The Socio-Political Role of Village *Kiai* in Nahdlatul Ulama Rural Communities: Patron–Client Relations, Symbolic Capital, and the Dynamics of Local Political Fields

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Abstract
The influence of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) in rural Indonesia is evident not only in religious practices but also in social relations, the governance of local traditions, and local political dynamics, with *kiai kampung* serving as nodes of moral authority operating beyond the state's formal institutional structures. As caretakers of small prayer houses (*mushala/langgar*) or mosques and as Qur'anic teachers, *kiai kampung* often become primary references for resolving everyday community problems and act as brokers of legitimacy when social life intersects with contests of interest at the local level. This article addresses three questions: (1) how *kiai kampung* build and maintain socio-religious legitimacy within NU-affiliated rural communities; (2) how patron–client relations and symbolic capital strengthen the influence of *kiai kampung* in addressing social problems and governing communal traditions; and (3) how the involvement of *kiai kampung* in local socio-political arenas reveals an ambivalence between reinforcing social harmony and the risk of co-optation by practical politics. The study employs a conceptual literature review with a critical-theoretical analysis of key scholarship on *kiai* authority, patron–client relations, and local political-field dynamics. The analytical framework combines charismatic authority to explain sources of informal legitimacy, patron–client theory to examine asymmetric reciprocal exchanges, and the concepts of field and capital to analyse the conversion of religious legitimacy into socio-political influence in local arenas. The argument advanced is that: (1) *kiai kampung* build and sustain socio-religious legitimacy through charismatic authority reproduced by recurrent socio-religious practices (teaching, communal rituals, and exemplary conduct), which secures their recognition as informal leaders in NU rural settings; (2) their influence in resolving social problems and governing traditions is reinforced by patron–client exchanges that trade moral protection, mediation, and network access for community loyalty and compliance, alongside the accumulation of symbolic capital convertible into social capital; and (3) their engagement in local socio-political fields is ambivalent strengthening social harmony and public ethics through legitimacy brokerage on the one hand, while risking clientelism, polarisation, and the erosion of religious authority when symbolic capital is transformed into political endorsement perceived as transactional on the other. The article recommends strengthening ethical–political literacy and moral accountability through inclusive community deliberation (*musyawarah*), clarifying boundaries between religious services and political transactions, and conducting further cross-regional ethnographic-comparative studies to map variations in *kiai kampung* typologies and the mechanisms through which symbolic capital is converted within local politics.

Keywords: Nahdlatul Ulama; *Kiai Kampung*; Patron–Client; Charismatic Authority; Symbolic Capital; Local Politics.

