

Modernist Kyai in Modern Java: An Intellectual Biography of KH. Salim Achjar

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Abstract: This article examines the role of KH. Salim Achjar as the founder of the Ar-Raudlatul Ilmiyah Islamic Boarding School (Pondok YTP) in Kertosono, Nganjuk, using a biographical approach. The study focuses on exploring KH. Salim's contributions to developing a pesantren education system that integrates Islamic traditions with modernity. The methods employed include interviews with alumni and archival analysis to uncover the intellectual journey and innovations implemented in the pesantren. Talcott Parsons' social role theory is utilized to analyze the adaptation of the pesantren within the context of social change and modernization. The findings reveal that KH. Salim, despite his affiliation with Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) through his teacher KH. Hasyim Asy'ari, introduced reforms by incorporating general subjects and providing educational access for female students. These innovations distinguish Pondok YTP from other traditional pesantren and contribute to social and educational empowerment. This study concludes that, while rooted in the same tradition, KH. Salim successfully brought significant changes to create a more modern pesantren education system.

Keywords: kyai, Java, pesantren, modernist, traditionalist

Article history: Received: 15 January 2024 | Revised: 01 April 2024 |
Available online: 30 June 2024

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Introduction

Islamic boarding schools, or *pesantren*, are the oldest educational institutions in Indonesia, believed to have emerged in the 14th century CE. Through *pesantren*, Islam was propagated and spread across the archipelago.¹ Over time, *pesantren* assumed a significant role in preserving Islamic traditions, transmitting Islamic knowledge, and serving as centers for the training of religious scholars ('*ulama*'). Beyond that, *pesantren* also function as institutions for community empowerment and as cultural hubs within society.² As such, Abdurrahman Wahid referred to *pesantren* as a subculture.³ Consequently, the existence of *pesantren* cannot be underestimated; they not only serve as “moral workshops” but also provide solutions to various religious, intellectual, political, and social issues.

The term *pondok* originates from the Arabic word *funduq*, which means hotel or dormitory. A *pondok* refers to the place where *santri* (students) reside, typically consisting of simple dormitory-style accommodations with multiple rooms (*gotakan*). In the past, *pesantren* buildings were made of bamboo woven panels known as *gedek*. Today, many *pesantren* dormitories are constructed with durable building materials, and some even resemble luxurious hotels. The term *pondok pesantren* is now more commonly referred to simply as *pesantren*. Derived from the word *santri* with the prefixes *pe-* and the suffix *-an*, *pesantren* denotes a place where *santri* reside and study religious knowledge. *Pesantren* are supported by five key elements: the *kyai* (spiritual leader), the *santri* (students), the *pondok* (dormitory), the mosque, and classical Islamic texts (*kitab kuning*).⁴

¹ Herman, “Sejarah Pesantren Di Indonesia,” *Jurnal Al-Ta’dib* 6, no. 2 (2013): 145–58.

² M. Dawam Rahardjo, ed., *Pesantren Dan Pembaharuan* (Jakarta: LP3ES, 1988), 2; Azyumardi Azra, *Pendidikan Islam: Tradisi Dan Modernisasi Menuju Milenium Baru* (Jakarta: Logos Wacana Ilmu, 2000), 95; Mahfudh Fauzi and Ahmad Khoirul Fata, “Modernisasi Pesantren Tahfiz: Studi Atas Pesantren Daarul Qur'an Tangerang,” *Potensi* 7, no. 2 (2021): 207–27.

³ Abdurrahman Wahid, *Menggerakkan Tradisi: Esai-Esai Dari Pesantren* (Yogyakarta: LKiS, 2001), 32; Andik Wahyun Muqoyyidin, “Kitab Kuning Dan Tradisi Riset Pesantren Di Nusantara,” *Ibda': Jurnal Kebudayaan Islam* 12, no. 2 (2014): 119–136, doi:<https://doi.org/10.24090/ibda.v12i2.441>.

⁴ Zamakhsyari Dhofier, *Tradisi Pesantren: Studi Tentang Pandangan Hidup Kyai* (Jakarta: LP3ES, 1982), 95.

One of the oldest *pesantren* in Indonesia that remains active today is Tebuireng Islamic Boarding School in Cukir, Jombang. Established by KH. Hasyim Asy'ari in 1899, it has produced numerous *ulama* who are now spread across the archipelago. Many Tebuireng alumni have also founded *pesantren* in various regions, creating a network of *kyai* and *pesantren* centered around Tebuireng. As KH. Hasyim Asy'ari was the founder of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), it is customary for *pesantren* established by Tebuireng alumni to affiliate with this organization and uphold its traditional religious practices.⁵

However, this convention does not apply to a *pesantren* located near Jombang. KH. Salim Achjar, one of KH. Hasyim Asy'ari's students, established a *pesantren* with a different religious orientation from his teacher's. Known as the Ar-Raudlatul Ilmiyah Islamic Boarding School, this institution is situated in Banaran Village, Kertosono, Nganjuk, East Java. Locally, it is referred to as "Pondok YTP," an acronym for Yayasan Taman Pengetahuan, the foundation that oversees it.

