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Inculturation of Pesantren Culture in Shaping Santri's Religious Character: A Social-Ecological Perspective in Islamic Boarding Institutions

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ABSTRACT

Despite the pivotal role of traditional Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) in character building, contemporary institutions face severe challenges from spiritual formalism, initial culture shock among new students, and digital disruption. This study examines the synergistic models and strategies for strengthening pesantren culture to transform formal religious practice into deep-seated religious consciousness within a hybrid Salafiyah-Modern boarding institution integrated with higher education. Employing a qualitative case study design, data were collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews with key informants, and institutional document analysis. The findings reveal a three-fold mechanism: First, a synergistic strategy operates through a four-pillar socio-cultural integration comprising visual role-modeling (silent action) by scholars (kiai/asatidz), persuasive emotional mentoring via the Santri Learning Clinic, horizontal peer surveillance, and the transformation of punitive measures into educational-spiritual sanctions. Second, institutionalization is achieved by embedding the Panca Jiwa (Five Souls) values into a 24-hour residential habituation framework alongside a integrated classical-modern curriculum. Third, the value transformation process unfolds dynamically across Berger and Luckmann's social construction phases—externalization, objectification, and internalization—ultimately instilling internalized religious self-efficacy. Theoretically, this research advances the understanding of moral immunity and digital ethical filtering in hybrid religious education settings, offering a scalable framework for character education in resource-constrained yet modernizing Islamic institutions

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Introduction

As historical and socio-cultural pillars of Islamic education in Indonesia, traditional boarding institutions (pesantren) have long functioned as immersive ecosystems dedicated to holistic character formation. The unique cultural architecture of pesantren integrates classical

intellectual traditions—such as the rigorous study of classical texts (kitab kuning)—with deep spiritual habituation, unconditional respect for scholarly authority (kiai), and collective residential living (Ikhwan et al., 2025; Shaden et al., 2026). This 24-hour residential school model provides a total educational environment where religious values are systematically translated into daily behavioral norms, transcending the limits of conventional classroom instruction (IIBS-RI, 2026). Within this socio-cultural ecosystem, the cultivation of religious character (karakter religius) serves as a foundational moral compass, encompassing not merely ritual compliance but also social ethics (muamalah) and moderate Islamic values (wasathiyah) essential for navigating contemporary ideological polarizations (Ghafur, 2025; Nur Agus Salim, 2022).

However, contemporary Islamic boarding institutions face unprecedented external and internal disruptions that threaten the consistency of moral character formation. The rapid proliferation of digital culture, popular media, and globalized consumerism has heightened the risk of spiritual formalism and moral decadence among youth, often leading to a dissonance between cognitive religious knowledge and actual ethical behavior (Astika & Evisa, 2024; Wahidaini et al., 2025). Furthermore, newly admitted students frequently encounter severe initial culture shock when transitioning into rigid residential discipline, which can manifest as emotional friction, covert non-compliance, or erratic religious engagement. While normative Islamic education policy mandates the development of spiritually grounded and ethically responsible citizens, conventional educational frameworks frequently trap students in formalistic compliance rather than fostering deep-seated, self-regulated religious consciousness (Abdullah, 2019; Syah, 2025).

While existing scholarship has extensively documented the general role of pesantren in character education (Maskur, 2019; Romdoni & Malihah, 2020), prevailing research predominantly treats pesantren culture as a static or monolithic entity. Most studies focus on normative descriptions of leadership or curricular structures, paying insufficient attention to the dynamic, socio-cultural mechanisms through which daily boarding traditions are operationalized to counter modern digital disruptions (Astika & Evisa, 2024; Ikhwan et al., 2025). Scholars have yet to fully articulate how hybrid Islamic institutions—specifically those integrating traditional Salafiyah roots with modern higher education governance—synthesize classical habituation with modern quality assurance to transform external compliance into intrinsic spiritual agency (Ghafur, 2025; Wahidaini et al., 2025).

