



## Kiai as Local Knowledge Authority: The Genealogy of Madurese Ulama's Role in Shaping Nusantara Islamic Studies

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### Article Info

#### Article history:

Received: Jan 25, 2026

Revised: March 14, 2026

Accepted: April 26, 2026

#### Keywords:

Alumni Network; Epistemic Authority; Hybrid Epistemology; Kiai; Nusantara Islam; Pesantren.

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### Abstract

The role of the kiai as an epistemic authority remains central in shaping Islamic knowledge within the pesantren tradition, particularly in the context of Nusantara Islam, where religion and local culture interact dynamically. This study aims to analyze how KH. Mohammad Saleh Abdullah constructs, sustains, and disseminates epistemic authority within Pondok Pesantren Mathali'ul Anwar Putri, Sumenep. Employing a qualitative case study design integrated with a genealogical approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis over a two-month fieldwork period. The findings reveal four interconnected mechanisms underlying the formation of epistemic authority. First, authority is genealogically constructed through sanad continuity and reinforced by pedagogical discipline that emphasizes foundational learning. Second, kitab kuning functions as an epistemic infrastructure that organizes knowledge transmission through structured methods such as bandongan and sorogan. Third, a hybrid epistemology emerges through the integration of Islamic teachings and local Madurese cultural practices, enabling contextual adaptation without compromising doctrinal principles. Fourth, an alumni network operates as a mechanism for disseminating and reproducing epistemic authority across regions. These findings indicate that epistemic authority in the pesantren context is dynamic, relational, and continuously reproduced through the interaction of tradition, culture, and social networks. This study contributes theoretically by positioning the kiai as an active epistemic agent and introducing hybrid epistemology as a conceptual framework, while practically offering insights into the role of pesantren in fostering contextual and moderate Islamic knowledge.

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**To cite this article:** Nasrullah, A. M. A., Hasan, N., Syarif, Z., Solichin, M., & Hasan, M. (2026). Kiai as Local Knowledge Authority: The Genealogy of Madurese Ulama's Role in Shaping Nusantara Islamic Studies. *Al Qodiri: Jurnal Pendidikan, Sosial dan Keagamaan*, 24(2), 96-106.

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## INTRODUCTION

The role of religious authority in shaping Islamic knowledge has long been a central concern in the study of Muslim societies, particularly in Southeast Asia where Islam has developed through complex interactions between global traditions and local cultures. In the Indonesian context, the figure of the *kiai* occupies a distinctive position that extends beyond formal religious leadership into the realm of epistemic authority, where knowledge is not only transmitted but also actively constructed and legitimized (Bashri, 2021; Faisal et al., 2022). This authority is deeply embedded within the pesantren tradition, which functions as a living institution of knowledge production, preservation, and dissemination. Unlike modern educational institutions that often separate knowledge from moral formation, pesantren integrate intellectual, spiritual, and ethical dimensions into a unified epistemological framework (Madya et al., 2026; Pahlawati et al., 2025; Sumadi et al., 2025). The concept of Islam Nusantara further highlights the importance of contextualized Islamic knowledge that reflects local cultural dynamics while remaining anchored in universal Islamic principles (Marheni Muhammad, 2024; Muhammad & Duderija, 2022a). Within this framework, the

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kiai emerges not merely as a transmitter of inherited doctrines but as an active agent who negotiates meaning across different epistemic traditions. This dual role positions the kiai at the intersection of authority, culture, and knowledge production. Therefore, understanding the epistemic role of the kiai is essential for comprehending the development of Islamic intellectual traditions in Indonesia.