While Tebuireng upheld traditional religious practices, KH. Salim Achjar introduced modernist Islamic thought and traditions at Pondok YTP. As a result, the community often refers to Pondok YTP as a "Muhammadiyah *pesantren*." Although it is not formally affiliated with Muhammadiyah, many of its alumni have become active members and leaders within the organization. At the national level, the late Moeslim Abdurrahman and Abdul Fattah Wibisono, both alumni of Pondok YTP, held significant positions within Muhammadiyah's Central Leadership. Moeslim Abdurrahman even referred to his alma mater as a "Wahhabi-style *pesantren*."⁶ This "deviation" is intriguing to examine.

⁵ Ahmad Khoirul Fata and M Ainun Najib, "Kontekstualisasi Pemikiran KH. Hasyim Asy'ari Tentang Persatuan Umat Islam," *Miqot: Jurnal Ilmu-Ilmu Keislaman* 38, no. 2 (2014): 319–34, doi:10.30821/miqot.v38i2.65; Ahmad Misbah and Bahru Rozi, "Sejarah Pesantren Dan Tradisi Keilmuannya Di Jawa," *Al-Jadwa* 1, no. 2 (2022): 116–29, doi:<https://doi.org/10.38073/aljadwa.v1i2.796>; Pepen Irvan Fauzan and Ahmad Khoirul Fata, "Jaringan Pesantren Di Jawa Barat Tahun 1800-1945: Critical Review Atas Disertasi 'Jaringan Pesantren Di Priangan 1800-1945' Karya Ading Kusdiana," *Jurnal Lekture Keagamaan* 17, no. 1 (2019): 139–68, doi:10.31291/jlk.v17i1.602.

⁶ Islamlib, "Dr. Moeslim Abdurrahman: Berislam Dari Bukhari-Muslim Ke Weber-Durkheim," *Muhammadiyah Studies*, 2013, <https://muhammadiyahstudies.blogspot.com/2013/02/dr-moeslim-abdurrahman-berislam-dari.html>.

How could KH. Salim Achjar, who once studied under the founder of NU at Tebuireng, diverge from his teacher's religious traditions by establishing a modernist *pesantren*? To address this question, this article explores the figure of KH. Salim Achjar as the founder of Pondok YTP Kertosono.

Methods

This article adopts a biographical approach, delving into KH. Salim Achjar's life history and the educational institution he founded. Data sources include interviews with several of his students who studied directly under him, such as KH. Ali Manshur Kastam (currently the head of Pondok YTP), Kyai Sartian (Lamongan), Kyai Ihsanuddin (Surabaya), Hanif Azhar (Surabaya), and Dr. Arif Al-Imroni (Jakarta).

This article serves as an “initial note” on the biography of KH. Salim Achjar, as the data is solely derived from his students without corroboration from other sources. Therefore, future research has significant opportunities to confirm and expand upon these findings. The primary focus of this study is to examine KH. Salim Achjar's role and contributions in establishing the modernist-oriented Pondok YTP and how the institution developed amidst the more traditional *pesantren* landscape, exemplified by Tebuireng.

The main objective of this research is to explore the divergence in religious traditions between the two *pesantren*, both of which originated from the same source—NU. This study employs Talcott Parsons' social role theory to analyze the social roles of *pesantren* in the context of social change and modernization.⁷ This theoretical framework helps explain how Pondok YTP functions as a social institution that preserves Islamic traditions while adapting to modernist thought, thereby carving out a distinct social role compared to other traditional *pesantren*. Additionally, this research argues that while the topic of modernist *pesantren* has begun to garner attention, the influence of KH. Salim Achjar within

⁷ Talcott Parsons, *The Social System* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1951), Talcott Parsons, *Essays in Sociological Theory* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1949), Talcott Parsons, *Structure and Process in Modern Societies* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1960).

the context of religious reform in NU-affiliated *pesantren* remains underexplored, offering opportunities for further study.

Results and Discussion

The Background of the Salim Achjar Family

The life of Kyai Salim (d. 1974) is a testament to the resilience of a Kyai in a modest pesantren who devoted his entire being to be educating and nurturing his students. His dedication extended beyond merely offering his time; he also utilized all his personal assets for the benefit of the pesantren and its students. Due to his modest lifestyle, he would often break his fast with nothing more than a glass of water. Known as KH. Salim Achjar, Kyai Salim integrated the values of traditional Salaf pesantren education with Islamic modernism. He promoted an understanding of Islam that transcended sectarian divisions and avoided affiliation with specific mass organizations.