Abstrak

Pengaruh Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) di pedesaan Indonesia tidak hanya tampak dalam praktik keagamaan, tetapi juga dalam relasi sosial, tata kelola tradisi, dan dinamika politik lokal, dengan kiai kampung sebagai simpul otoritas moral yang bekerja di luar struktur formal negara. Kiai kampong pengampu mushala/langgar/masjid dan guru ngaji sering menjadi rujukan pemecahan masalah warga sekaligus "broker" legitimasi ketika ruang sosial bersinggungan dengan kontestasi kepentingan di tingkat lokal. Artikel ini merumuskan tiga pertanyaan: (1) bagaimana kiai kampung membangun dan memelihara legitimasi sosial-keagamaan dalam komunitas pedesaan NU; (2) bagaimana relasi patron–klien dan modal simbolik memperkuat pengaruh kiai kampung dalam penyelesaian persoalan sosial serta tata kelola tradisi; dan (3) bagaimana keterlibatan kiai kampung dalam ruang sosial-politik lokal menampilkan ambivalensi antara penguatan harmoni sosial dan risiko kooptasi politik praktis. Metode yang digunakan adalah kajian pustaka konseptual dengan analisis teoretik-kritis terhadap literatur kunci mengenai otoritas kiai, patron–klien, dan dinamika medan politik lokal. Kerangka analisis memadukan otoritas kharismatik untuk menjelaskan sumber legitimasi informal, patron–klien untuk membaca pertukaran timbal balik asimetris, serta konsep medan dan modal untuk menelaah konversi legitimasi religius menjadi pengaruh sosial-politik dalam arena lokal. Kesimpulannya, (1) kiai kampung membangun dan memelihara legitimasi sosial-keagamaan melalui otoritas kharismatik yang direproduksi oleh praktik sosial-keagamaan berulang (pengajaran, ritus komunal, keteladanan) sehingga diakui sebagai pemimpin informal di pedesaan NU. (2) pengaruh kiai kampung dalam penyelesaian persoalan sosial dan tata kelola tradisi diperkuat oleh relasi patron–klien yang menukar perlindungan moral, mediasi, dan akses jejaring dengan loyalitas serta kepatuhan warga, sekaligus oleh akumulasi modal simbolik yang dapat dikonversi menjadi modal sosial dalam komunitas. (3) keterlibatan kiai kampung dalam medan sosial-politik lokal bersifat ambivalen: di satu sisi memperkuat harmoni dan etika publik melalui fungsi broker legitimasi, tetapi di sisi lain rentan memicu klientelisme, polarisasi, dan reduksi otoritas agama ketika modal simbolik berubah menjadi dukungan politik yang dipersepsi transaksional. Rekomendasi penelitian menekankan perlunya penguatan literasi politik-etika dan akuntabilitas moral melalui musyawarah warga yang inklusif, penegasan batas layanan keagamaan dari transaksi politik, serta kajian lanjutan berbasis etnografi-komparatif lintas wilayah untuk memetakan variasi tipologi kiai kampung dan mekanisme konversi modal simbolik dalam politik loka

Kata kunci: Nahdlatul Ulama; Kiai Kampung; Patron–Klien; Otoritas Kharismatik; Modal Simbolik; Politik Lokal.

Introdoction

Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) is a socio-religious organisation with a strong influence on Indonesian society, particularly in rural areas. This influence is reflected not only in religious practice but also in social relations, culture, education, and even citizens' political preferences and behaviour. NU's strength rests on deeply rooted religious traditions, the authority of *ulama*, and ritual and educational institutions embedded in everyday life (Dhofier, 1982; van Bruinessen, 1998; Barton, 1997). Within NU's socio-religious ecosystem, the figure of the *kiai* occupies a central position as an informal leader who holds moral and religious authority. A *kiai* is commonly regarded as legitimate due to mastery of religious knowledge, spiritual

depth, and the capacity to offer normative guidance for communities facing social and religious challenges. This authority extends beyond formal state structures because it is grounded in communal recognition and leadership practices continuously reproduced through teaching, rituals, and social exemplarity (Dhofier, 1982; Achidsti, 1970; Weber, 1978).

Conceptually, the term *kiai* has multiple meanings, but it generally refers to a figure respected for religious knowledge and spiritual prestige. In Indonesian usage, *kiai* is also understood as an "Islamic religious teacher" or an authoritative religious reference, which often places the *kiai* within the upper tier of local social hierarchies. In contexts of social change, a *kiai* may also function as an agent of transformation through communicative roles, information provision, and normative direction in pesantren settings and surrounding communities (Pusat Bahasa, Departemen Pendidikan Nasional, 2008; Horikoshi, 1987).

A *kiai* is not only a religious instructor but also a social actor capable of directing change through intergroup communication, conflict mediation, and reinforcement of community norms. In everyday practice, *kiai* often serve as the "central reference" for problem-solving—from household matters and social tensions to negotiations between local traditions and religious norms. This capacity helps explain why *kiai* remain effective amid change: their legitimacy is built through religious knowledge, cultural intimacy, and sustained communal recognition nurtured through socio-religious service (Horikoshi, 1987; Achidsti, 2014).