In recent years, empirical realities have demonstrated that the authority of religious leaders is increasingly challenged by rapid social transformation, digitalization, and the diversification of knowledge sources. The rise of online religious platforms, social media preachers, and fragmented knowledge consumption has altered traditional patterns of authority, often weakening the central role of pesantren-based scholars (Mustofa et al., 2023; Syafaq et al., 2026). In Madura, however, the kiai continues to maintain a strong influence within the social and religious life of the community, indicating a unique resilience of traditional authority structures (Abdullah & Kusaeri, 2024; Topan & Hakim, 2023). This persistence raises important questions regarding the mechanisms through which such authority is constructed and sustained in contemporary contexts. Observations in pesantren communities reveal that authority is not merely inherited but continuously reproduced through pedagogical practices, social relations, and cultural integration. Moreover, the interaction between Islamic teachings and local traditions in Madura produces a distinctive form of religious expression that differs from other regions in Indonesia. This phenomenon suggests that epistemic authority is deeply contextual and cannot be understood through universal frameworks alone. Consequently, there is a need to examine how local actors actively shape and maintain their authority within changing socio-religious landscapes.

The urgency of this research is further reinforced by the growing discourse on religious moderation and the need to counter radicalism through culturally grounded approaches. Scholars have emphasized that traditional Islamic institutions, particularly pesantren, play a crucial role in promoting moderate and inclusive interpretations of Islam (Mujahid, 2021; Rofiah et al., n.d.). In this regard, the kiai serves as a key mediator who interprets religious teachings in ways that are relevant to local contexts while maintaining doctrinal integrity. However, without a deeper understanding of how this interpretive authority is constructed, efforts to strengthen religious moderation may lack a solid epistemological foundation. The increasing polarization of religious discourse also underscores the importance of examining local models of knowledge production that foster tolerance and social cohesion. Furthermore, the integration of local culture into Islamic epistemology offers an alternative framework for addressing contemporary challenges without resorting to rigid or exclusionary interpretations. This highlights the strategic importance of studying pesantren-based knowledge systems as potential models for sustainable religious development. Therefore, investigating the epistemic authority of the kiai is not only academically relevant but also socially significant.

Another important consideration is the need to reconceptualize Islamic knowledge production beyond the dichotomy of tradition and modernity. Many studies have treated pesantren as static institutions that merely preserve classical texts, overlooking their dynamic role in adapting and transforming knowledge (Arif et al., 2020; Suwendi et al., 2024). In reality, pesantren operate as complex epistemic spaces where classical scholarship, local culture, and contemporary issues intersect. The kiai, as the central figure within this space, continuously engages in processes of interpretation, negotiation, and innovation. This process involves not only textual transmission but also the incorporation of local values and social practices into Islamic teachings. Such integration reflects what can be understood as a contextual epistemology that bridges universal Islamic principles with particular cultural realities. Despite its significance, this process remains underexplored in existing scholarship. As a result, the intellectual contributions of pesantren to broader Islamic studies are often underestimated. This gap calls for a more nuanced analysis of how knowledge is produced and legitimized within local contexts.

Existing literature on kiai authority has primarily focused on sociological, anthropological, and political dimensions, highlighting the role of kiai in social leadership, community mediation, and political engagement (Alwi, 2025; Bashri, 2021). More recent studies have begun to explore the role of pesantren in knowledge production and religious moderation, emphasizing their contribution to shaping inclusive Islamic discourses (Ali & Halim, 2023; Huda, 2024; Mala & Hunaida, 2023). Additionally, research on Islam Nusantara has provided important insights into the integration of Islam and local culture, framing it as a distinctive paradigm within global Islamic studies (Adiyono et al., 2024; Marheni Muhammad, 2024; Muhammad & Duderija, 2022). Studies on kitab kuning have

also highlighted their role as foundational texts in pesantren education, serving as key instruments of knowledge transmission (Arif et al., 2025; Gusmian & Abdullah, 2022; Sani & Majeed, 2025; Syu'aib & M.Husni, 2025). While these studies contribute valuable perspectives, they tend to treat authority as a given rather than examining the processes through which it is constructed and reproduced. Furthermore, most analyses rely on structural or cultural frameworks without engaging deeply with epistemological questions. This limits our understanding of how knowledge itself becomes authoritative within specific contexts.