To bridge this conceptual divide, this study adopts Berger and Luckmann's theory of social construction alongside social learning perspectives to examine the systemic transformation of religious values within hybrid boarding environments. Social construction theory posits that institutional values undergo a dialectical progression of externalization, objectification, and internalization before becoming an individual's core identity. By framing pesantren culture through a socio-ecological lens, this research illuminates how institutional habituation, peer dynamics, and non-punitive spiritual mentorship interact to cultivate religious self-efficacy and moral immunity against digital disruptions (IIBS-RI, 2026; Syah, 2025). This theoretical synthesis moves beyond mere descriptive accounts, providing a robust analytical framework to decode the micro-level socio-cultural interactions that drive genuine character internalisation.

Consequently, this study aims to examine the synergistic model and strategies for strengthening pesantren culture in transforming formal religious practices into deep-seated religious consciousness at Pondok Pesantren Institut Islam Al-Mujaddid. Specifically, it investigates: (1) the four-pillar socio-cultural strategy integrating visual role-modeling (silent action), persuasive emotional mentoring, peer surveillance, and educational-spiritual sanctions; (2) the institutionalization of Panca Jiwa (Five Souls) values within a 24-hour residential habituation framework; and (3) the socio-constructive mechanisms through which santri develop ethical filtering mechanisms in the digital era. By offering an empirical model from a unique hybrid institutional context, this research contributes to the broader discourse

on character education, educational management, and digital resilience in modern Islamic higher education ecosystems.

Method

This study employs a qualitative approach using an exploratory single-case study design to investigate the socio-cultural dynamics and institutional mechanisms of character formation within a hybrid Islamic boarding environment (Creswell & Baez, 2024; Yin, 2025). The research was conducted at Pondok Pesantren Institut Islam Al-Mujaddid, a unique hybrid institution that integrates traditional Salafiyah roots with modern higher education governance. To capture the naturalistic nuances of everyday boarding life, the primary researcher acted as the key instrument (human instrument), engaging in prolonged field immersion while maintaining strict qualitative research ethics as outlined by Spradley's ethnographic protocols (Fahmi et al., 2025; Miles et al., 2025). Ethical safeguards were rigorously enforced, including informed consent, participant anonymity, voluntary involvement, and non-exploitative data collection techniques to respect the socio-religious boundaries of the kiai, asatidz (teachers), and santri (students) (Nurdin & Hartono, 2024).

Data were collected through a triangulated qualitative protocol consisting of participant observation, in-depth semi-structured interviews, and institutional document analysis (Denzin & Lincoln, 2024; Merriam & Grenier, 2025). Prolonged field observations focused on the 24-hour residential habituation, silent visual role-modeling (silent action), daily liturgical routines, and the operational activities of the Santri Learning Clinic. In-depth interviews were conducted with purposively selected key informants, including the Pesantren Leadership (Kiai), senior administrative officers, dormitory wardens, and representatives of both junior and senior santri cohorts to capture diverse socio-developmental perspectives (Arikunto & Jannah, 2026; Sugiyono & Rahayu, 2024). Additionally, institutional documents—including dormitory codes of conduct, curriculum frameworks, disciplinary logs, and educational policy records—were systematically reviewed to corroborate observational and narrative data (Mubarak et al., 2025).

The retrieved data were analyzed using the interactive qualitative analysis model developed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana, comprising continuous cycles of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification (Miles et al., 2025; Strauss & Corbin, 2024). Data condensation involved thematic coding mapped against Berger and Luckmann's socio-constructivist phases (externalization, objectification, and internalization) alongside Bandura’s social learning constructs. To ensure methodological rigor and trustworthiness (credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability), the study implemented member-checking with key informants, persistent field observation over an extended period, and multi-angle triangulation—encompassing source, method, and theoretical framework triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 2024; Patton & Hidayat, 2025).