However, academic discussions tend to highlight pesantren-based *kiai* or NU at the organisational/macro level, while analyses of *kiai kampung* remain relatively limited. *Kiai kampung* refers to village-based *kiai* who lead prayer houses (*mushala/langgar*) or mosques and interact intensively with local residents at a micro-rural scale. Yet at the grassroots, *kiai kampung* often function as key nodes in the intergenerational transmission of religious knowledge, guardians of communal rites (e.g., *tahlil*, *slametan*, *majelis taklim*), and principal references for solving community problems. Due to strong social proximity, *kiai kampung* frequently "fill the gap" in moral-social services when residents' issues are not adequately addressed by formal institutions (Syamsul et al., 2016; Dirdjosanjoto, 1999).

At the same time, local socio-political dynamics position *kiai kampung* at the intersection of moral leadership and contests of interest. In community forums, *kiai kampung* may shape social decisions, strengthen harmony, and stabilise relations among residents. Under certain conditions, however, religious authority can be drawn into practical politics

through symbolic endorsement, social mobilisation, or moral legitimation attached to the *kiai* figure. This condition generates ambivalence: *kiai kampung* can serve as ethical forces guiding society, but may also be vulnerable to clientelism and polarisation if political involvement is not managed prudently (Faridl, 2007; Khoiruddin, 2018).

Classical studies on pesantren traditions and *kiai* worldviews underline that *kiai* authority is built upon mastery of religious knowledge, reputations for piety, socio-religious networks, and cultural recognition that shapes communal obedience and respect. This framework explains why *kiai* remain effective as informal leaders outside state structures, especially in rural contexts where legitimacy is often rooted in tradition and exemplary figures. In accounts of social change, *kiai* are also seen as agents capable of "translating" change into local traditional frames so that transformation occurs without rupturing value continuity. This perspective is crucial for understanding *kiai kampung*, who live closely with residents, appear relatively egalitarian in daily life, yet still operate as religious elites whose influence is strengthened through moral leadership and conflict-mediation capacities (Dhofier, 1982; Weber, 1978; Horikoshi, 1987; Syamsul et al., 2016).

Literature on NU and its relationship with the state shows non-uniform dynamics: NU may be adaptive, negotiative, and strategic depending on historical-political contexts and actor configurations. This is relevant because *kiai kampung* stand at the intersection of NU's local tradition, residents' social needs, and local power structures that often require religious legitimation. In social relations, patron–client approaches highlight resource exchanges within asymmetrical yet reciprocal relationships; in the case of *kiai kampung*, these exchanges are not merely material but also symbolic such as *barakah*, moral legitimacy, social security, and network access supporting compliance and expanding socio-political influence (Fealy and Barton, 1997; Fealy, 2003; Scott, 1972; Sukamto, 1999).

Nevertheless, many studies still centre on pesantren-based *kiai* or NU at the organisational (macro) level, so *kiai kampung* may be reduced to "Qur'anic teachers" rather than analysed as symbolic leaders shaping communal decision-making, traditions, and political preferences. This gap underscores the need for research that specifically examines how *kiai kampung* authority is produced and exercised at the micro level, including how religious capital is converted into social and political capital within local political fields. Accordingly, *kiai kampung* remains a crucial topic for clarifying grassroots authority mechanisms and for analysing the ambivalence of the *kiai's* social-political roles between

strengthening social harmony and the risk of co-optation by practical politics (Bourdieu, 1990; Khoiruddin, 2018; Dirdjosanjoto, 1999).

Based on this context, the article formulates three questions: (1) how *kiai kampung* build and maintain socio-religious legitimacy within NU-affiliated rural communities; (2) how patron–client relations and symbolic capital strengthen the influence of *kiai kampung* in resolving social problems and governing traditions; and (3) how *kiai kampung* involvement in local socio-political arenas reveals an ambivalence between strengthening social harmony and the risk of co-optation by practical politics.

Research Method

This article adopts a conceptual literature review design with a critical-theoretical orientation to explain the mechanisms of *kiai kampung* authority and socio-political influence in NU-affiliated rural communities. This approach is chosen because the article's aim is not to measure the frequency of phenomena, but to develop a conceptual explanation of: (a) the production of socio-religious legitimacy; (b) patron–client relations as a mechanism of exchange and social dependency; and (c) the conversion of symbolic capital within local socio-political fields (Weber, 1978; Scott, 1972; Bourdieu, 1990).