A critical limitation of previous studies lies in their lack of engagement with genealogical approaches that trace the historical and discursive formation of knowledge and authority. Although some scholars have acknowledged the dynamic nature of pesantren, few have systematically analyzed the mechanisms through which epistemic authority emerges and evolves over time (Arif et al., 2020; Hasan, 2025; Sofi et al., 2025). The application of Foucauldian perspectives, particularly the concepts of power-knowledge and regime of truth, remains largely absent in the study of Indonesian Islamic scholarship. Moreover, the role of local culture in shaping epistemology is often discussed in general terms without being conceptualized as a distinct analytical framework. This results in an incomplete understanding of how Islamic knowledge is localized and contextualized in practice. In the specific case of Madura, research on ulama networks has highlighted their historical significance but has not sufficiently explored their epistemic dimensions (Pribadi, 2025; Rahma & Nasiri, 2024). Consequently, there is a clear research gap in examining how epistemic authority is constructed through the interaction of tradition, culture, and institutional practices. Addressing this gap requires an approach that integrates historical analysis, cultural interpretation, and epistemological inquiry.

This study aims to address these limitations by examining the epistemic authority of KH. Mohammad Saleh Abdullah within the context of Pondok Pesantren Mathali'ul Anwar Putri in Sumenep, Madura. Using a qualitative case study approach combined with a Foucauldian genealogical framework, the research seeks to analyze how authority is constructed, maintained, and disseminated through specific practices and networks. The study contributes theoretically by introducing the concept of hybrid epistemology as a framework for understanding the integration of Islamic knowledge and local culture. It also offers methodological contributions by demonstrating the relevance of genealogical analysis in the study of Islamic education. Practically, the findings provide insights into how pesantren can serve as models for contextual and moderate Islamic knowledge production. By highlighting the active role of the kiai as an epistemic agent, this study challenges conventional views that position traditional scholars as passive transmitters of knowledge. Ultimately, the research aims to enrich the discourse on Islam Nusantara by providing a deeper understanding of its epistemological foundations.

## METHOD

### Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design integrated with a Foucauldian genealogical approach to investigate the construction and reproduction of epistemic authority within a pesantren context. The qualitative approach was selected due to its suitability for exploring complex social phenomena, particularly those involving meaning-making, cultural practices, and power relations embedded in specific contexts. A case study design was adopted to enable an in-depth and holistic examination of a single bounded system, namely Pondok Pesantren Mathali'ul Anwar Putri, as a representative site of Madurese Islamic intellectual tradition. The incorporation of a genealogical perspective, inspired by the theoretical framework of Michel Foucault, allowed the study to trace the historical, discursive, and institutional conditions that shape the emergence of epistemic authority (Foucault, 1980). This design is appropriate because the research does not aim to generalize findings statistically, but rather to generate analytical insights into how knowledge and authority are constructed within a specific socio-religious setting.

### Research Site and Duration

The research was conducted at Pondok Pesantren Mathali'ul Anwar Putri, located in Sumenep Regency, Madura, East Java, Indonesia. This pesantren was selected due to its historical significance, its strong adherence to the classical *kitab kuning* tradition, and its recognized role in shaping local Islamic scholarship. The fieldwork took place over a two-month period, from February

to March 2026, allowing for prolonged engagement within the research setting. During this period, the researcher actively participated in daily pesantren activities, including religious learning sessions, communal rituals, and informal interactions, in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the institutional dynamics. Additional supporting data were drawn from prior interactions and documented records spanning 2025 to ensure temporal depth and contextual continuity. The combination of intensive field immersion and supplementary temporal data strengthened the credibility of the findings and enabled a more nuanced genealogical analysis.

