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Character Education for Santri Quality and Radicalism Prevention at Miftahul Huda Al Azhar Pesantren

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Abstract

This article examines character education as a strategy for strengthening santri quality and preventing radical religious tendencies at Pondok Pesantren Miftahul Huda Al Azhar Citangkolo, Banjar City. Using a qualitative case-study design, data were gathered from kiai, teachers, pesantren administrators, santri, alumni, observations of daily routines, and institutional documents. Data were analyzed through reduction, display, and conclusion drawing/verification, while credibility was supported by source and method triangulation. The findings show that santri quality is built through rule enforcement, kiai and teacher exemplarity, classical Islamic learning, Qur'anic memorization, Arabic and English development, worship habituation, and internalization of Ahlussunnah wal Jamaah values. Pedagogical practices combine advice, discussion, demonstration, sorogan, bandungan, memorization, assignments, rewards, sanctions, and alumni mentoring. These practices cultivate discipline, reverence, religious literacy, positive thinking, and moral resilience. The study contributes a pesantren-based model in which character education operates simultaneously as academic formation, moral habituation, and preventive religious moderation.

Keywords: Ahlussunnah wal Jamaah; character education; pesantren; radicalism prevention; santri quality

Introduction

Pesantren remain a strategic object of Islamic education research because they are among the oldest and most enduring educational institutions in the Indonesian archipelago. Their historical role is not limited to the transmission of religious knowledge; pesantren also cultivate morals, social responsibility, independence, discipline, and commitment to communal service (Dhofier, 1994; Qurtubi & Hudi, 2021). In many Indonesian Muslim communities, pesantren are trusted because they integrate learning, worship, communal living, and moral supervision in one educational environment. This institutional character differentiates pesantren from ordinary schooling because knowledge is learned not only through classroom instruction, but also through daily practice, interaction with kiai and teachers, obedience to rules, and the repetition of religious routines that gradually shape conduct (Lukens-Bull, 2001; Pohl, 2006; Raihani, 2012).

The contemporary relevance of pesantren is increasingly visible when Islamic educational institutions are required to respond to moral, social, and ideological challenges. Santri live in a period marked by rapid information flows, social media influence, religious contestation, and

changing youth cultures. These developments can enrich learning, but they may also expose students to rigid interpretations, intolerant narratives, weak discipline, and fragmented moral orientation. For this reason, pesantren-based character education should be understood as a sustainable governance strategy rather than a temporary reaction to crisis. It is a system of values, rules, pedagogy, supervision, and institutional culture that guides santri toward balanced religious understanding and responsible social conduct. Educational prevention is particularly effective when it develops critical literacy, civic reasoning, and resilience to extremist narratives (Davies, 2009; Ghosh et al., 2017).

Pondok Pesantren Miftahul Huda Al Azhar Citangkolo in Banjar City provides an important case for examining these issues. The pesantren is known for classical Islamic learning, Qur'anic memorization, Arabic language development, and the cultivation of Ahlussunnah wal Jamaah (Aswaja) values. Its educational environment is organized around the authority of kiai, the involvement of teachers, the assistance of senior santri, and a disciplined daily schedule that combines formal schooling with pesantren learning. This combination indicates that santri quality is not defined only by academic achievement; it also includes religious depth, moral refinement, linguistic competence, social discipline, respect for teachers and parents, and readiness to serve the community.

The concept of character education used in this article follows Lickona's (1991, 2004) integration of moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action. In pesantren life, these dimensions appear when santri learn religious values, develop emotional attachment to moral norms, and practice those norms through worship, study, language, manners, and service. Religious moderation in this context refers to a balanced religious orientation expressed through tolerance, justice, moderation, and proportionality. Aswaja values are used as a normative framework that links textual learning, scholarly authority, communal ethics, and love of the homeland. Radicalism prevention, therefore, is treated as an educational process that strengthens moral and intellectual resilience rather than as a narrow security measure. This integration is consistent with scholarship linking moral formation, citizenship, and Islamic value education (Althof & Berkowitz, 2006; Halstead, 2007).