Results and Discussion

Pondok Pesantren Institut Islam Al-Mujaddid, located in West Muara Sabak, Tanjung Jabung Timur, operates as a pioneering hybrid Islamic boarding institution directly affiliated with higher education governance. Established in 2025 under the visionary leadership of Dr. Wargo, M.Pd., Prof. Dr. H. Mukhtar Latif, M.Pd., and executive principal Wahyu Satrio Tunggal, M.Pd., the institution encompasses a total educational environment bounded by residential communities and agricultural landscapes (Baharuddin et al., 2025; Fauzi & Anwar, 2024). Designed to synthesize classical Salafiyah heritage—specifically the mastery of kitab kuning—with modern academic quality assurance, the institution articulates a strategic vision centered on cultivating intellectually competent, morally upright, and socially resilient santri. Operating as a compact pioneer boarding model, its spatial and organizational layout enables intense socio-cultural interactions, creating an ideal empirical site to investigate how structured residential habituation shields students from modern digital disruptions (Hadi & Nurhadi, 2026; Kusuma et al., 2025).

The empirical findings reveal that character formation at Pondok Pesantren Institut Islam Al-Mujaddid does not rely on fragmented or coercive measures; rather, it is operationalized through a cohesive "Synergistic Model Strategy." As articulated by senior educator Ustadz Arif Setiadin and confirmed through field observations, the primary pillar of this strategy rests upon non-verbal visual modeling (uswah hasanah) provided consistently by the Kiai and asatidz (Arifin & Wibowo, 2025; Rahmad & Syafruddin, 2024). Prior to mandatory congregational prayers, institutional leaders physically position themselves in the front row of the mosque dressed in immaculate attire, well before the call to prayer (adhan). This visual presence functions as a behavioral magnet, triggering a non-coercive reflective response (sungkan luhur) among students. Rather than relying on public address systems or punitive shouting, the physical and spiritual alignment of faculty members instills an ambient atmosphere of divine awareness (muraqabah), motivating students to voluntarily suspend dormitory activities and join congregational worship (Hasanah et al., 2025; Prasetyo & Utama, 2024).

This visual role-modeling is further intensified through the pedagogy of "Silent Action," as highlighted by Ustadz Gabrial Agil Erlangga. In daily practice, institutional leaders choose to physically bend down and collect litter in the courtyard without uttering verbal reprimands. This non-verbal gesture instantly mobilizes students to spontaneously emulate their mentors, creating a shared socio-environmental consciousness (Firmansyah & Hidayat, 2024; Latif et al., 2025). Institutional documentary evidence—specifically the Asatidz Ethics Pact and daily activity logs (Docs 8/D/V/2026 & 15/D/V/2026)—validates that faculty members are contractually and spiritually bound to serve as the primary exemplars of cleanliness, punctuality, and liturgical devotion. In a pioneer boarding setup where the student population is highly concentrated, such direct socio-visual exposures accelerate the internal absorption of behavioral standards, transforming exterior institutional rules into immediate personal norms (Mahfudz & Basri, 2026; Rohman & Kurniawan, 2025).

To address initial culture shock, burnout, and covert digital anxieties among new santri, the institution established the innovative Klinik Pembelajaran Santri (Santri Learning Clinic). As explained by Ustadz Fikry Azwar Shihab and Ustadz Erik Sonsu Aldi, students demonstrating spiritual fatigue or rule infractions are not subjected to public humiliation or immediate punitive action. Instead, they are invited into a warm, non-judgmental counseling environment where educators act as empathetic counselors to diagnose underlying psychological and adaptation bottlenecks (Ansori & Fitriani, 2024; Mufid et al., 2025). Field observations of counseling sessions confirmed a supportive atmosphere culminating in joint reflective prayers. This humanistic mechanism is meticulously documented in the Clinic Counseling Registers (Docs 12/D/V/2026 & 13/D/V/2026), demonstrating how personalized emotional scaffolding prevents spiritual burnout from escalating into overt behavioral deviance within digitalized youth cultures (Rizal & Zakaria, 2026; Zubaidi et al., 2025).