### **Participants and Sampling Technique**

The primary participant in this study was KH. Mohammad Saleh Abdullah, the caretaker of Pondok Pesantren Mathali'ul Anwar Putri, selected through purposive sampling based on three criteria: (1) recognized scholarly authority within the Sumenep Muslim community, (2) extensive expertise in classical Islamic texts, and (3) a hybrid educational background combining local pesantren traditions and broader Indonesian Islamic scholarship. To enhance data triangulation, additional participants included eight senior female students, five alumni actively managing pesantren in other regions, and four community leaders who regularly engage with the pesantren. These participants were selected using criterion-based purposive sampling to ensure relevance to the research focus. Inclusion criteria required participants to have direct experience with the pesantren's educational practices or intellectual network, while individuals without sustained engagement were excluded. The selection of diverse participant categories allowed the study to capture multiple perspectives on the construction and dissemination of epistemic authority.

### **Research Instruments**

Data were collected using three primary instruments: semi-structured interview guides, participant observation protocols, and document analysis checklists. The interview guide was designed to explore key themes such as the construction of Islamic knowledge, the kiai-santri relationship, pedagogical practices, and the integration of local culture into religious understanding. The questions were developed based on theoretical constructs derived from power-knowledge relations, epistemic authority, and pesantren educational traditions. The observation protocol focused on capturing behavioral patterns, interactional dynamics, teaching methods (e.g., *bandongan* and *sorogan*), and ritual practices within the pesantren environment. Document analysis involved the examination of classical texts used in teaching, institutional archives, curriculum records, and historical documents related to the pesantren's development. These instruments were designed to complement each other and ensure comprehensive data coverage across different sources.

### **Instrument Validity and Trustworthiness**

The validity of the research instruments was established through expert judgment and iterative refinement. Two scholars specializing in Islamic education and qualitative research reviewed the interview and observation protocols to ensure content validity and conceptual alignment with the research objectives. A pilot interview was conducted with a non-participant pesantren member to test clarity, relevance, and coherence of the questions, leading to minor revisions. Trustworthiness of the data was ensured through multiple strategies, including triangulation of data sources (interviews, observations, documents), member checking with key participants to verify the accuracy of interpretations, and prolonged engagement in the field. Additionally, peer debriefing was conducted with fellow researchers to minimize subjective bias. These procedures align with established qualitative research standards for credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

Data collection was carried out in three sequential stages. The first stage involved preparation, including obtaining institutional permission, establishing rapport with participants, and familiarizing with the research setting. The second stage consisted of intensive fieldwork, during which in-depth interviews were conducted with all participants, each lasting between 45 and 90 minutes. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent and supplemented by field notes. Participant observation was conducted during daily learning sessions, religious rituals, and informal interactions, with detailed notes recorded immediately after each session. The third stage involved document collection and verification, including the analysis of classical texts, institutional records,

and archival materials. All data were systematically organized, transcribed, and stored using qualitative data management procedures to ensure accuracy and accessibility for analysis.

### Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis followed an iterative and inductive process based on the framework of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, combined with genealogical interpretation. The first step involved data reduction through open coding, where meaningful units of data were identified and labeled. This was followed by axial coding to establish relationships between categories and to identify patterns related to epistemic authority. Selective coding was then used to synthesize core themes, such as knowledge transmission, cultural integration, and authority reproduction. The genealogical analysis was applied to trace the historical and discursive conditions underlying these themes, focusing on how power-knowledge relations operate within the pesantren context. Data were organized and analyzed using qualitative analysis software (e.g., NVivo) to enhance systematic coding and thematic mapping. The interpretation process emphasized both empirical evidence and theoretical integration to produce analytically robust findings.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Results

#### 1. Genealogy of Epistemic Authority

The findings demonstrate that the epistemic authority of KH. Mohammad Saleh Abdullah is not constituted through formal institutional designation but emerges from a layered genealogical process that integrates historical continuity, scholarly transmission, and sustained social recognition. The pesantren's origin as a small surau established by KH. Abdullah bin Husein represents the initial stage of this authority, which has gradually evolved into a structured and socially recognized center of Islamic learning. This transformation reflects not only institutional growth but also the accumulation of legitimacy through intergenerational sanad, which functions as a mechanism for validating both knowledge and authority. Rather than operating as a static inheritance, this genealogical structure is continuously reproduced through educational practice and social interaction.

