



KIAI CHARISMATIC LEADERSHIP AND PESANTREN TRANSFORMATION: CONCEPTUALIZATION OF MANAGED CHARISMA

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ABSTRACT

The transformation of traditional pesantren into modern Islamic educational institutions faces persistent challenges in sustaining kiai charismatic leadership across generations. This study analyzes the dynamics of kiai charismatic leadership in driving pesantren organizational transformation and develops the concept of managed charisma as a leadership regeneration model within Islamic education management. Employing a phenomenological approach with multiple case studies at four pesantren two salaf-transformative pesantren in East Java and two modern-combination pesantren in Central Java data were collected through in-depth interviews with 18 informants, three-month cumulative participatory observation (March–August 2024), and institutional document analysis. An epoché procedure was applied to ensure phenomenological objectivity. Findings reveal that kiai charisma derives from three pillars: 'ilmu (scholarly depth), 'amal (consistent practice), and karamah (spiritual distinction). The central contribution is the conceptualization of "managed charisma" a model enabling the preservation of charismatic essence through three institutional mechanisms: value codification, authority distribution, and ritualization of leadership practices. Unlike Weber's routinization of charisma which implies charismatic erosion, this model offers operational guidance for pesantren leadership succession management, with direct implications for innovative management of Islamic educational institutions.

Keywords: Charismatic Leadership; Islamic Education Management; Kiai; Managed Charisma; Organizational Transformation; Pesantren

INTRODUCTION

Pesantren as the oldest Islamic educational institution in Indonesia has experienced significant transformational dynamics throughout its history. Data from the Ministry of Religion of the Republic of Indonesia (2023) recorded that there are 36,900 Islamic boarding schools with 4.2 million students, showing the vitality of this institution in the national education landscape. From traditional Islamic boarding schools that focus on teaching the yellow book with *the sorogan* and *bandongan methods*, now various typologies have developed that adopt a modern education system without completely abandoning their classical traditions. This transformation did not occur naturally, but was driven by the leadership of the kiai who had a vision of renewal as well as a commitment to the preservation of the essential values of the pesantren. Alam (2018) emphasized that kiai plays a central role as *an educator, caregiver, society connector, leader, and manager* who determines the direction of institutional development (p. 5).



Kiai leadership has unique characteristics that are different from the leadership of organizations in general. Kharisma kiai does not only come from formal positions, but from three main pillars: *'ilmu* (the depth of religious knowledge), *'amal* (consistency of practice), and *karamah* (spiritual advantages). Karim, Purnomo, Fikriyah, and Kardiyati (2020) — in a *mixed-method* study that integrates quantitative measurements (path coefficient 0.72; $p < 0.01$) with qualitative analysis based on interviews — found that the construction of kiai charisma and community obedience is a dynamic process built through mutually supportive spiritual, scientific, and moral legitimacy (pp. 135–141). These quantitative findings are relevant in this article not as a basis for measurement, but rather as empirical confirmation that corroborates a qualitative analysis of the mechanism of kiai charisma: voluntary obedience built through layered social processes. Dhofier (2011) identified that kiai charisma is the main social capital that allows the mobilization of resources and voluntary student compliance (pp. 55–65).

However, charismatic leadership that relies on individual kiai figures presents problems in the context of sustainability. Weber (1978) identifies that charisma is personal and cannot be transferred directly to a successor (pp. 241–245). The implication is that many Islamic boarding schools have regressed after the death of the founding kiai due to the inability of the next generation to reproduce the same charisma. Steenbrink (1986) noted that this phenomenon of succession crisis is a serious challenge to the sustainability of pesantren (pp. 45–67). Van Bruinessen (2008) confirms that the problem of the transfer of charismatic authority is a crucial issue that determines the survival of Islamic boarding schools after the founding generation (pp. 225–230).