The data consist of secondary documents including academic books, journal articles, proceedings, and relevant references on *kiai* authority, NU, religious patronage, and Indonesian local politics. The search was conducted iteratively using keywords such as *kiai kampung, kiai langgar*, NU rural, charismatic authority, patron–client, symbolic capital, and local politics, complemented by snowballing techniques to expand references specific to rural contexts and local religious leadership (Dhofier, 1982; Dirdjosanjoto, 1999; Syamsul et al., 2016).

Sources were included if they: discussed *kiai/ulama* as socio-religious authorities or agents of social change; engaged relevant theories (charisma, patron–client, field/capital, NU–state relations); and provided empirical or conceptual contexts related to Indonesian rural society or communal traditions. Sources were excluded if they were popular writings lacking academic grounding, were not relevant to *kiai kampung* and local arenas, or focused solely on NU/*kiai* at the macro level without implications for grassroots analysis (Fealy, 2003; Khoiruddin, 2018).

Analysis proceeded through three stages: concept extraction (identifying key propositions on *kiai* legitimacy, social relations, and communal rites as bases of authority);

theoretical mapping (linking propositions to charismatic authority, patron–client relations, and field/capital to explain conversion from religious legitimacy to socio-political influence); and argumentative synthesis (building an explanatory model of the ambivalence of *kiai kampung* roles between strengthening harmony and vulnerability to co-optation by practical politics) (Dhofier, 1982; Horikoshi, 1987; Weber, 1978; Scott, 1972; Bourdieu, 1991; Faridl, 2007; Hefner, 2000).

To enhance rigour, the study applies source triangulation (contrasting classical works, contemporary Indonesian studies, and social-political theory), conceptual consistency (using stable operational definitions of charisma, patron–client, and symbolic capital), and conceptual auditing by re-checking key references when interpretive emphases differ across authors. This ensures that the argument rests on coherent intertextual foundations and adequate theoretical explanatory power for understanding *kiai kampung* in NU rural contexts (Weber, 1978; Bourdieu, 1990; Syamsul et al., 2016).

Theoretical Framework

Charismatic Authority and the Informal Leadership Legitimacy of *Kiai Kampung*

Charismatic authority suggests that leadership can be accepted not primarily because of formal office, but due to communal recognition of a leader's "extraordinary" qualities. In the case of *kiai kampung*, charisma emerges from scholarly reputation, piety, and the ability to provide answers to residents' problems, enabling the *kiai* to remain influential despite operating outside state bureaucracy (Weber, 1978; Dhofier, 1982). Within pesantren-NU traditions, *kiai* legitimacy is not derived from a single source but is produced through recurring socio-religious practices: teaching, leading rituals, offering counsel, and embodying exemplary conduct. This pattern enables *kiai kampung* authority to function as symbolic leadership widely accepted because residents view them as moral references and guardians of community religious tradition (Dhofier, 1982; Horikoshi, 1987).

Charismatic authority can also be understood as a mechanism for managing social change. *Kiai kampung* often operate as translators of change into local traditional idioms, allowing transformation to occur without undermining social cohesion. In this position, charisma functions not only as personal influence but also as an institutional-informal capacity that regulates what is considered "appropriate" or "inappropriate" in the community's moral imagination (Horikoshi, 1987; Syamsul et al., 2016).

At the same time, the charismatic framework requires analytical caution: intense communal recognition can generate strong relations of obedience, making *kiai* decisions readily accepted without adequate deliberation. Therefore, charismatic authority should be read alongside local governance contexts such as community *musyawarah* forums, customary structures, and conflict dynamics to distinguish when charisma supports harmony and when it may constrain critical voice and social correction (Weber, 1978; Dhofier, 1982).