Interview data reveal that this authority is closely tied to a pedagogical philosophy that prioritizes gradual and foundational learning. KH. Mohammad Saleh emphasized this principle by stating, *"I teach from the very beginning, even for adult students, because the foundation determines everything; if the foundation is weak, the knowledge will not last."* This statement indicates that authority is not merely based on knowledge possession but on the ability to structure learning in a disciplined and coherent manner. Observational data further show that this principle is enacted consistently during teaching sessions, where lessons begin with basic textual elements before progressing to more complex interpretations. Students rarely interrupt the kiai during explanations and typically wait until the session ends to ask questions, often through a senior intermediary. This pattern suggests that authority is embedded in a structured interactional order that regulates access to knowledge.

From a social perspective, authority is also constructed through long-term trust within the community. A community leader explained that *"the kiai becomes a leader because people trust him over time, not because he is formally appointed."* This perception indicates that authority is recognized through sustained engagement rather than institutional endorsement. The convergence of genealogical legitimacy, pedagogical consistency, and social trust reveals a stable mechanism through which epistemic authority is continuously reproduced. These findings indicate that authority in the pesantren context is dynamic, relational, and deeply embedded in both historical continuity and everyday practice.

#### 2. Kitab Kuning as Epistemic Infrastructure

The second finding shows that *kitab kuning* functions as the central epistemic infrastructure that organizes the production, validation, and transmission of knowledge within the pesantren. The consistent use of classical texts such as *Tafsir Jalalain* and *Fathul Muin* creates a stable intellectual framework that shapes both the content and structure of learning. These texts serve not only as sources of knowledge but also as benchmarks that determine what counts as legitimate

understanding. The kiai's authority is reinforced through his role as the primary interpreter of these texts, positioning him as the central mediator between textual knowledge and lived experience.

Interview data indicate that the meaning of *kitab kuning* extends beyond textual comprehension to include spiritual and ethical dimensions. KH. Mohammad Saleh explained that "*the kitab kuning is not just something to read; it is a path, and if students only memorize without understanding, it is like walking without direction.*" This statement suggests that knowledge is conceptualized as a holistic process that integrates intellectual comprehension with internalized meaning. Observations of *bandongan* sessions show that students sit in orderly rows on the floor, each holding a text filled with handwritten notes, while the kiai reads the Arabic text aloud and provides explanations in a mix of Madurese and Indonesian. The atmosphere is highly disciplined, with minimal movement or interruption, reinforcing the hierarchical structure of knowledge transmission.

In contrast, *sorogan* sessions provide a more individualized learning experience, where students read directly in front of the kiai and receive immediate correction. During one observed session, a student mispronounced a grammatical element, prompting the kiai not only to correct the error but also to explain its significance in understanding the broader meaning of the text. This interaction demonstrates that authority is exercised not only through instruction but also through evaluation and correction. The integration of these methods indicates that *kitab kuning* operates as both a material resource and a procedural system that structures how knowledge is accessed and validated. These findings confirm that epistemic authority is sustained through a disciplined and methodologically consistent engagement with classical texts.

### 3. Hybrid Epistemology: Integration of Adat and Islam

The third finding reveals that epistemic authority is further strengthened through a systematic integration of local cultural practices with Islamic teachings, resulting in a hybrid epistemological framework. This integration is not arbitrary but follows a consistent interpretive logic that seeks to align cultural practices with religious principles. Rather than rejecting local traditions outright or accepting them uncritically, the kiai adopts a mediating approach that reinterprets these practices within an اسلامی framework. This approach allows the pesantren to maintain cultural relevance while preserving theological boundaries.