Kyai Salim was born in Sekaran Village, Ngronggot, Nganjuk. However, no specific records or information exist regarding his exact date of birth. His father, Achjar, and his mother, Aminah, raised him in a devout Islamic household. Kyai Salim had seven siblings—two brothers and five sisters. He married a woman named Sa'diyah, and their union resulted in the birth of a daughter, Sa'adah.

The family names—his own and those of his parents—reflect the religious devotion of the Salim Achjar family, which adhered strictly to Islamic principles. During the early 1900s, Islamic names were rare compared to today, as most names were influenced by Javanese culture. Given this background, Kyai Salim was raised as a lifelong santri by his parents. His father chose not to enroll him in the Sekolah Ongko Loro, the elementary school system of the Dutch colonial era. Instead, his father sent him to study religion at the Tebuireng Pesantren in Jombang. This decision aligned with the family's commitment to the santri tradition, which was a minority cultural practice compared to the dominant abangan-nationalist tradition flourishing in Nganjuk at the time.

Ayu Sutarto categorizes East Java into *ten tlatahor* cultural regions. Four major cultural regions are Mataraman, Arek, Madura Island, and Pandalungan, while the smaller regions include Jawa Panoragan, Osing,

Tengger, Madura Bawean, Madura Kangean, and Samin (*Sedulur Sikep*). Nganjuk belongs to the Mataraman region, along with Ngawi, Madiun, Pacitan, Magetan, Kediri, Tulungagung, Blitar, and Trenggalek. In contrast, Tuban, Lamongan, and Bojonegoro are categorized as Coastal Mataraman.⁸ The term “Mataraman” refers to areas in western East Java influenced by the culture of the Mataram Kingdom. A significant cultural distinction exists between inland Mataraman and Coastal Mataraman. The former is characterized by a stronger abangan culture, whereas the latter is more deeply rooted in Islamic traditions.⁹

Geographically, Nganjuk is bordered by Bojonegoro Regency to the north, Jombang Regency to the east, Kediri Regency to the south, and Madiun Regency to the west. Historically, during the Medang Kingdom era, Nganjuk was known as Anjuk Ladang, meaning “Land of Victory.” It is also referred to as the “City of Wind.” From a socio-religious perspective, Nganjuk is predominantly influenced by the abangan tradition. Even today, abangan nationalist political forces maintain a dominant presence in the region, which is also renowned for the Sedudo Waterfall.¹⁰

Studying at Tebuireng & Journeying Abroad

The family background of young Salim paved the way for him to pursue his education at the influential Tebuireng Pesantren, founded

⁸ Ayu Sutarto, *Menguak Pergumulan Antara Seni, Politik, Islam Dan Indonesia* (Jember: Kompaswidya, 2004), 56–58.

⁹ See Warsini, “Peran Wali Songo (Sunan Bonang) Dengan Media Da’wah Dalam Sejarah Penyebaran Islam Di Tuban Jawa Timur,” *Asanka* 3, no. 1 (2022): 23–45, doi:<https://doi.org/10.21154/asanka.v3i1.3832>; A. Jauhar Fuad, “Tlatah Dan Tradisi Keagamaan Islam Mataraman,” *Tribakti: Jurnal Pemikiran Keislaman* 30, no. 1 (2019): 1–27, doi:<https://doi.org/10.33367/tribakti.v30i1.659>.

¹⁰ Muh. Barid Nizarudin Wajdi, “Nyadranan, Bentuk Akulturasi Islam Dengan Budaya Jawa (Fenomena Sosial Keagamaan Nyadranan Di Daerah Baron Kabupaten Nganjuk),” in *Proceedings of Annual Conference for Muslim Scholars (AnCoMS)* (Surabaya: Kopertais Wilayah IV, 2017), 989–97, doi:10.36835/ancoms.v0iSeri 2.100; Sabella Firdausi and Nurul Baiti Rohmah, “Peran KH. Dahlan Abdul Qohhar Sebagai Penggerak Partai Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) Di Nganjuk 1952-1975,” *Tapis: Teropong Aspirasi Politik Islam* 19, no. 1 (2023): 47–65, doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.24042/tps.v19i1.16245>; Windi Ika Diahing Sari and Anjar Mukti Wibowo, “Prasasti Anjuk Ladang Di Nganjuk Jawa Timur (Sejarah Dan Potensinya Sebagai Sumber Pembelajaran Sejarah),” *Agastya* 7, no. 1 (2017): 82–103, doi:<http://doi.org/10.25273/ajsp.v7i01.1062>.