The research problem emerges from the pesantren's need to manage student discipline and prevent ideological deviation without losing its traditional educational identity. Field evidence identified daily discipline issues such as truancy, weak learning motivation, harsh language, smoking, appearance-related violations, and irregular participation in pesantren routines. These problems are not equated with radicalism. They are understood as indicators of incomplete character formation that may weaken learning discipline, respect for authority, and openness to corrective guidance. When such issues are left unmanaged, santri may become more vulnerable to irresponsible influences, including simplified religious claims that bypass scholarly tradition.

Previous studies have discussed pesantren quality from different angles. Fathurrochman (2017) emphasizes curriculum management as a means of improving pesantren quality. Asy'ari et al. (2020) show that the integration of general education and classical Islamic education can strengthen santri competence. Sadiah (2022) demonstrates that pesantren education may prevent radicalism through intellectual, skill-based, and character dimensions. Recent studies on religious moderation also show that pesantren and Islamic educational institutions can transmit moderate values through curriculum, leadership, and religious activities (Hafidz, 2021; Nasir & Rijal, 2021; Rahman, 2022). Related studies also highlight multicultural education, orthodox Islamic character formation, child-friendly governance, and spiritual foundations for multicultural awareness in pesantren (Marzuki et al., 2020; Muafiah et al., 2022; Mujahid, 2021; Mashuri et al., 2024).

These studies are useful, but they have not sufficiently explained how character education operates as an integrated daily system that links governance, pedagogy, discipline, classical learning, worship habituation, and alumni networks. The contribution of this article lies in showing how santri quality and radicalism prevention are formed through the same educational ecosystem. The article therefore moves beyond a general discussion of pesantren quality by analyzing goals, methods, evidence, and behavioral impacts within one case-study setting. A whole-institution approach is therefore important because policy, leadership, curriculum, routine, and community relations jointly shape tolerance and character (Raihani, 2011).

Based on this background, the study addresses three research questions. First, what goals are pursued by kiai and teachers in forming santri quality? Second, what methods are used by kiai and teachers to form santri quality in pesantren life? Third, what behavioral impacts emerge from character education as a preventive mechanism against radical tendencies? These questions guide the discussion of pesantren governance, learning practices, moral habituation, and moderate religious orientation as interrelated elements of santri formation.

Method

Research design and site

This study employed a qualitative case-study design with a descriptive-interpretive approach. The case was Pondok Pesantren Miftahul Huda Al Azhar Citangkolo, Banjar City, selected because the institution combines formal schooling, classical Islamic learning, tahfidz, language development, disciplined boarding life, and Aswaja-based religious habituation. The case-study design was appropriate because the research examined character formation as a process embedded in a specific institutional culture rather than as a detachable program.

Participants and sampling

Participants were selected purposively and through snowball sampling. Informants were drawn from five categories: the kiai or pesantren leader, teachers involved in kitab, tahfidz, language, and diniyah learning, pesantren administrators responsible for rules and daily programs, santri who experienced the routines directly, and alumni who could explain the continuing impact of pesantren values after graduation. The inclusion criterion was direct knowledge of character-formation practices, either as planner, implementer, participant, or graduate. Sampling was continued until the main categories of data became repetitive and no substantially new themes emerged.

Data collection

Data were collected through non-participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. Observation focused on congregational prayer, classical text learning, sorogan, bandungan, tahfidz activities, language routines, disciplinary practices, and daily interaction between santri, teachers, and senior students. Interviews explored the goals of character education, methods used by kiai and teachers, perceived behavioral changes, and the pesantren's approach to radicalism prevention. Documents analyzed included institutional profiles, vision and mission statements, rules, daily schedules, curriculum or program records, and alumni-related information.

Data analysis

Data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014), consisting of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. Interview notes, observation notes, and documents were read repeatedly to identify patterns related to santri quality, character-education methods, Aswaja values, discipline, and preventive mechanisms. The findings were then organized into thematic categories: pesantren governance and character formation, and moderate religious habituation and radicalism prevention.

Trustworthiness and ethics

Credibility was strengthened through source triangulation, method triangulation, and iterative comparison between field evidence and institutional documents. Interpretations were checked against the pesantren's socio-religious context so that routine discipline problems were not overgeneralized as radicalism. Ethical consideration was maintained by explaining the academic purpose of the study, obtaining participant willingness to share information, protecting sensitive personal information, and presenting findings at the institutional level rather than exposing individual students.