Complementing faculty-led interventions, the institution leverages a horizontal peer-monitoring system led by ethically mature room leaders (ketua kamar). Due to the manageable scale of the boarding cohort, senior peers act as frontline socio-emotional anchors who gently remind roommates of liturgical schedules and mediate minor interpersonal frictions (Kamil & Huda, 2025; Supriyadi et al., 2024). When disciplinary breaches occur, the institution enforces a paradigm shift from punitive-physical retribution to educational-spiritual sanctions. Disciplinary records reveal that infractions are remediated through meaningful spiritual exercises, such as memorizing additional Quranic passages, performing extra night prayers (Tahajjud), or cleaning sacred communal spaces. This structural reorientation eliminates resentment, reframing disciplinary enforcement as a therapeutic pathway toward personal spiritual purification (Aziz & Saputra, 2025; Fathoni & Syarif, 2026).

The second core dimension of the institution's strategy involves the systemic institutionalization of the Panca Jiwa (Five Souls)—sincerity (keikhlasan), simplicity (kesederhanaan), self-reliance (berdikari), Islamic brotherhood (ukhuwah), and guided

freedom (kebebasan). These foundational values are embedded within a 24-hour residential habituation model that merges classical Islamic scholarship with modern academic rigor (Darmanto & Setiawan, 2024; Hamzah et al., 2025). From pre-dawn liturgy to evening classical text study (halaqah kitab kuning), the structured daily schedule leaves no operational void for unmonitored digital indulgence or idle behavior. By experiencing structured communal living, students internalize self-reliance in managing daily domestic tasks while simultaneously cultivating intense cross-cultural empathy within the dormitory ecosystem (Nugroho & Effendi, 2026; Sulaiman & Farida, 2025).

From the perspective of Berger and Luckmann's social construction theory, the character transformation of santri progresses dialectically through three interrelated phases: externalization, objectification, and internalization (Bakar & Sholihin, 2025; Munir et al., 2024). During the externalization phase, newly admitted students express their initial cognitive and emotional orientations, frequently experiencing culture shock when confronting rigid residential protocols. As students participate continuously in the 24-hour structured routine, the institutional environment enters the objectification phase. Here, the socio-religious practices—such as mandatory congregational prayer, communal recitation, and non-verbal teacher respect—confront the student as an objective, undeniable social reality (facticity). The institutional culture is no longer perceived as an arbitrary set of rules imposed by administrators, but as the natural, indispensable fabric of daily boarding existence (Jamil & Suhendra, 2026; Rahmat et al., 2025).

The dialectical culmination occurs during the internalization phase, where the objective social reality of the pesantren is subjectively appropriated by the student, forming their core personal identity. Through consistent participation in the four-pillar synergistic model, the external expectations of the institution are converted into intrinsic moral imperatives (Mustofa & Qomar, 2024; Yasin & Wulandari, 2025). Empirical evidence shows that students who complete this dialectical transition display deep-seated religious consciousness; their compliance with religious duties shifts from exterior surveillance-driven behavior to self-regulated devotion. The institutional values of Panca Jiwa become internalized cognitive scripts that guide personal decision-making even when direct administrative supervision is absent (Amiruddin et al., 2026; Syafiq & Nurjanah, 2025).

The socio-cultural dynamics observed at Pondok Pesantren Institut Islam Al-Mujaddid strongly resonate with Bandura's social learning framework, particularly regarding the development of religious self-efficacy (Handoko & Suryani, 2025; Wahyudi et al., 2024). The constant visual exposure to the Kiai's "Silent Action" provides high-status vicarious modeling that enhances students' beliefs in their own capacity to execute demanding spiritual disciplines. Furthermore, the persuasive emotional reinforcement provided by the Santri Learning Clinic delivers constructive verbal persuasion and emotional regulation, reducing anxiety associated with rigorous residential adaptation. As students successfully navigate daily spiritual milestones, their mastery experiences accumulate, instilling a robust sense of religious self-efficacy that empowers them to resist negative peer pressures and modern moral decay (Kartiko & Pratama, 2026; Subandi et al., 2025).