by KH. Hasyim Asy'ari (d. 1947) in 1899 in Jombang. Some of Kyai Salim's students at the YTP Pesantren later mentioned that he was contemporaneous with KH. Wahid Hasyim (d. 1953), the father of Gus Dur, who became a prominent figure in the modernization of education at Tebuireng Pesantren and one of the founders of the Masyumi Party.¹¹

Tebuireng was chosen for several reasons. First, it was led by KH. Hasyim Asy'ari, the founder of Nahdlatul Ulama and a renowned scholar known as Hadratus Sheikh. He held a teaching certification for the *Sahīh Bukhārī* from Sheikh Mahfuzz at-Tirmisi (d. 1919), an Indonesian scholar residing in Mecca. Second, Tebuireng was the largest center of Islamic education and an anti-colonial political hub in Java, producing many prominent scholars and national leaders. Third, by the 1920s, Tebuireng was home to over 2,000 students from various regions of the archipelago and countries like Malaysia and Singapore, creating an expansive network of connections.¹²

Salim began studying at Tebuireng in 1924, immersing himself in classical Islamic texts, especially hadith. Some of the books he studied there, such as *Sahīh Bukhārī*, *Riyāḍ al-Ṣalihīn*, *Bulūgh al-Maram*, *Fiqh Wadih*, and *Mabādi’ Awwaliyah*, later became part of the curriculum at the YTP Pesantren he established.¹³

After completing his studies at Tebuireng, Salim chose to teach in various places across East Java, although records do not specify the pesantrens where he taught. In 1937, Salim embarked on an overseas journey, visiting countries such as Malaysia, Thailand, Burma, and India before continuing his studies at *Ma’had al-‘Ilmi al-Su’udī* in Mecca.

¹¹ Bharata Barrir Ibrahim, “Peranan K.H. Abdul Wahid Hasjim Dalam Perkembangan Partai Masyumi Tahun 1943 - 1953” (Universitas Siliwangi, 2019), <http://repository.unsil.ac.id/486/>; Asifa Nurfadilah, Agus Mulyana, and Andi Suwirta, “Peranan K.H. Abdul Wahid Hasyim Dalam Pembaharuan Pendidikan Islam Di Pesantren Tebuireng, Jombang, Jawa Timur, Indonesia, 1934-1953,” *Insan Cita* 5, no. 1 (2020): 19–42, doi:<https://doi.org/10.2121/incipita-jisica.v5i1.1329>.

¹² M. Alamil Huda, Miftahul Khoiri, and Nur Anwar, “Dinamika Pendidikan Di Pesantren Tebuireng Dan Pengaruhnya Terhadap Masyarakat Jombang 1948-1975 M,” *Jurnal Tamaddun* 9, no. 2 (2021): 743–76, doi:10.24235/tamaddun.v9i2.8873; Fata and Najib, “Kontekstualisasi Pemikiran KH. Hasyim Asy’ari Tentang Persatuan Umat Islam.”

¹³ Sartian (student of KH. Salim Achjar), *interview*, Lamongan, December 12, 2023.

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He also taught for a year at the *Madrasah Indonesia Islamiyah* in Mecca and participated in the “Famine Relief Committee” to assist pilgrims in Mecca.¹⁴

In 1944, Salim embarked on another journey, visiting countries like Iraq, Syria, Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia, Somalia, and Yemen. From Aden, he sailed to the Indian subcontinent, stayed in India for some time, and then continued to Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and Singapore. In Singapore, Kyai Salim taught for a brief period and purchased a bell still used at the YTP Pesantren today.¹⁵

Salim’s extensive travels were inspired by KH. Hasyim Asy’ari’s journey to Mecca. Determined to follow in his teacher’s footsteps, Salim convinced his parents to sell their rice fields to fund his trip. Even with this sacrifice, it was not enough, so Salim borrowed money from a friend in Jombang.¹⁶

To reach Mecca, Salim began his journey from Bawean, Gresik, traveling by land and sea. His journey was filled with meaningful experiences. In Singapore, Salim worked various jobs to sustain himself and taught for a few months. In Myanmar, he befriended Buddhist monks, demonstrating mutual respect despite religious differences. The monks even washed his clothes and utensils multiple times to ensure they were acceptable to him.¹⁷ This episode highlights Salim’s ability to build relationships across religious and cultural boundaries.

The return journey from Mecca to Indonesia took two years, with Salim arriving back in 1946. He visited several pesantrens in East Java before settling in Kertosono, Nganjuk, about 15 kilometers from his birthplace in Ngronggol. A philanthropist, Hj. Siti Marijam, donated a plot of land east of the Banaran village market in Kertosono, where Salim established a modest pesantren and madrasah.¹⁸

Kyai Salim’s long journey—from studying at Tebuireng to traveling abroad—reflects the rigorous process of becoming a Kyai. Unlike many

¹⁴ Sartian, interview by author, Lamongan, December 12, 2023.