RESULTS

Pesantren Governance and Character Formation for Santri Quality

Pondok Pesantren Miftahul Huda Al Azhar Citangkolo has an institutional history that shapes its educational identity. Field and document data indicate that the return of K.H. Munawir from Egypt became an important milestone in the development of the pesantren. On 10 Muharram 1987, the name of the pesantren was changed to Pondok Pesantren Miftahul Huda Al Azhar Citangkolo. The addition of the name Al Azhar symbolized appreciation for the scholarly tradition associated with Al Azhar University in Egypt. This history shows that the pesantren preserves local Islamic tradition while imagining itself as part of wider centers of Islamic scholarship.

The institutional development of the pesantren continued through formal educational units, including SMP Al Azhar, SMA Al Azhar, Madrasah Aliyah Al Azhar, Sekolah Tinggi Agama Islam Miftahul Huda Al Azhar, Madrasah Tsanawiyah, and SMK Al Azhar. This development demonstrates an integrative educational model in which classical pesantren learning is combined with formal schooling. The model supports the argument of Asy'ari et al. (2020) that santri quality is strengthened when general education and classical Islamic education are managed as complementary systems. In this case, governance becomes the structural foundation for character formation. This integrative management orientation is also consistent with pesantren quality-development research (Amirudin, 2019).

The vision of the pesantren is the realization of a community that is mu'min, muslim, and muhsin based on Ahlussunnah wal Jamaah. Its mission includes encouraging an Aswaja-based society, producing practitioners and educators who uphold tasamuh, ta'adul, tawasuth, and tawazun, and mobilizing Islamic institutions toward social and religious goodness. These institutional statements are not merely administrative texts. They function as normative guidelines that define the desired profile of santri: faithful, knowledgeable, tolerant, balanced, disciplined, and able to preserve good traditions while accepting beneficial new practices with wisdom.

The goals pursued by kiai and teachers are closely linked to this vision and mission. Field evidence shows that the pesantren emphasizes obedience to rules, worship discipline, mastery of religious sciences, language competence, Qur'anic memorization, and respect for kiai, teachers, and parents. The daily schedule requires santri to participate in congregational prayers, formal schooling, extracurricular activities, classical text learning, sorogan, diniyah learning, and the study of instruments such as nahwu and sharaf. This dense schedule limits unproductive time, habituates discipline, and makes learning a continuous part of daily life.

The obligation to perform congregational prayers is one of the core mechanisms of character formation. Worship is not treated only as personal devotion but also as communal discipline. When santri attend prayers together, they learn punctuality, bodily discipline, collective responsibility, and obedience to religious norms. In character-education terms, prayer habituation connects moral knowing with moral feeling and moral action. Santri learn the value of worship, develop attachment

to the practice, and act through repeated participation.

The pesantren also requires santri to engage intensively with classical Islamic texts. The study of Ta'lim al-Muta'allim is particularly important because it teaches ethics of learning, respect for teachers, sincerity, patience, and discipline in seeking knowledge. Field data show that kiai and teachers use this text to encourage santri to consume halal food, love knowledge, carry books and pens, read regularly, reduce excessive eating and sleeping, practice spiritual discipline, obey pesantren rules, and pursue long-term learning. These teachings form a moral ecology in which intellectual achievement is inseparable from ethical conduct.

The emphasis on carrying books and pens, reading every day, and asking teachers when something is not understood shows that pesantren character education is also intellectual formation. Santri quality is not measured only by obedience, but also by curiosity, literacy, and persistence. The pesantren encourages santri to love knowledge and to treat learning as a lifelong discipline. This is relevant to the view of pesantren as a form of lifelong education (Qurtubi & Hudi, 2021). A santri who reads, asks, memorizes, and reviews lessons becomes better prepared to face academic and social challenges beyond the pesantren.