Previous studies have made an important contribution to understanding pesantren leadership. Almuzani, Handoko, and Maksudin (2021) examine the values of the Five Souls as the foundation of educational leadership that goes beyond a single figure (pp. 263–282). Karim, Bakhtiar, Sahrodi, and Chang (2022)—in a study of spiritual leadership behavior in pesantren using a three-pesantren, qualitative approach—identified that kiai leadership functions through three dimensions: *meditation*, *mediation*, and *reflection*, which collectively form an institutional value system that goes beyond the individual kiai itself (pp. 1–29). Ikhwan, Marzuki, Liswandi, and Sabila (2023) examine the leadership model of Trimurti Gontor as a concrete example of the institutionalization of post-founding collective leadership (pp. 1–12). Noor, Nasar, Novarlia, Anieg, and Zulihi (2023) emphasize that the role of the kiai in the development of modern education does not depend only on individual capacity, but on the ability to transfer leadership values into the institutional system (pp. 28–42).

Although the above studies are rich and diverse, there are three research gaps that have not been filled. *First*, there have been no studies that specifically analyze the dynamics of the transformation of charismatic leadership from a multi-case phenomenological perspective. *Second*, the problem of the sustainability of charisma after the leadership of the founding kiai has not been studied mechanistically. *Third*, the conceptualization of how charisma can be "managed" to allow leadership regeneration without losing its charismatic essence is still absent from the Islamic educational management literature.

From the perspective of Islamic education management, the above conceptual void has significant practical implications. This research contributes directly to both agendas: first, by presenting a leadership model that is rooted in Islamic tradition but can be



operationalized as a succession management instrument; second, by offering conceptual innovations in the form of "managed charisma" that fills the gap between Western leadership theories and the empirical reality of Indonesian Islamic boarding schools. Thus, the findings of this study are not only academically valuable, but also provide practical guidance for managers of Islamic educational institutions in planning for a sustainable leadership transition — a need that is increasingly urgent in the midst of the current wave of Islamic boarding school modernization.

This research departs from the framework of the charismatic authority theory of Weber (1978, pp. 241–245) and the transformational leadership theory of Bass and Riggio (2006, pp. 3–24), which are integrated with the sociology of pesantren Dhofier (2011) and Azra (2012). This research answers two main questions: (1) how the dynamics of kiai charismatic leadership in encouraging the transformation of pesantren organizations; and (2) how can such charisma be managed to enable a sustained regeneration of leadership in the context of Islamic education management?

RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design to understand the meaning of the experience of charismatic leadership from the perspective of the actors (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, pp. 181–223). Prior to data collection, the researcher applied *the epoché* procedure (bracketing) as required in the Husserlian phenomenological tradition adapted by Moustakas (1994, pp. 85–96). This procedure involves three steps: first, the researcher explicitly documents all initial assumptions, personal experiences, and theoretical knowledge of kiai charisma in a reflective journal; second, these assumptions are "bracketed" during the interview and observation process so that the phenomenon can appear as it is from the perspective of the informant; Third, reflection on potential bias is carried out after each data collection session through *peer debriefing* with research colleagues. This step is crucial considering that the researcher has a pesantren background, so the risk of confirmation of bias against familiar narratives needs to be managed methodologically.

The research was carried out in March–August 2024 in four purposively selected Islamic boarding schools. Pesantren 1 and 2 are located in East Java: P1 is a more than 280-year-old NU-affiliated salaf-transformative pesantren with 11,000 students and 13 generations of leadership, and P2 is a 115-year-old independent salaf-transformative pesantren with 40,000 students who are in the process of transitioning to the fourth generation. Pesantren 3 and 4 are located in Jakarta and Banten: P3 is an 83-year-old modern-urban pesantren with 13,500 students in central and branch Islamic boarding schools that has successfully passed two leadership successions, and P4 is a 60-year-old modern-combination pesantren with 5,800 students that has successfully passed two leadership successions. To avoid *survivorship bias* — the tendency to examine only successful pesantren — the study also included the perspective of informants who had experienced stagnation in the post-succession phase before successfully undertaking institutional recovery. The full name of the pesantren was not included for ethical reasons for the study: the caregivers allowed the study on the condition that institutional anonymity was maintained to prevent potential unwanted social impacts from academic publications.