¹⁵ Ali Manshur Kastam, interview by author, Kertosono, November 27, 2023.

¹⁶ Ali Manshur Kastam, interview by author, Kertosono, November 27, 2023.

¹⁷ Hanif Azhar, interview by author, Surabaya, December 5, 2020.

¹⁸ Ali Manshur Kastam, interview by author, Kertosono, November 27, 2023.

who inherit the title through ascribed status due to their lineage, Salim achieved his status through merit and personal achievement.¹⁹ His insatiable thirst for knowledge and experience, combined with his expertise in Islamic sciences and exemplary character, cemented his place as a respected Kyai.

Establishing a Pesantren

After traveling extensively and studying in various Islamic boarding schools (pondok pesantren), Kyai Salim aspired to establish his own pesantren. He rented a space in Toko Remaja to conduct religious lessons with a small group of students. Thanks to the generosity of Hj. Siti Marijam, Kyai Salim was provided with a plot of land on which he built simple shelters made of wood or bamboo (gedek) for the students. It was from this humble beginning that the history of *Pesantren Ar-Raudlatul Ilmiyah* began, eventually growing into the institution it is today. The initial group of students numbered around 20, including Dimyathi, Hussein, Anwar, Wahid, among others. In exchange for the monthly fee, paid in rice, the basic educational activities at this simple pesantren continued.²⁰

Ar-Raudlatul Ilmiyah, which translates to “The Garden of Knowledge,” was the name Kyai Salim chose for the pesantren he founded in 1949. Kyai Salim envisioned the pesantren as a beautiful, serene, and nurturing place, akin to a garden that yields beneficial fruits for all creatures. With the name *Ar-Raudlatul Ilmiyah*, he hoped that the pesantren would become a “garden” that nurtures knowledge beneficial to the entire universe.²¹

From its inception, Pesantren YTP did not focus solely on religious education. It also included subjects such as Mathematics, Geography, Botany, and Natural Sciences. These subjects were taught using Arabic-language texts as references. This interdisciplinary approach reveals

¹⁹ Hasanatul Jannah, “Kyai, Perubahan Sosial Dan Dinamika Politik Kekuasaan,” *Fikrah* 3, no. 1 (2015): 157–76, doi:10.21043/fikrah.v3i1.1831.

²⁰ Ali Manshur Kastam, and Hanif Azhar, interview by author, December 5, 2020.

²¹ Ali Manshur Kastam, and Arif al-Imroni (student of KH. Salim Achjar), interview, Jakarta, January 3, 2023

that from the beginning, Kyai Salim intended for *Pesantren YTP* to be a modern pesantren.²²

This innovative aspect is further exemplified by the students admitted to the pesantren. Unlike many other pesantren at the time, which only accepted male students, Pesantren YTP welcomed female students as well. This was an unconventional practice in 1949, as most pesantren only accepted male students, and when women were admitted, it was typically in female-only pesantren under the leadership of a female figure (Nyai).²³

In his bamboo-walled pesantren, Kyai Salim mentored both male and female students. He believed that the right to education was not exclusive to men but should be extended to women as well. This was a progressive view, as, in the early 1950s, education was predominantly regarded as a male privilege. Women, whose roles were typically confined to the home and the fields, had little access to formal education. Kyai Salim broke this perspective by welcoming female students, arguing that the pursuit of knowledge (*talab al-‘ilm*) is a lifelong obligation for both men and women.²⁴

The Quran and Hadith-Based Pesantren

According to KH. Ali Manshur Kastam, a student of Kyai Salim who now oversees Pesantren YTP, Ar-Raudlatul Ilmiyah is a pesantren focused on the Quran and Hadith. This pesantren offers Islamic education directly from its original sources, the Quran and Hadith, making them the primary reference for action. Kyai Salim believed that all knowledge originates from the Quran and Hadith, and thus, every subject taught at Pesantren Ar-Raudlatul Ilmiyah was grounded in these sacred texts.²⁵

The principle that “all knowledge stems from the Quran and Hadith” is broad and integral, rejecting any dichotomy between religious and secular knowledge. One incident illustrates Kyai Salim’s integrated

²² Ali Manshur Kastam, Arif al-Imroni, Hanif Azhar, interview by author.

²³ Ali Manshur Kastam, Arif al-Imroni, Hanif Azhar, interview by author.

²⁴ Ali Manshur Kastam, interview by author, Kertosono, November 27, 2023; Ihsanuddin (student of KH. Salim Achjar), *interview*, Surabaya, November 24, 2023.