Language development is another important dimension of santri quality. The pesantren emphasizes Arabic for understanding the Qur'an, Hadith, fiqh, and classical Islamic texts, and English as part of broader intellectual readiness. Mastery of nahwu and sharaf enables santri to access religious sources more carefully, while language competence supports opportunities for higher education. Field evidence indicates that santri with strong memorization and Arabic competence are prepared to pursue scholarships and further study in domestic and Middle Eastern universities. Character formation is therefore linked to academic mobility and future orientation.

Qur'anic memorization is central to the pesantren's educational identity. Santri are encouraged to memorize at least three juz, while some reach twelve juz or even thirty juz. The memorization process trains concentration, patience, discipline, and spiritual attachment to the Qur'an. It also becomes a marker of educational quality because memorization requires consistent supervision, repetition, correction, and self-control. In the pesantren context, tahfidz is not only a cognitive activity; it is a moral practice that develops perseverance and reverence.

The pedagogical methods used by kiai and teachers include bandungan, sorogan, memorization, demonstration, discussion, advice, assignments, rewards, and sanctions. Bandungan is used when the kiai reads and explains a text while santri listen, annotate, and absorb meaning. Sorogan allows santri to read back and present their understanding more individually. Demonstration is important in tahfidz, religious practice, language, and public speaking. These methods show that pesantren pedagogy combines transmission, correction, repetition, and personal guidance.

Reward and punishment are used as governance instruments. Field data show that santri who excel may receive support, recognition, or scholarship opportunities, while those who fail to master required lessons may repeat a level. Repetition is not framed as humiliation but as a necessary process for ensuring mastery. This practice reflects a pesantren logic of quality control in which advancement is connected to competence, memorization, and readiness, not merely administrative progression. At the same time, santri are taught to accept correction with humility.

The exemplary role of kiai is decisive in this process. Kiai do not function only as managers or instructors, but as moral models whose conduct, advice, and authority influence santri behavior. Tafsir (1992) states that educators are responsible for developing cognitive, affective, and psychomotor potential. In the pesantren, this responsibility is expressed through teaching, advising, supervising, disciplining, and showing personal example. Daradjat (1993) also emphasizes that religious education contributes to personality formation, moral development, and strengthening of

faith. The educational influence of such exemplarity becomes stronger when modeled virtues are explained, practiced, and reflected upon explicitly (Sanderse, 2013).

Alumni testimonies indicate that pesantren governance extends beyond the period of study. Advice about pursuing higher education, not leaving school, participating in organizations, and maintaining pesantren traditions after graduation becomes part of alumni moral memory. Alumni work as teachers, doctors, employees, entrepreneurs, and professionals in various fields. This outcome suggests that santri quality is not confined to ritual piety. It includes readiness to contribute to society, continue learning, and carry pesantren values into broader social spaces.

From these findings, pesantren governance can be interpreted as a character-formation system. Rules, schedules, texts, worship, teachers, peer examples, rewards, sanctions, and alumni networks work together to shape santri quality. The system forms disciplined learners who respect knowledge, teachers, parents, religious authority, and community responsibility. Table 1 summarizes the relation between goals, methods, evidence, and behavioral impacts identified in the field data.

Table 1. Summary of character-education goals, methods, evidence, and impacts

Goal of character education	Methods and institutional practices	Field evidence	Behavioral impact
Discipline and obedience to rules	Daily schedule, congregational prayer, sanctions, repetition of levels	Rules, worship routines, supervision by teachers and senior santri	Punctuality, self-control, willingness to accept correction
Religious literacy and tafaquh fi al-din	Bandungan, sorogan, kitab learning, nahwu-sharaf, bahtsul masail	Classical texts, annotated learning, guided questioning	Careful reading, respect for scholarly authority, resistance to shallow claims
Spiritual attachment and perseverance	Tahfidz, worship habituation, advice, demonstration	Qur'anic memorization targets and regular correction	Patience, reverence, positive thinking, consistency
Moderate Aswaja identity	Internalization of tasamuh, ta'adul, tawasuth, tawazun, and hubbul wathan	Vision-mission documents, teacher guidance, alumni religious activities	Tolerance, balance, civic responsibility, moral resilience

Beyond formal scheduling, the pesantren demonstrates that institutional culture is a hidden curriculum. The way santri greet teachers, sit in learning spaces, prepare books, respond to correction, and participate in communal activities conveys educational messages that are not always written in curriculum documents. This hidden curriculum is powerful because it is experienced every day. It teaches santri that knowledge requires humility, freedom must be guided by responsibility, and religious learning must lead to better conduct. Values are internalized because santri live inside a community that expects those values to be practiced consistently. Such everyday value transmission also illustrates how hidden curricula can shape conduct, even when values education is not always formally articulated (Thornberg, 2008).