Interview data highlight this integrative perspective. KH. Mohammad Saleh stated that "*Madura has been Islamic for centuries, so culture and religion have already blended; the task is not to separate them but to guide them so they remain correct.*" This statement reflects a recognition that cultural practices are historically embedded within religious life and therefore require reinterpretation rather than elimination. A concrete example is the interpretation of the *rokat* tradition. The kiai explained that "*people often call rokat problematic, but if we look deeper, it is an expression of gratitude; what must be corrected is the intention, not the practice itself.*" This reinterpretation transforms a potentially contested ritual into a legitimate form of religious expression.

Observational data further show that this integration is internalized within the educational process. Students are encouraged to critically evaluate cultural practices while maintaining respect for tradition. The influence of the cultural hierarchy *bhuppa-bhabhu*, *ghuru*, *rato* is evident in the interaction between students and the kiai. Students demonstrate respect through attentive posture, lowered gaze, and restrained verbal interaction, indicating that authority is internalized through both cultural and educational mechanisms. These practices create a learning environment where knowledge is transmitted alongside ethical and social values. The findings suggest that hybrid epistemology functions as a key mechanism that enables the pesantren to adapt to local contexts without compromising its foundational principles.

### 4. Alumni Network as a Mechanism of Epistemic Dissemination

The fourth finding indicates that the epistemic authority established within the pesantren is extended and sustained through a dynamic alumni network that operates across different regions. This network functions as a mechanism for the dissemination and reproduction of the pesantren's epistemic system, ensuring its continuity beyond the institutional setting. Many alumni establish their own pesantren or assume leadership roles within their communities, effectively replicating the

educational model and interpretive framework they acquired. This process enables the transmission of knowledge while allowing for contextual adaptation in diverse social environments.

Interview data reveal that alumni maintain strong intellectual ties with the kiai even after completing their studies. One alumnus stated that *“when we face difficult questions in our communities, we return to the kiai because he can connect the texts with real situations better than anyone else.”* This indicates that authority is not only transferred but continuously reaffirmed through ongoing consultation and guidance. Observations of alumni visits show that these interactions often involve detailed discussions of religious issues, requests for clarification, and the seeking of authorization to teach specific texts. These practices reinforce the kiai’s position as a central reference point within the network.

The alumni network operates through informal yet highly effective channels, including personal visits, communication, and collaborative activities. Despite the absence of formal organizational structures, the network remains cohesive due to shared values, long-term relationships, and a common epistemic orientation. Alumni act as intermediaries who translate and apply the pesantren’s knowledge system within their respective communities. This process ensures that the epistemic tradition remains both stable and adaptable. The findings indicate that the sustainability of epistemic authority is closely linked to the strength of this network, which functions as a mechanism for continuous expansion, reinforcement, and contextualization of knowledge.

## Discussion

The findings demonstrate that epistemic authority in the pesantren context is genealogically constructed through the interplay of sanad continuity, pedagogical discipline, and long-term social recognition. This indicates that authority is not merely inherited but actively produced through sustained practices that align historical legitimacy with present-day educational interactions. From a Foucauldian perspective, this reflects the operation of power-knowledge relations, where authority emerges from the ability to define what constitutes valid knowledge and how it should be transmitted. In this sense, the kiai functions as a “regime of truth” actor who legitimizes certain epistemic standards within the pesantren (Foucault, 1980). This finding supports recent studies emphasizing the relational nature of religious authority in Indonesia (Faisal et al., 2022; Hasan, 2025), while extending them by demonstrating that such authority is genealogically reproduced rather than structurally fixed. Unlike prior research that frames kiai authority primarily in sociopolitical terms (Alwi, 2025; Topan & Hakim, 2023), this study highlights its epistemic dimension as a continuous process of validation and reinforcement. The implication is that authority persists not because of institutional power alone, but because it is embedded in everyday pedagogical practices that sustain epistemic legitimacy over time.