²⁵ Ali Manshur Kastam, interview by author, Kertosono, November 27, 2023.

approach to knowledge. When KH. Abdurrahman Syamsuri visited Kyai Salim, he inquired about the ratio of religious knowledge to general knowledge taught at the pesantren. Kyai Salim replied succinctly, “All knowledge taught here is religious knowledge,” because all knowledge is derived from the Quran and Hadith.²⁶

Kyai Salim maintained that since all knowledge comes from the All-Knowing (*al-‘Alīm*), it is one and the same. Therefore, the distinction between religious and secular knowledge is only a convenient categorization, not a fundamental separation. For Kyai Salim, all knowledge leads to the ultimate truth, which is Allah. He quoted a narration from Imam al-Ghazālī’s *Iḥyā’ ʻUlūmīddīn*: “Whoever’s knowledge increases without their guidance increasing, they have only moved farther from Allah.”²⁷

As a student who had traveled and studied at various pesantren and abroad, Kyai Salim possessed a broad and flexible worldview. The ideas of Islamic reform he encountered during his travels were applied when he founded his pesantren. With a background in education from Pondok Tebuireng, which balanced traditional values and modern ideas, Pesantren YTP was established as a synthesis of both approaches. Traditional pesantren teachings were preserved, while modern subjects were also incorporated, and students attended classes with desks and chairs, a feature influenced by the schools established by the Dutch colonial system. This combination set it apart from other pesantren at the time.²⁸

In this context, Kyai Salim shared a similar vision with Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 1328), a notable Islamic reformer. Ibn Taymiyyah’s motto “al-Rujū‘ ila al-Kitāb wa al-Sunnah” (Return to the Quran and the Sunnah) inspired Kyai Salim, who also referred to the Quran and Hadith. However, unlike Ibn Taymiyyah, who rejected logic, Kyai Salim embraced the study of *Ilmu Manṭiq* (logic) at his pesantren.²⁹

During Kyai Salim’s leadership, Pesantren YTP offered 36 subjects, all taught using Arabic texts. From the perspective of modern education curricula, this was a considerable number of subjects.

²⁶ Ali Manshur Kastam, interview by author, Kertosono, November 27, 2023.

²⁷ Ihsanuddin, *interview...*; Arif al-Imroni, *interview...*

²⁸ Ali Manshur Kastam, interview by author, Kertosono, November 27, 2023.

²⁹ Ihsanuddin, interview by author, Surabaya, November 24, 2023.

Here is a list of lessons at Pesantren Ar-Raudlatul Ilmiyah: *Al-Lughah al-‘Arabiyyah, al-Athiniyyah, al-Tauhid, al-Tafsir, Uṣūl al-Tafsir, al-Hadīth, Muṣṭalah al-Hadīth, al-Fiqh, Uṣūl al-Fiqh, al-Qawā‘id al-Fiqhiyyah, al-Naḥwu, al-Sarf, al-‘Arud wa al-Qawāfi, ‘Ilm al-Kalām, al-Balāghah, ‘Ilm al-Nafs fi al-Tarbiyah, ‘Ilm al-Nafs fi al-Mantiq, al-Tarbiyah al-Waṭaniyyah, al-Ḥisāb, al-Handasah, al-Farā‘idh, al-Tajwid, al-Fann, al-Mantiq, al-Shihhah, ‘Ilm al-Nabat, al-Tarīkh, ‘Ilm al-Ḥayawān, al-Jughrāfiyyah, al-Tajwid, al-‘Arūdh wa al-Tawāfi, al-Rasm, al-Lughah al-Injīlīziyyah, al-Tarbiyah, al-Inshā’, and al-Khat.*

In addition to traditional *salafiyyah* pesantren texts, Kyai Salim used books written by prominent Islamic modernist figures as textbooks at Pesantren YTP. One such text is *Risālah Tauhid* (Treatise on Monotheism), written by Muhammad ‘Abduh (d. 1905), which emphasizes that the essence of *tauhid* (monotheism) is the belief in the oneness of Allah and avoiding associating Him with others. The book further asserts that human reason will never contradict religion, as Islam is inherently rational.³⁰ According to Qudsi, Abduh’s *Risalah Tauhid* became one of the key references in modernist pesantren and played a significant role in the spread of reformist ideas in Indonesia.³¹

Standing Above All Groups

In 1955, Indonesia held its first general elections, with 172 contenders and only 28 successful candidates (three of whom were independents). The major political parties that won seats were the Indonesian National Party (57 seats, 22.3%), Masyumi (57 seats, 20.9%), Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) (45 seats, 18.4%), and the Indonesian Communist Party (39 seats, 15.4%). This election was considered the most democratic in Indonesia’s history, with a participation rate of 90%.³²

At the time of the 1955 elections, Pesantren Ar-Raudlatul Ilmiyah was only six years old, and if we draw an analogy to human development,

³⁰ Ali Manshur Kastam, Hanif Azhar, Ihsanuddin, interview by author.

