional position but through sustained embodied enactment of moderate values in daily interactions that santri observe and progressively replicate. Al-Ghifari et al. (2024) confirm this from a parallel East Java context, demonstrating that the kiai's moral and relational conduct functions as a living pedagogical text whose influence on santri moderation formation exceeds that of any formal instructional program. Geertz's (1960) characterization of the kiai as cultural broker remains analytically productive because it captures precisely this dual function: the kiai mediates between the classical Islamic tradition and the contemporary social context, making the former legible and applicable in the latter without distorting either. In the Madurese context, this mediation role is amplified by the deep cultural paternalism of Madurese society, where the kiai's conduct is observed, discussed, and emulated with an intensity that few other educational contexts can match, creating what Suryana et al. (2021) describe as a charismatic leadership ecosystem in which institutional values are continuously reproduced through the kiai's personal presence.

The policy implication is demanding but clear. Programs designed to strengthen moderation in pesantren that bypass or undermine kiai authority will likely be socially hollowed out regardless of their formal sophistication. As the results demonstrate, moderation internalization in all three pesantren flows through the kiai as the primary epistemological authority. Policy interventions that respect and build upon this authority, providing resources, training, and inter-pesantren dialogue platforms that enhance what kiai already do rather than substituting for them, are most likely to succeed (Rofiqi, Zainiyati, Niam, Kusaeri, et al., 2026). Aryati et al. (2026) further demonstrate that pesantren educational management is most effectively transformed when policy support is channeled through existing institutional logics rather than through standardization mandates that ignore those logics. Those interventions that seek to standardize moderation delivery through uniform curricular requirements risk disrupting the plausibility structures that give moderation its social reality in these communities, as Chotimah et al. (2025) have cautioned in their study of superficial moderation implementation in Islamic educational management.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the social construction of religious moderation among Madurese kiai through a multi-site qualitative investigation conducted at three institutionally diverse pesantren in Madura, Indonesia. The findings demonstrate that religious moderation in pesantren is not merely transmitted as a formal normative doctrine but is socially reproduced through everyday interaction, religious authority, pedagogical practice, and institutional culture.

First, the study found that all three kiai grounded their understanding of moderation in the *wasathiyah* tradition, particularly through the principles of *tawassuth*, *tasamuh*, *tawazun*, and *ta'adul*. However, each pesantren articulated moderation differently according to its institutional and ideological context. Al-Hikam emphasized moderation as a socially protective religious framework grounded in authoritative textual interpretation. Assirojiyyah framed moderation primarily through coexistence-oriented ethical practice, while Nurul Hikmah positioned moderation as a balanced response to both radicalism and excessive liberalism. These findings indicate that moderation within pesantren is shaped through locally embedded interpretive processes rather than through uniform doctrinal formulation.

Second, the implementation of moderation was institutionally differentiated across the three pesantren. Al-Hikam institutionalized moderation through formal curricular integration, Assirojiyyah through contextual interpretation of *kitab kuning* within the salaf tradition, and Nurul Hikmah through dialogic-participatory pedagogy. Despite these differences, all three models appear capable of facilitating meaningful moderation internalization among santri. This finding challenges policy approaches that attempt to standardize moderation education through uniform curricular intervention and instead suggests the importance of context-sensitive strategies that respect pesantren diversity and institutional autonomy.

Third, the study found that the implications of moderation extended beyond attitudinal tolerance into broader processes of ethical formation, pedagogical transformation, and institutional culture. Santri developed different forms of inclusive religious orientation depending on the pesantren context, including practical social competence, identity-based attachment to traditional moderation, and dialogical openness toward differing perspectives. These orientations potentially extend into alumni professional and social life, thereby broadening the social influence of pesantren-based moderation.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the scholarship on Islamic education by demonstrating how moderation is socially constructed through the dialectical processes of externalization, objectivation, and internalization as conceptualized by Berger and Luckmann. Unlike previous studies that primarily emphasize moderation curriculum or policy discourse, this research shows that moderation is reproduced through institutionally embedded pedagogical and cultural practices shaped by kiai authority and pesantren social ecology.