Data was collected through three instruments. *First*, in-depth interviews with 18 informants consisting of: 4 2nd or 3rd generation successor kiai (key informants), 4 senior foundation administrators, 6 senior ustadz who have experienced leadership transitions directly, and 4 alumni who are now community leaders. *Second*, participatory observation for three cumulative months includes formal activities (management meetings, assembly sessions) and informal activities (daily recitations, daily interaction of kiai with students). *Third*, the analysis of institutional documents includes the founder's will, Islamic boarding school guidebooks, organizational structure, and hidden curriculum.

Data analysis followed Moustakas' (1994, pp. 120–154) phenomenological procedure: *horizontalization* (identification of all relevant statements from the transcript), *clustering* (grouping of themes), *textural description* (description of what was experienced), *structural description* (description of how experienced), and *composite description* (textural-structural synthesis). The validity of the data is ensured through triangulation of sources (kiai, administrators, alumni), triangulation of methods (interviews, observations, documents), *member checking* by returning transcripts to informants for confirmation, and *peer debriefing* with two independent researchers in the field of Islamic education leadership.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Sources of Kiai Charisma in the Context of Transformation

The results of the phenomenological analysis revealed that the kiai charisma that drives the transformation of the pesantren comes from three pillars that reinforce each other: '*science*', '*charity*', and '*karamah*'. Alam (2018) identifies that the authority of the kiai is based on the mastery of religious knowledge, consistent practice, and the community's recognition of its spiritual advantages (pp. 10–14). Karim et al. (2020) confirmed through a significant path coefficient (0.72; $p < 0.01$) that kiai charisma and community obedience are built through a layered process of interaction that includes spiritual, social, and institutional dimensions (pp. 135–141). This spiritual dimension is deepened by Karim, Bakhtiar, Sahrodi, and Chang (2022) who find that the behavior of kiai spiritual leadership in pesantren — which includes *meditation*, *mediation*, and *reflection* — directly forms an institutional value system that goes beyond individual leadership (p. 15).

The pillar of '*knowledge*' is manifested in the mastery of classical Islamic scientific treasures as well as openness to modern science. A senior ustadz informant (P1-U1, March 2024 interview) described: "*Abah is very deep in his fiqh knowledge, memorizing many yellow books. But he also read modern educational books, even went to Egypt to see the Al-Azhar education system and adopted some of its elements.*" The pillar of '*amal*' is the most consistent source of charisma called by informants across Islamic boarding schools. Noor et al. (2023) emphasized that moral exemplary and solemnity of kiai worship are key factors in the formation of leadership authority that goes beyond managerial competence (pp. 33–38). The pillar of '*karamah*' — which in the findings of this study is not always mystical, but is also manifested in "sharpness of vision" and the ability to read situations — is confirmed by Dhofier (2011) as an advantage given by God to His guardians and a source of leadership legitimacy (pp. 60–65).



The Mechanism of Charismatic Leadership in Driving Transformation

The cross-case analysis identified three key mechanisms of kiai charismatic leadership in driving transformation. Weber (1978) stated that charismatic authority is revolutionary because it is able to break down established orders (pp. 246–254). These findings confirm the revolutionary character with an important nuance: the revolution carried out by the kiai is a "revolution from within" that maintains continuity with tradition.

The first mechanism is *the articulation of a transformative vision framed in a religious narrative*. Yasin (2019) shows that K.H. Imam Zarkasyi frames the modernization of education as an implementation of *wasathiyatul Islam* — a middle ground between stagnant traditionalism and modernism that has lost its roots (pp. 80–88). Informant P3-K1 (interview April 2024) described the moment when the kiai introduced the general curriculum: *"He conveyed to the ustadz: this is not changing the pesantren, this is continuing the ideals of the ulama so that the students can bear the burden of the ummah in a changing era."* The second mechanism is *the mobilization of voluntary obedience through a sacred teacher-student relationship*. Almuzani et al. (2021) emphasized that the values of manners in the teacher-student relationship create a foundation of obedience that goes beyond rational calculations (pp. 270–275). The third mechanism is *the legitimacy of change through ijihad and sharia argumentation*: every institutional innovation is accompanied by an explanation of its abilities or necessity from a sharia perspective, so that change is perceived as a religious obligation, not just a pragmatic modernization.