³¹ Saifuddin Qudsi, “Pemikiran Pendidikan Muhammad Abduh Dan Proses Modernisasi Pesantren Di Indonesia,” *Dirosat: Journal of Islamic Studies* 1, no. 1 (2016): 13–26, doi:10.28944/dirosat.v1i1.5.

³² See Ajeng Kusuma Ayu, Singgih Tri Sulistiyono, and A. Alamsyah, “Masyumi’s Campaign Strategies in the 1955 Election in Jakarta,” *Indonesian Historical Studies* 4, no. 1 (2020): 32–41, doi://doi.org/10.14710/ihis.v4i1.7734.

the pesantren was still in its early stages. Yet, during this formative period, Kyai Salim demonstrated his vision for the pesantren. Despite the fervor surrounding the 1955 elections, which cost a significant sum of Rp 479,891,729, the pesantren allowed its students the freedom to choose their political candidates. The pesantren's grounds were filled with the flags of various election candidates, and students were invited to cast their votes in alignment with their political aspirations.³³

Kyai Salim was determined that his pesantren would stand above all factions of the Muslim community, remaining non-partisan and impartial. Although figures from Masyumi, such as Moh. Natsir (d. 1993), former Prime Minister, and Prof. Abdul Kahar Mudzakkir, founder of the Islamic University of Indonesia (UII) in Yogyakarta (d. 1973), visited the pesantren, this did not mean that Kyai Salim aligned the pesantren with Masyumi. He maintained the principle of standing above all groups, a principle he adhered to and continues to uphold today.³⁴

In another historical instance, Kyai Salim was invited by Golongan Karya (Golkar) to support the 1971 elections. He accepted the invitation and traveled to Jakarta by train from Kertosono Station, bringing little with him. Despite being invited, Kyai Salim did not attend the Golkar event. Instead, he went to the market to buy necessities for his pesantren. He returned home with a Petromax lamp for the students' study sessions. For Kyai Salim, a modest pesantren that preserved its ideals of neutrality was preferable to a large pesantren that was influenced by political parties or the government.³⁵

Kyai Salim also kept his pesantren and its activities separate from any particular Islamic organization. His goal was to preserve its independence and commitment to standing above all factions. As a student of KH. Hasyim Asy'ari, the founder of NU, Kyai Salim was never tempted to engage with organizations represented by a logo depicting a globe encircled by a rope with nine stars. His relationship with KH. Hasyim Asy'ari was one of mentor and student, not that of organizational affiliation.³⁶

³³ Hanif Azhar, Ihsanuddin, Sartian, interview by author.

³⁴ Hanif Azhar, Ihsanuddin, Sartian, interview by author.

³⁵ Hanif Azhar, Ihsanuddin, Sartian, interview by author.

³⁶ Ali Manshur Kastam, interview by author, Kertosono, November 27, 2023.

Kyai Salim maintained good relations with all Islamic movements, particularly Muhammadiyah. Many of his students came from Muhammadiyah backgrounds, and many Masyumi leaders were from Muhammadiyah. However, Kyai Salim never became a member or official of Muhammadiyah. For the sake of his principle of standing above all groups, Kyai Salim refrained from attending Friday prayers in the Kertosono area to avoid being seen as aligning with either NU or Muhammadiyah.³⁷

Initially, Kyai Salim prohibited his students from participating in Islamic organizations, believing that such involvement could lead to tribalism (*ashabiyah*). He would even reprimand students who drew the symbols of specific organizations on the board. His independent stance and concern over group fanaticism led him to discourage such actions. However, later in his life, Kyai Salim allowed his students to participate in Islamic organizations, including Muhammadiyah and NU.³⁸

This principle of standing above all groups was not only applied in the social-political realm but also in religious matters. As a scholar who studied at Pondok Tebuireng, Kyai Salim did not restrict his students to studying texts from one particular school of thought. While *fiqh* texts from the Shafi'i school were taught, the most important text was *Bidāyat al-Mujtahid wa Nihāyat al-Muqtaṣid*. This book was taught directly by Kyai Salim to senior students (comparable to high school level).³⁹

The author of *Bidāyat al-Mujtahid*, Abu al-Walid Muhammad Ibn Rushd (d. 1198), known in the West as Averroes, made significant contributions to medicine, philosophy, Islamic law, and music. A philosopher and jurist, Ibn Rushd was born in Cordoba, Spain, and served as a qadi (chief judge) in Seville and Cordoba. His work *Bidāyat al-Mujtahid wa Nihāyat al-Muqtaṣid* is a comparative *fiqh* (jurisprudence) text in which he explains the views and arguments of various Islamic legal schools, both textual and rational. He also included the opinions of companions of the Prophet Muhammad such as 'Ali, 'Umar, Ibn Mas'ūd,

³⁷ Ali Manshur Kastam, Ihsanuddin, Sartian, interview by author.