Patron–Client Relations and Capital Conversion within NU Socio-Political Fields

Patron–client theory highlights asymmetrical yet reciprocal relations: patrons provide protection or benefits, while clients repay with support and loyalty. In the context of *kiai kampung,* the "benefits" exchanged include moral guidance, conflict mediation, social legitimacy, and network access, whereas residents reciprocate through compliance, ritual participation, and social support that reinforces the *kiai*'s authority (Scott, 1972; Sukamto, 1999).

Patron–client relations in *kiai kampung* settings have a distinctive religious character because exchanges are not merely material but also symbolic, including expectations of *barakah* and perceptions of social security derived from proximity to a pious figure. In pesantren subcultures, norms of obedience such as *sami'na wa atha'na* reinforce loyalty and help explain how *kiai* influence can extend from religious life into communal decision-making (Sukamto, 1999; Dhofier, 1982).

To explain how such influence operates in socio-political arenas, the concepts of field and capital clarify how symbolic capital (religious legitimacy) can be converted into social capital (trust and networks) and, in certain contexts, into political capital (influence over collective preferences). This conversion is visible when *kiai* authority shapes communal action, mediates interest conflicts, or functions as a moral guarantor for particular agendas within village forums (Bourdieu, 1990; Bourdieu, 1991).

Finally, NU's historically negotiative posture toward power provides a contextual frame for understanding why *kiai* involvement can range from political distance to active engagement without necessarily being interpreted as a deviation from community-oriented missions. Within this frame, *kiai kampung* can be read as actors constantly weighing communal welfare within local socio-political fields, while facing the risks of co-optation and polarisation when religious patronage shifts toward transactional politics (Fealy, 2003; Fealy and Barton, 1997).

The Socio-Political Role of *Kiai Kampung*

Kiai kampung may be understood as religious figures living in village settings who lead religious activities in *mushala/langgar* or mosques and serve as Qur'anic teachers for local children and adolescents. Their position is deeply embedded in residents' everyday lives because they are socially proximate and directly engage with real community concerns family problems, traditions, and other social issues even if they do not possess large pesantren institutions as organisational bases. In practice, *kiai kampung* are typically active in socio-religious activities such as *slametan*, leading *tahlilan*, teaching in *majelis taklim*, and other communal rites, which confirms their role as local religious authorities whose influence primarily covers their surrounding community (Khoiruddin, 2018; Dirdjosanjoto, 1999).

Within village social structures, *kiai kampung* often occupy strategic positions because they are perceived as respected elders whose guidance is sought in communal decision-making forums. Such relations do not emerge randomly but reflect long-standing social orders where authoritative figures fill moral and symbolic leadership roles in local customary life. Consequently, *kiai* may also participate in customary village institutions or other communal structures, particularly when collective decisions require ethical-religious legitimation (Achidsti, 1970; Dhofier, 1982).

The *kiai kampung*'s relationship to Islamic doctrine also positions them as normative agents who can foster the internalisation of values at the community level. Through intense social interaction, *kiai* may facilitate acculturation introducing values and meanings that become shared guidelines by offering solutions to residents' problems in persuasive, reasoned, and morally authoritative ways. This explains why *kiai kampung* often gain sympathy and communal support: their presence functions as a meaning-making mechanism and a normative regulator within processes of social change (Horikoshi, 1987; Syamsul et al., 2016).

As religious elites, *kiai kampung* frequently serve as key persons in their communities. Their influence is reflected in the ability to shape residents' moral orientations, guide socio-religious practices, and provide references during uncertainty or conflict. Therefore, their socio-political role should not be reduced to that of "ritual leaders," but understood as operating at the intersection of religious authority, social leadership, and community governance needs (Khoiruddin, 2018; Dhofier, 1982).

Conceptually, there are several reasons why *kiai* figures in socio-political domains should not be underestimated. First, despite operating within informal leadership structures, *kiai* often possess recognised charisma and substantial authority. Second, *kiai kampung* transmit religious knowledge intergenerationally and exercise symbolic leadership that makes their counsel socially binding. Third, many residents perceive *kiai* as "heirs of the Prophet," capable of guiding life problems, so their authority is experienced not only socially but also spiritually (Weber, 1978; Dhofier, 1982; Achidsti, 1970).