Strategies for Preserving Essential Values in the Midst of Transformation

The four Islamic boarding schools studied showed a strong commitment to identity preservation in the midst of modernization. Hardoyo (2009) identified that the transfer of pesantren values occurred through intensive socialization in a 24-hour boarding environment (pp. 180–185).

Three conservation strategies were identified consistently across cases. *First*, the differentiation between the "fixed" and the "changing": the kiai deliberately identifies the core values that must not change (faith, worship, morals, classical scientific traditions) with practices that can be adapted (curriculum, technology, organizational management). Fadhillah (2015) found that in Pondok Modern Gontor, a modern management system was adopted without sacrificing the values of the Five Souls which are the DNA of the institution (pp. 140–145). *Second*, the intensification of rituals and symbols of identity: the tradition of congregational wirid, the reading of the yellow book, and the pilgrimage to the founder's tomb intensified as an anchor of identity in the midst of the turmoil of change—a form of ritualization that will be discussed in more depth in the next section. *Third*, the narrative of continuity in the communication of change: each innovation is consistently communicated as a continuation of—not a rejection—of the founder's vision.

Conceptualization of Managed Charisma

The most significant finding of this study is the identification and conceptualization of a phenomenon referred to as *"managed charisma"*. In contrast to *Weber's (1978, pp. 1111–1157) routinization of charisma which implicated the decay of the charismatic dimension, this model allows for the preservation of the charismatic essence within an institutional framework through three complementary mechanisms.*



Table 1.
Managed Charisma Model: Mechanisms, Descriptions, and Field Empirical Evidence

Mechanism	Description	Manifestations	Field Evidence (Informant Quote)
1. Codification of Values	Document the values and vision of the founder's kiai into a formal system, curriculum, and written code that applies across generations	Founder's written will, student guidebook, pesantren motto and philosophy, documented hidden curriculum	<i>"Everything that Abah taught us as long as we have written it in the new student guidebook. Whoever is the kiai who leads after that must read and live the book first."</i> (P3-U2 informant, senior administrator, April 2024 interview)
2. Distribution of Authority	Distribute leadership to a collective structure so that it does not depend on a single figure; Authority is divided by functional field	Collective caregiver council, supervisory assembly, division of fields: curriculum, finance, student affairs, public relations	<i>"We always deliberate on big decisions in the caregiver assembly. No one can decide for themselves."</i> (P1-K1 informant, 2nd generation successor kiai, March 2024 interview)
3. Ritualization of Practice	Making the leadership patterns and rituals of the founding kiai a tradition that is practiced repeatedly by successors, creating a charismatic collective memory	Style of leading meetings, traditions of weekly advice, rituals of pilgrimage to the tomb of the founder, typical communication patterns inherited	<i>"The way Abah [successor] reprimands students who violate is exactly the same as the way Mbah [the founder] used to be. We realize that this is not a coincidence, this was indeed taught specifically by Mbah before he died."</i> (P2-A1 informant, third-generation alumni, March 2024 interview)

Source: Results of field data analysis, 2024

Theoretical Discussion: The Position of Managed Charisma in Literature -REVISION S4

To emphasize the conceptual contribution of this article, it is necessary to make a systematic comparison between managed charisma and related concepts in the Islamic educational leadership and management literature.