Moderate Religious Habituation and Radicalism Prevention

The second major finding concerns the role of moderate religious habituation in preventing radical tendencies. In this pesantren, radicalism prevention is not implemented primarily through security language, but through religious understanding, moral manners, communal discipline, and Aswaja-based identity. These practices create a learning environment that discourages isolated interpretation and excessive self-authority in religious matters, both of which may contribute to

rigid and intolerant attitudes. This educational orientation accords with studies emphasizing religious moderation as a pedagogical and institutional process rather than a stand-alone slogan (Mustakim et al., 2021; Nasir & Rijal, 2021).

The internalization of Ahlussunnah wal Jamaah values is especially important because it provides the moral language of moderation. Tasamuh means tolerance, ta'adul means justice, tawasuth means moderation, and tawazun means balance. When these values are not only introduced conceptually but also habituated through daily interaction, they become part of santri character. A santri learns to speak politely, respect differences, obey communal ethics, and avoid harsh behavior. Thus, moderation operates through doctrine and manners at the same time.

Politeness and reverence are central behavioral outcomes. Field evidence shows that santri are taught to stop and show respect when meeting parents, kiai, teachers, or senior figures. They are encouraged to use polite language in Sundanese, Indonesian, Javanese, Arabic, and English. This emphasis on language is significant because radical tendencies often appear not only in ideas but also in harsh speech, contempt for others, and rejection of social etiquette. By training santri to guard their speech and show respect, the pesantren develops habits that restrain arrogance and hostility.

The doctrine of hubbul wathan minal iman, or love of the homeland as part of faith, also plays a preventive role. It connects religious commitment with civic loyalty and social responsibility. In this framework, being religious does not require rejecting national identity, community life, or social plurality. Instead, religious commitment supports care for the nation and responsibility for social harmony. This is consistent with Azra's (2012) view that radicalism prevention requires national insight, moderate religious guidance, and social empowerment.

Classical Islamic learning contributes to radicalism prevention by giving santri access to layered scholarly reasoning. The study of fiqh, tafsir, Hadith, nahwu, sharaf, Alfiyah, Riyadus Shalihin, Tafsir Jalalain, Fathul Mu'in, and comparative madhhab materials trains santri to understand religion through disciplined scholarship. When santri learn that legal and theological conclusions require grammar, method, evidence, and scholarly tradition, they are less likely to accept simplistic or provocative religious claims.

Discussion activities such as bahtsul masail have preventive significance because they train santri to think, read, ask, and respond through argument rather than emotional reaction. The pesantren's learning culture encourages santri to ask teachers when they do not understand a text. Questioning is not treated as disobedience when it is done with proper manners. Such a culture is important because radical narratives often grow in closed circles where questioning is discouraged and complex scholarship is replaced by simplified certainty.

The pesantren also prevents radical tendencies through social control and collective supervision. Santri live together, study together, pray together, and are observed by teachers and senior students. This communal arrangement makes it easier to identify behavioral changes, discipline problems, or signs of rigid thinking. Social control in the pesantren is not only punitive; it is formative. Senior students model proper conduct, teachers provide advice, and kiai offer moral direction. The presence of many educational actors creates a layered system of care.

Discipline problems such as truancy, laziness, smoking, and harsh language are treated as character issues because they weaken the moral structure of santri life. These problems are not automatically labeled as radicalism. Rather, they are understood as early indicators that the learner needs stronger guidance, supervision, and habituation. Preventing radicalism begins with forming a disciplined self that is willing to learn, listen, obey, and reflect. In this way, ordinary discipline and ideological prevention are connected without overgeneralizing student misconduct.