Nevertheless, the literature also notes critical perceptions of *kiai* involvement in practical politics. In some contexts, *kiai* may be regarded as politically naïve or opportunistic, or seen as administratively unprepared when entering formal governance arenas. Without adequate political literacy and public ethics, political engagement may lead to negative outcomes—from weakened moral authority to community fragmentation and the transactionalisation of endorsements. Hence, analyses of *kiai kampung* socio-political roles must examine not only advantages but also potential risks associated with unmanaged political involvement (Khoiruddin, 2018; Faridl, 2007).

From the perspective of space and field, *kiai kampung* enact religious teachings within socio-political life through two interacting spheres: an internal sphere (values, beliefs, moral authority) and an external sphere (local socio-political dynamics). Local politics may be understood as a social field in which actors compete and negotiate; within this field, *kiai* hold symbolic capital that can influence collective decisions. Because political life is lived over long durations, *kiai* influence in this field becomes significant even when not formally institutionalised (Faridl, 2007; Bourdieu, 1990).

Furthermore, there are typologies of *kiai* responses to socio-political change. First, some *kiai* maintain distance from practical politics, focusing on *da'wah* and education, viewing politics as unstable and potentially disruptive to communal missions. Second, some *kiai* are responsive to socio-political change and willing to engage, including endorsing parties or candidates, believing such involvement can be reconciled with traditional values to protect communal welfare and interests. This typology indicates that *kiai* political involvement is not uniform, but context-dependent and shaped by ethical considerations (Faridl, 2007; Fealy, 2003).

Ultimately, *kiai kampung* contributions through religious movements, education, and socio-political community service cannot be fully measured through material calculations. Their contributions often appear as strengthened social solidarity, maintained communal

cohesion, and cultivated social harmony through normative regulation and conflict mediation. Hence, *kiai kampung* remains an important figure in the mental-spiritual development of communities and in sustaining social stability at the micro level, making continued scholarly attention to their roles analytically and practically relevant (Syamsul et al., 2016; Horikoshi, 1987).

Analysis: Charismatic Authority and the Symbolic Leadership of *Kiai Kampung*

The socio-political authority of *kiai kampung* fundamentally derives from charismatic authority legitimacy produced by communal recognition of a leader's "extraordinary" qualities rather than by formal office. In NU rural contexts, *kiai kampung* charisma is generated through scholarly reputation, piety, and the capacity to resolve residents' problems, positioning the *kiai* as both moral reference and directive figure in situations requiring normative certainty (Weber, 1978; Dhofier, 1982).

This charisma becomes sedimented into symbolic leadership through recurring socio-religious routines: teaching, leading communal rites, offering counsel, and serving as exemplary models. Sociologically, these routines cultivate communal obedience and respect, allowing *kiai kampung* to exercise moral regulation of the community not only transmitting doctrine but also reinforcing meaning structures and collective norms that sustain social order (Dhofier, 1982; Horikoshi, 1987).

Within frameworks of social change, *kiai kampung* also function as translators of change into local traditions, enabling transformation without rupturing value continuity. Their role is visible in managing communal religious practices such as *slametan*, *tahlilan*, and *majelis taklim* as arenas for value internalisation, conflict mediation, and social reconciliation. Thus, *kiai kampung* influence operates via cultural mechanisms: defining boundaries of appropriateness, strengthening cohesion, and stabilising inter-resident relations (Horikoshi, 1987; Syamsul et al., 2016).

Yet charisma also carries ambivalent implications: when communal recognition is extremely high, *kiai* decisions may be accepted without sufficient deliberation, narrowing spaces for critique and corrective feedback. Therefore, analyses of *kiai kampung* should situate charismatic authority within community governance contexts *musyawarah* forums, customary structures, and local conflict dynamics to identify when charisma supports harmony and when it risks producing symbolic domination (Weber, 1978; Dhofier, 1982; Achidsti, 1970).