Table 2.
Conceptual Comparison: Managed Charisma with Related Approaches

Comparison Dimensions	Managed Charisma (MI Kurniawan, 2026)	Routinization Weber (1978)	Transformational Leadership Bass & Riggio (2006)	Spiritual Leadership Karim et al. (2022)
The fate of the charismatic element	Maintained through active institutionalization	Decayed, replaced by traditional/rational authority	Not discussed — focus on interpersonal competencies	Defended through spiritual values
Main focus	Mechanism of transfer of charisma across generations of leadership	The process of bureaucratization and normalization of the authority of the post-charismatic leader	Leader's behavior in motivating and transforming followers	Spiritual behavior of leaders and Islamic-based values
Institutional context	Specific: Islamic boarding schools / Islamic educational institutions based on personal charisma	Universal: religious organizations, social movements, political organizations	Universal: business and educational organizations	Specific: Islamic educational institutions (pesantren, madrasah)
Main mechanisms	3 mechanisms: codification of values, distribution of authority, ritualization of practice	Bureaucratization, proclamation, establishment of written rules	4 komponen: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, individual consideration	Meditation, mediation, reflection
Relevance to succession	Very high — designed specifically for charismatic succession issues	High — explains what's going on, but doesn't provide normative guidance	Medium — provides behavioral guidance but not a mechanism for the transfer of value between generations	High for value formation, medium for succession



Gaps addressed	Filling the gap between the Western universal approach and the specific context of charisma-based Islamic leadership	Not designed for succession contexts that maintain charisma	Not discussing the transfer of charismatic values across generations	Doesn't explicitly discuss the mechanism of charismatic succession
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Source: Comparative analysis based on Weber (1978), Bass & Riggio (2006), Karim et al. (2022)

Table 2 emphasizes that managed charisma fills a conceptual gap that is not addressed by the three related approaches. Weber (1978) describes *what happens* when charisma is bureaucratized (pp. 1111–1157), but does not provide normative guidance on *how* charisma can be maintained. Bass and Riggio (2006) provide a rich guide to transformational leadership behavior, but do not discuss the mechanisms of charismatic value transfer between leaders (pp. 3–24). Karim et al. (2022) build an understanding of the relevant kiai spiritual leadership behavior, but the focus is on the *behavior of the incumbent leader*, not the mechanism of transmitting leadership values to successors. Thus, managed charisma offers a genuine perspective: a model based on the Islamic context, sourced from empirical data from Islamic boarding schools, and specifically designed to address the challenge of charismatic succession. Ikhwan et al. (2023) have identified the Trimurti Gontor model as a practical manifestation of post-independence collective leadership (pp. 6–10), and this article provides a mechanistic conceptualization that explains *why* Gontor-like models are successful: because it unconsciously implements all three mechanisms of managed charisma.

CONCLUSION

This phenomenological research with a case study analyzes the dynamics of kiai charismatic leadership in four Islamic boarding schools in East Java, Jakarta and Banten and produces a conceptualization of "*managed charisma*" as a contribution to Islamic education management. The kiai charisma that encourages transformation comes from three pillars that strengthen each other: '*ilmu*', '*amal*', and '*karamah*'. The three work through the mechanism of articulating vision in religious narratives, mobilizing voluntary obedience, and legitimizing change through *ijtihad*.

A major contribution of this research is a managed charisma model consisting of three institutionalization mechanisms—codification of values, distribution of authority, and ritualization of practice—that collectively allow for the preservation of charismatic essence without relying on individual figures. Systematic comparisons show that this model fills a void that was not addressed by *Weber's routinization*, Bass and Riggio's transformational leadership, nor the spiritual leadership of Karim et al. This conceptual innovation has direct implications for the management of Islamic education: it provides operational guidance rooted in the tradition of Islamic boarding schools, yet can be articulated within a modern management framework relevant to various Islamic educational institutions typology.



For further research, it is suggested: (1) a comparative study of successful versus failed pesantren in leadership succession to validate the model; (2) the development of quantitative instruments to measure the level of charisma management in various types of Islamic boarding schools; and (3) the expansion of research to Islamic boarding schools outside Java, including Kalimantan, Sulawesi, and Sumatra to test the universality of the model. For practitioners of management of Islamic educational institutions, this study recommends: systematic documentation of the values of the charismatic leader while he or she is still active, the development of a collective leadership structure in anticipation of succession, the implementation of a regeneration program that builds dual legitimacy (Islamic science and modern managerial competence), and the maintenance of rituals and symbols of institutional identity as a mechanism for transmission of charisma between generations.

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