Future research should extend this comparative framework to pesantren in other Indonesian regions and examine how digital religious environments, alumni trajectories, gender dynamics, and changing forms of religious authority influence the long-term reproduction of moderation within contemporary Islamic education.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS STATEMENT

Conceptualization, methodology, investigation, data collection, formal analysis, writing—original draft preparation, and writing—review and editing were conducted by the author. The author was also responsible for fieldwork coordination, data interpretation, theoretical framework development, and final manuscript approval. All aspects of the research and manuscript preparation were completed solely by the author.

REFERENCES

- Al-Ghifari, D. H., Huda, M. M., & Haider, A. (2024). Traditional Authority of Kyai and Its Impact on Religious Moderation in East Java Pesantren. *IJIBS*, 2(2), 129–144. <https://doi.org/10.35719/ijibs.v2i2.47>
- Alhazmi, A. A., & Kaufmann, A. (2022). Phenomenological Qualitative Methods Applied to the Analysis of Cross-Cultural Experience in Novel Educational Social Contexts. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.785134>
- Aryati, A., Mustofa, M., Jemain, Z., Azizah, N., & Suradi, A. (2026). Transforming pesantren educational management through religious moderation in the era of technological disruption. *Indonesian Journal of Educational Management and Leadership*, 4(1), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.51214/ijemal.v4i1.1874>
- Aslamiyah, S. S., Aprilianto, D., Febriyanti, T., & Nurista, S. (2026). Constructing santri's understanding of religious moderation within Islamic boarding school education. *Tafkir: Interdisciplinary Journal of Islamic Education*, 7(4). <https://doi.org/10.31538/tijie.v7i2.2674>
- Athoillah, M., Rahman, A. S., Firdaus, A. S., & Septiadi, M. A. (2024). Policies And Practices Religious Moderation In Pesantren. *Jurnal Pendidikan Islam*, 10(2), 387–396. <https://doi.org/10.15575/jpi.v10i2.27543>
- Bahri, R., Rofiqi, M., Kusaeri, & Rusydiyah, E. F. (2025). Religious moderation education: a comparative study of Islamic approaches in Indonesia and Malaysia with implications for faith-based education. *International Studies in Catholic Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19422539.2025.2519727>
- Berger, P. L., & Luckmann, T. (1966). *The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge*. Penguin Group.
- Bourdieu, P. (1977). Outline of a Theory of Practice. In *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. <https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511812507>
- Bowen, Glenn, A. (2009). Document Analysis as a Qualitative Research Method. *Qualitative Research Journal*, 9(2).
- Chotimah, C., Qudsy, S. Z., & Yusuf, M. (2025). Superficial implementation of religious moderation in Islamic educational management. *Cogent Education*, 12(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2024.2442235>
- Creswell, W. J., Plano Clark, & L., V. (2014). Research Design, Qualitatif and Mixed Methods Approaches. In *Sage Publications Ltd*. (Number 8).
- DeWalt, K. M., & DeWalt, B. R. (2011). *Participant observation: A guide for fieldworkers (2nd ed.)*. AltaMira Press.
- Faisal, A., Pabbajah, M., Abdullah, I., Muhammad, N. E., & Rusli, M. (2022). Strengthening religious moderatism through the traditional authority of kiai in Indonesia. *Cogent Social Sciences*, 8(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2022.2150450>
- Geertz, C. (1960). The Javanese Kijaji: The changing roles of cultural broker. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 2(2), 228–249. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417500000670>
- Hanafi, Y., Saefi, M., Diyana, T. N., Ikhsan, M. A., Faizin, N., Thoriquttyas, T., & Murtadho, N. (2022). Students' perspectives on religious moderation: A qualitative study into religious literacy processes. *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies*, 78(1). <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v78i1.7638>
- Hatta, M. (2025). *Islam , Religious Moderation , and Digital Political Polarization : Religious Authority and Social Cohesion in the Age of Social Media*. 7(2), 201–212.
- Humaidi, A., Fadhliah, N., & Sufirmansyah, S. (2024). The Centrality of Kyai in Establishing Moderate Understandings in Salafiyah Pesantren. *Nazhruna: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam*, 7(3), 554–569. <https://doi.org/10.31538/nzh.v7i3.3>

- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. SAGE Publications.
- Ma'arif, M. A., Rokhman, M., Fatikh, M. A., Kartiko, A., Ahmadi, A., & Hasan, M. S. (2025). Kiai's leadership strategies in strengthening religious moderation in Islamic boarding schools. *Jurnal Ilmiah Peuradeun*, 13(1), 23–48. <https://doi.org/10.26811/peuradeun.v13i1.1168>
- Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaña, J. (2014). *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook (3rd ed.)*. SAGE Publications.
- Muali, C., Rofiki, M., Baharun, H., Zamroni, Z., & Sholeh, L. (2021). The Role of Sufistic-Based Kiai Leadership in Developing the Character of Santri in the Pesantren. *AL-ISHLAH: Jurnal Pendidikan*, 13(3), 1705–1714. <https://doi.org/10.35445/alishlah.v13i3.1012>
- Mukhibat, M., Effendi, M., Setyawan, W. H., & Sutoyo, M. (2024). Development and evaluation of religious moderation education curriculum at higher education in Indonesia. *Cogent Education*, 11(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2024.2302308>
- Nasution, M., Nasution, H. B., & Ritonga, A. A. (2026). Internalization of religious moderation in Islamic boarding schools. *Fitrah: Journal of Islamic Education*, 7(1), 80–96.
- Nurdin, A., & Syahrotin Naqqiyah, M. (2019). Model Moderasi Beragama Berbasis Pesantren Salaf. *ISLAMICA: Jurnal Studi Keislaman*, 14(1). <https://doi.org/10.15642/islamica.2019.14.1.82-102>
- Qorib, M., & Umiarso, U. (2025). The religious moderation model based on the unity of theo-socio-anthropological values in Muhammadiyah and NU pesantren in Indonesia. *Cogent Education*, 12(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2025.2584644>
- Ridwan, A., & Mahmudi, A. F. (2023). The Internalization of Wasathiyah (Moderation) Values Through Pesantren-Based Education. *Journal of Educational Research and Practice*, 1(1), 60–72. <https://doi.org/10.70376/jerp.v1i1.30>
- Rofiqi, Zainiyati, H. S., Niam, K., & Kusaeri. (2026). Living under the gaze: an ethnographic study of authority, embodied learning, and social reproduction in Indonesian pesantren educational practices. *Ethnography and Education*, 1–26. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17457823.2026.2614516>
- Rofiqi, Zainiyati, H. S., Niam, K., Kusaeri, & Zuhri, A. M. (2026). Educational Leadership Transformation in Traditional Settings: Policy Adaptation and Distributed Authority in Indonesian Pesantren. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15700763.2025.2608041>
- Rohman, M. Z., & Khotimah, I. H. (2024). Sustainable Practices in Islamic Education: Implementation and Impact in Traditional Islamic Boarding Schools. *IJIBS*, 2(2), 97–110. <https://doi.org/10.35719/ijibs.v2i2.44>
- Suryana, Y., Khoiruddin, H., & Oktapiani, T. (2021). Gaya Kepemimpinan Kharismatik Kyai Dalam Pengembangan Pondok Pesantren. *Jurnal Isema Islamic Educational Management*, 6(2), 199–210. <https://doi.org/10.15575/isema.v6i2.6322>
- Tarnoki, C., & Puentes, K. (2019). Something for everyone: A review of qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches. In *Qualitative Report* (Vol. 24, Number 12). <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2019.4294>
- Yahya, I., Kasnawi, M. T., Abdullah, S., & Hasbi, H. (2021). Externalization Of Systematic Values of Wahyu Hidayatullah - In Constructing Miniature Islamic Civilization. *Journal of Asian Multicultural Research for Social Sciences Study*, 2(3), 18–24. <https://doi.org/10.47616/jamrsss.v2i3.170>
- Yin, R. K. (2018). Case study research and applications: Design and methods. In *Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Research* (Vol. 53, Number 5). <https://doi.org/10.1177/109634809702100108>
- Yip, S. Y. (2024). Positionality and reflexivity: negotiating insider-outsider positions within and across cultures. *International Journal of Research & Method in Education*, 47(3), 222–232. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1743727X.2023.2266375>
- Zulhimma, Z., Zulhammi, Z., & Rangkuti, S. S. (2026). Islamic boarding school management in instilling religious moderation. *Tafkir: Interdisciplinary Journal of Islamic Education*, 7(3), 709–724. <https://doi.org/10.31538/tijie.v7i3.2931>