Analysis: Patron–Client Relations, Symbolic Capital Conversion, and Ambivalence in Local Political Fields

If charismatic authority explains the sources of legitimacy, patron–client theory explains how *kiai kampung* influence operates in concrete social relations. As patrons, *kiai kampung* provide moral protection, mediation, and network access; residents reciprocate through loyalty, compliance, ritual participation, and social support. These relations tend to remain stable because exchanges are not only material but also symbolic such as expectations of *barakah* and perceptions of social security highly valued in NU rural culture (Scott, 1972; Sukamto, 1999).

The concepts of field and capital further clarify how *kiai kampung* convert symbolic capital (religious legitimacy) into social capital (trust and networks) and, in some contexts, into political capital (influence over collective preferences). Conversion occurs when *kiai* act as brokers—linking residents' needs to village decision-making arenas—or when their religious authority becomes a "moral guarantee" for particular agendas or candidates. At this point, influence need not be formal; it works through symbolic mechanisms that shape collective orientations (Bourdieu, 1990; Bourdieu, 1991).

However, local political fields operate according to competitive logics that can shift the meaning of religious patronage toward transactional patronage. NU's historically negotiative stance toward power helps explain why *kiai* positions range across a spectrum: some maintain distance to preserve *da'wah* integrity, while others engage to secure communal welfare or access to resources. This variation underscores that *kiai kampung* political involvement is not uniform but reflects contextual strategies shaped by opportunity structures and ethical calculations (Fealy, 2003; Fealy and Barton, 1997; Faridl, 2007).

The ambivalence becomes clear in two directions: on the one hand, *kiai kampung* can strengthen social harmony by mediating values and managing micro-level conflicts; on the other, they risk being perceived as opportunistic or triggering fragmentation when political endorsements are seen as transactional. Therefore, the analysis highlights the need for public-ethical frameworks and moral accountability so that *kiai* symbolic capital is not degraded by contestation logics, and so their socio-political roles remain aligned with cohesion-building and local democratisation (Khoiruddin, 2018; Faridl, 2007; Hefner, 2000).

Conclusion

This article concludes that the socio-religious legitimacy of *kiai kampung* in NU rural communities is built through a combination of charismatic authority and recurring socio-religious practices. Mastery of religious knowledge, reputations for piety, and the ability to offer solutions to residents' problems establish *kiai kampung* as effective informal leaders, while routines of Qur'anic teaching, leading communal rites, and exemplary conduct reinforce communal acceptance. Thus, *kiai kampung* authority is sustained not by formal office but by social recognition continuously reproduced in everyday interaction. Second, patron–client relations and symbolic capital operate as key mechanisms strengthening *kiai kampung* influence in resolving social problems and governing traditions. *Kiai kampung* function as patrons who provide moral protection, conflict mediation, normative guidance, and network access; residents reciprocate through loyalty, ritual participation, and social support. Because the exchange is often symbolic such as expectations of *barakah* and perceptions of social security religious patronage tends to remain stable and reinforces the *kiai*'s position as a broker connecting NU-traditional religious values with residents' practical needs. Third, *kiai kampung* involvement in local socio-political fields reveals an inherent ambivalence between strengthening harmony and the risk of co-optation by practical politics. On one side, *kiai kampung* can stabilise social relations, shape communal decisions, and safeguard public ethics through symbolic legitimacy. On the other side, when symbolic capital is converted into political endorsement perceived as transactional, *kiai* may face moral delegitimation, community fragmentation, and intensified clientelism. Therefore, the *kiai kampung* socio-political role is best understood as a continuous negotiation among NU traditions, communal welfare, and competitive local political logics. Accordingly, the article recommends strengthening ethical–political literacy for *kiai kampung* and communities so that socio-political engagement—if it occurs—remains within the principles of public welfare, transparency, and moral accountability, for example through inclusive *musyawarah* forums, codes of ethical endorsement, and clear separation between religious service and political transaction. This approach helps safeguard *kiai* religious authority while protecting community cohesion.

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