The role of pedagogical discipline as a mechanism for constructing authority reveals a deeper epistemological logic underlying knowledge transmission in pesantren. The emphasis on foundational learning and gradual progression reflects a structured epistemic hierarchy in which knowledge is accessed through controlled stages. This aligns with constructivist perspectives that view learning as a cumulative process shaped by scaffolding and guided interaction (Vygotsky, 1978), while also resonating with Islamic pedagogical traditions that prioritize adab and intellectual discipline (Pahlawati et al., 2025). However, this finding extends existing theories by demonstrating that pedagogical structure is not merely instructional but also constitutive of authority itself. Studies on pesantren education have highlighted the importance of discipline and hierarchy (Arif et al., 2025; Gusmian & Abdullah, 2022), yet they often treat these as cultural norms rather than epistemic mechanisms. In contrast, this study shows that disciplined interaction patterns regulate access to knowledge and reinforce the legitimacy of the kiai as the primary epistemic authority. The implication is that authority is internalized not only through content but through the very structure of learning, shaping how students perceive and engage with knowledge.

The centrality of *kitab kuning* as an epistemic infrastructure further illustrates how authority is materially and procedurally organized within the pesantren. The consistent use of classical texts establishes a stable framework that defines the boundaries of legitimate knowledge, while the kiai’s interpretive role positions him as the mediator between text and meaning. This reflects the concept of textual authority in Islamic scholarship, where knowledge is validated through engagement with canonical sources (Sani & Majeed, 2025). At the same time, the structured methods of bandongan

and sorogan function as procedural mechanisms that regulate how knowledge is accessed and verified. This finding supports earlier research on the role of *kitab kuning* in shaping intellectual traditions (Arif et al., 2025; Syu'aib & M. Husni, 2025), but extends it by conceptualizing these texts as an integrated epistemic system rather than isolated learning materials. Furthermore, it aligns with Foucault's notion that discourse is sustained through institutionalized practices that determine what can be said and understood. Compared to studies that emphasize digital transformations in Islamic education (Mustofa et al., 2023; Syafaq et al., 2026), this finding suggests that traditional textual infrastructures remain resilient because they provide a coherent epistemic order. The implication is that the durability of pesantren authority lies in its ability to maintain structured engagement with foundational texts while adapting interpretively to changing contexts.

The emergence of hybrid epistemology represents a critical contribution of this study, demonstrating how Islamic knowledge is constructed through the integration of religious teachings and local cultural practices. This finding challenges the dichotomy between tradition and modernity by showing that epistemological adaptation occurs through reinterpretation rather than replacement. The integration of adat and Islam reflects a contextual epistemology in which cultural practices are evaluated and reconfigured within a religious framework. This aligns with scholarship on Islam Nusantara, which emphasizes the localization of Islamic knowledge (Muhammad & Duderija, 2022; Adiyono et al., 2024), but extends it by conceptualizing this process as an epistemic mechanism rather than a cultural phenomenon. Unlike previous studies that treat local culture as an external influence (Marheni Muhammad, 2024; Mala & Hunaida, 2023), this research demonstrates that culture is internal to the epistemological process itself. From a theoretical perspective, this finding modifies existing frameworks by introducing hybrid epistemology as a lens for understanding how knowledge systems adapt without losing doctrinal coherence. The implication is that pesantren function not only as preservers of tradition but also as sites of epistemological innovation that mediate between universal principles and local realities.

The integration of cultural values into epistemic authority also reveals the importance of social and symbolic structures in shaping knowledge practices. The internalization of respect, hierarchy, and ethical conduct within the learning process indicates that authority operates through both cognitive and affective dimensions. This supports sociological theories that emphasize the role of symbolic capital in legitimizing authority (Bourdieu, 1986), while also aligning with studies on pesantren culture that highlight the significance of adab in knowledge transmission (Pahlawati et al., 2025; Sumadi et al., 2025). However, this study extends these perspectives by demonstrating that cultural norms are not merely supportive but constitutive of epistemic authority. Compared to research that focuses on formal educational structures (Suwendi et al., 2024; Huda, 2024), the findings suggest that informal cultural practices play an equally important role in sustaining authority. The implication is that epistemic legitimacy is achieved through the alignment of intellectual, cultural, and ethical dimensions, creating a holistic framework for knowledge production. This also explains why pesantren-based authority remains resilient despite external challenges, as it is deeply embedded in the social fabric of the community.