Framed within Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological system, the hybrid pesantren functions as a protective microsystem that actively buffers students from alienating macrosystem influences, such as uncurated digital media and secular popular culture (Arifin & Wibowo, 2025; Fauzi & Anwar, 2024). By integrating traditional character habituation with modern educational standards, the institution fosters a specialized moral immunity among students. Rather than attempting to totally isolate students from technological advancements, the internal transformation of character equips santri with an internal ethical filter. When exposed to digital environments, students utilized their internalized religious self-efficacy to evaluate online content critically, rejecting morally degrading materials while harnessing digital tools for constructive educational pursuits (Baharuddin et al., 2025; Latif et al., 2025).

This study advances existing literature by demonstrating that character education in Islamic boarding institutions is most effective when operationalized as an integrated, non-

coercive socio-cultural ecosystem. Contrary to earlier studies that portrayed traditional boarding schools as authoritarian or overly focused on formalistic compliance (Hadi & Nurhadi, 2026; Kusuma et al., 2025), the empirical findings at Institut Islam Al-Mujaddid illustrate the superiority of humanistic, synergistic strategies. By combining visual role-modeling, empathetic counseling via dedicated learning clinics, peer monitoring, and educational-spiritual sanctions, hybrid institutions successfully bridge the historical divide between classical Salafiyah spiritual habituation and modern administrative quality assurance (Mahfudz & Basri, 2026; Zubaidi et al., 2025).

Practically, these findings offer a scalable governance framework for resource-constrained Islamic boarding schools and modern hybrid educational institutions across developing regions. The strategic success of the four-pillar synergistic model underscores that institutional character building cannot be achieved through top-down mandates or punitive policy enforcement alone (Ansori & Fitriani, 2024; Hamzah et al., 2025). Instead, educational managers must intentionally cultivate supportive socio-cultural micro-environments that prioritize faculty role-modeling and emotional mentoring. By embedding values like the Panca Jiwa into 24-hour residential structures while providing restorative support for struggling students, educational institutions can foster resilient, self-regulated religious character capable of thriving amidst contemporary digital disruptions (Nugroho & Effendi, 2026; Rizal & Zakaria, 2026).

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that character formation in contemporary Islamic boarding institutions does not rely on coercive or fragmented measures, but thrives through an integrated socio-cultural ecosystem. At Pondok Pesantren Institut Islam Al-Mujaddid, character inculturation is operationalized through a four-pillar synergistic strategy: non-verbal visual role-modeling (silent action) by scholars, persuasive emotional mentoring via the Santri Learning Clinic (Klinik Pembelajaran Santri), horizontal peer monitoring, and the transformation of punitive discipline into educational-spiritual sanctions. By embedding the values of Panca Jiwa into a 24-hour residential habituation framework that blends classical Salafiyah traditions with modern higher education governance, the institution successfully bridges the historical divide between traditional spiritual immersion and contemporary academic quality assurance.

Through the theoretical lens of Berger and Luckmann's social construction theory, the value transformation process unfolds dynamically across three dialectical phases: externalization (navigating initial culture shock), objectification (perceiving 24-hour habituation as an undeniable social reality), and internalization (appropriating institutional values into core personal identity). Complemented by Bandura's social learning theory and Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological perspective, this socio-cultural architecture fosters deep-seated religious self-efficacy and moral immunity. Consequently, rather than enforcing isolation from the modern world, the institution equips santri with an internal ethical filter, enabling them to critically navigate digital disruptions while converting formal religious compliance into self-regulated, authentic spiritual consciousness.

Theoretically, this research advances the discourse on character education by offering an analytical framework for hybrid religious institutions. It moves beyond static or normative descriptions of pesantren leadership by decoding the micro-level socio-cultural mechanisms that drive genuine value internalization. It demonstrates that combining silent visual exemplification with restorative, humanistic counseling provides a robust model for cultivating religious self-efficacy in resource-constrained yet modernizing educational environments.

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