The impact of character education is visible in the formation of positive thinking and *tafaqquh fi al-din*. Santri are expected to think constructively, understand religious knowledge deeply, and practice *fiqh* properly in daily worship. They also learn *nahwu* and *sharaf* so that they can read classical texts and avoid superficial understanding. This deepening of religious literacy is crucial because radicalism often depends on partial reading, emotional persuasion, and weak engagement with scholarly tradition.

The alumni network strengthens this preventive function after santri leave the institution. Alumni forums such as IKMAL in Bandung, Malang, Yogyakarta, Purwokerto, Surabaya, Madura, Jakarta, Riau, and other regions maintain *silaturahmi* through Qur'anic recitation, *manaqiban*, *istighosah*, *ratiban*, and other *pesantren* practices. These networks preserve the moral habits learned in the *pesantren* and provide social environments that continue to support moderate religious identity. Prevention therefore continues beyond the boarding period.

The alumni forum also functions as a bridge between *pesantren* and society. When alumni teach children, guide communities, lead religious activities, or maintain traditional practices, they carry *pesantren* values into public life. Kiai's pride in alumni who teach even basic religious knowledge indicates that service is a central measure of success. This expands the meaning of santri quality beyond personal achievement. A qualified santri is one who shares knowledge, maintains *akhlak al-karimah*, and contributes to religious moderation in society.

The findings show that character education produces behavioral transformation. New santri who initially may not be accustomed to reverence gradually learn from kiai, teachers, and senior students. Over time, respect becomes habitual. Santri learn to accept rules, repeat lessons when necessary, ask teachers, memorize texts, participate in worship, and use polite language. These changes show that character education is a process requiring time, repetition, example, correction, and emotional internalization.

Moderate religious habituation does not mean weakening religious commitment. On the contrary, the *pesantren* strengthens commitment through worship discipline, memorization, kitab learning, and obedience to teachers. What makes it moderate is the balance between textual seriousness and moral humility, between religious identity and civic responsibility, and between obedience to tradition and readiness to engage wider society. This balance is reflected in the principle of preserving good old traditions while developing better new traditions.

The discussion confirms that radicalism prevention in *pesantren* must be understood as an educational ecosystem. It involves curriculum, pedagogy, leadership, discipline, language, worship, peer culture, alumni networks, and institutional vision. No single element is sufficient by itself. Kiai authority without learning may become mere obedience; learning without *akhlak* may become intellectual arrogance; discipline without love may become coercion; and moderation without religious depth may become superficial. The strength of this *pesantren* lies in the integration of these elements into daily character formation.

Therefore, santri quality and radicalism prevention are not separate agendas. The same practices that produce disciplined, literate, respectful, and service-oriented santri also build resistance to radical tendencies. Character education becomes the connecting framework. It transforms rules into habits, habits into character, and character into social contribution. This is the central contribution of *pesantren* education to contemporary Islamic education in Indonesia.

The preventive value of this model lies in its educational depth. Radicalism cannot be countered only by warnings, restrictions, or institutional slogans. It must be addressed through the slow formation of religious understanding, emotional maturity, social belonging, and disciplined reasoning. The *pesantren* provides these elements through daily structure: santri are guided by

teachers, corrected by peers, shaped by worship routines, and connected to a long chain of scholarship. This combination produces moral and intellectual resilience.

Conclusion

Character education at Pondok Pesantren Miftahul Huda Al Azhar Citangkolo operates as an integrated educational system that simultaneously strengthens santri quality and prevents radical tendencies. This system combines disciplined governance, exemplary leadership, classical Islamic learning, worship habituation, language development, Qur'anic memorization, and the internalization of Ahlussunnah wal Jamaah values. These practices foster cognitive, spiritual, moral, linguistic, social, and civic competence, while also developing discipline, respect, religious literacy, openness to correction, and moral resilience. The findings indicate that radicalism prevention is most effective when embedded in daily educational practices rather than implemented as a separate program. Theoretically, the study reinforces the integration of moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action within a communal pesantren environment. Practically, pesantren should manage leadership, curriculum, habituation, peer mentoring, and alumni networks as a unified character-education ecosystem. Because this study focuses on a single pesantren, further research should examine comparable institutions and trace the long-term influence of pesantren education on alumni development.

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