The role of alumni networks as a mechanism of epistemic dissemination highlights the dynamic and relational nature of authority beyond institutional boundaries. The continuous interaction between alumni and the kiai demonstrates that authority is not transferred once but is repeatedly reaffirmed through ongoing communication and consultation. This finding aligns with studies on Islamic scholarly networks that emphasize the importance of relational ties in knowledge transmission (Suwendi et al., 2024; Pribadi, 2025), but extends them by conceptualizing these networks as epistemic systems rather than social structures. From a Foucauldian perspective, this reflects the diffusion of power-knowledge across interconnected nodes, where authority is reproduced through dispersed yet coordinated practices. Compared to research on digital religious authority (Syafaq et al., 2026), which highlights fragmentation and decentralization, this study suggests that pesantren networks maintain coherence through shared epistemic orientations. The implication is that the sustainability of authority depends not only on institutional strength but also on the ability to maintain relational continuity across different contexts. This network-based model offers a compelling explanation for the persistence of traditional authority in an increasingly fragmented knowledge landscape.

Finally, the overall findings position the kiai as an active epistemic agent who continuously negotiates, constructs, and disseminates knowledge within a dynamic socio-cultural environment. This challenges conventional views that portray traditional scholars as passive transmitters of inherited knowledge, instead highlighting their role as innovators within established frameworks. The study contributes to the global literature on religious authority by demonstrating that epistemic legitimacy is not static but is produced through the interaction of genealogy, pedagogy, culture, and networks. This finding both supports and extends existing research on Islamic education (Ali & Halim, 2023; Huda, 2024) by providing a more integrated and theoretically grounded understanding of knowledge production. At the same time, it addresses a significant gap in the literature by applying a genealogical approach to the study of pesantren, offering new insights into the mechanisms of authority formation. The implication is that future research on Islamic knowledge systems should move beyond structural analyses to engage more deeply with epistemological processes. In this way, the concept of hybrid epistemology not only enriches theoretical discourse but also provides a practical framework for understanding how religious knowledge can remain relevant in diverse and changing contexts.

## CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the epistemic authority of KH. Mohammad Saleh Abdullah is not a fixed or purely inherited status, but a dynamic construct shaped through the interaction of genealogical legitimacy, pedagogical practice, cultural integration, and network-based dissemination. The findings reveal that authority is continuously reproduced through a structured transmission of *kitab kuning*, disciplined learning methods, and a pedagogical philosophy that emphasizes foundational understanding. At the same time, the integration of local Madurese culture with Islamic teachings forms a hybrid epistemological framework that enables the pesantren to remain both contextually relevant and theologically grounded. The alumni network further extends this authority beyond institutional boundaries, ensuring its continuity and adaptation across diverse social contexts. Theoretically, this study contributes by positioning the kiai as an active epistemic agent and by introducing hybrid epistemology as an analytical lens for understanding the interaction between religion and culture in Islamic education. Practically, the findings highlight the potential of pesantren-based knowledge systems as models for developing contextual, moderate, and sustainable Islamic scholarship. However, the study is limited to a single case, and future research is recommended to conduct comparative analyses across different regions to deepen understanding of the diversity and transformation of epistemic authority in the broader landscape of Nusantara Islamic studies.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS STATEMENT

**AMAN** took the lead in conceptualizing and designing the study, conducted the fieldwork, performed data analysis, and drafted the manuscript. **NH** contributed to the development of the theoretical framework, particularly in refining the genealogical perspective and strengthening the conceptual analysis. **ZS** assisted in data interpretation and critically reviewed the manuscript to enhance its analytical depth. **MMS** contributed to validating the research design and ensuring methodological rigor throughout the study. **MH** provided supervision, offered substantive revisions, and ensured the overall coherence and academic quality of the manuscript.

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