³⁸ Ali Manshur Kastam, Ihsanuddin, Sartian, interview by author.

³⁹ Ali Manshur Kastam, Ihsanuddin, Sartian, interview by author.

Ibn ‘Abbās, and others, as well as those of the followers of the companions (*tabi‘in*) and their successors (*tabi‘al-tabi‘in*).⁴⁰

In NU pesantren, which follow the Shāfi‘ī school, this book is not typically taught. Martin van Bruinessen notes that *Bidayat al-Mujtahid* is reserved for select students, as it requires a solid understanding of *Uṣūl Fiqh* (the principles of Islamic jurisprudence).⁴¹ Kyai Salim introduced this book to his students, influenced by his time in Mecca. Through this text, Kyai Salim taught students the diversity of Islamic jurisprudence and the process of legal reasoning in fiqh. This lesson emphasized that religious practice should not be clouded by blind imitation (*taqlid*) or sectarian fanaticism.

Personality of Kyai Salim

There are many memories regarding Kyai Salim’s character. To his students, Kyai Salim was a friendly yet firm individual. His speaking style was stern, and he often emphasized the importance of mental discipline and dedication to learning. Kyai Salim would always stress to those who came to *sowan* (visit with the intention of becoming a student) that the only requirement for becoming a student was *cengkir* (a sharp mind, willing to think deeply) and a sincere commitment to study. Therefore, anyone who wished to become a student would be welcomed, regardless of their background or economic status.⁴²

Kyai Salim’s firmness was evident in his handling of problematic students. A student who repeatedly violated the pesantren rules, such as attending the cinema three times, would be sent back to their parents without exception. A student caught stealing would be expelled immediately, with no forgiveness for this offense. Despite these strict measures, Kyai Salim would always pray for expelled students, hoping they would eventually establish their own pesantren and live lives that were beneficial to others. It is not surprising that several of the expelled students later

⁴⁰ Mohamad Thooyib Madani, “Ibnu Rusyd Dan Kontribusi Pemikirannya Terhadap Perkembangan Ilmu Fiqih,” *Kabilah* 2, no. 1 (2017): 36–59, doi:<https://doi.org/10.35127/kabillah.v2i1.57>.

⁴¹ Martin van Bruinessen, *Kitab Kuning, Pesantren Dan Tarekat* (Yogyakarta: Gading, 2015).

⁴² Ali Manshur Kastam, interview by author, Kertosono, November 27, 2023.

⁴³ Ali Manshur Kastam, Sartian, Ihsanuddin, interview by author.

went on to open their own pesantren. Some of Kyai Salim's students even joked that if they wanted their knowledge to be beneficial, they should aim to be expelled, because when Kyai Salim expels someone, he prays for them.⁴³

A distinctive characteristic of Kyai Salim was his love of debate. He would invite anyone, even his own students, to engage in discussion. On one occasion, a student asked him a peculiar question: "Will the devil, created from fire, feel pain if it is cast into the fire of hell?" Without hesitation, Kyai Salim took a handful of dirt and threw it at the student. He then asked, "Does it hurt or not?" The student answered, "Yes, Kyai... it hurts," while trying to endure the pain. Kyai Salim responded, "That is the answer to your question."⁴⁴

Despite the limited number of teachers at Pesantren Ar-Raudlatul Ilmiyah, Kyai Salim took the initiative to teach multiple classes in parallel. He would move from one class to the next, teaching one class for an hour using the *sorogan* method, then transitioning to another class. Kyai Salim would read from a text, and the students would repeat it. In the mornings, Kyai Salim taught *tafsīr*, the *Riyāḍ al-Ṣalihīn* hadith collection, and *Sahīh Bukhārī*. In the afternoons, he taught *Tafsīr Bayḍāwī* and *Bidāyat al-Mujtahid*. In addition, after *Isha* and *Subuh* prayers, Kyai Salim would hold a *ngaji* (study group) session. All of these activities were carried out personally by Kyai Salim. As senior students began to emerge, the teaching load on Kyai Salim decreased significantly.⁴⁵

Apart from teaching, Kyai Salim was also diligent in staying informed about social and political developments by reading newspapers. One of the newspapers he regularly read was *Simponi*, a publication managed by non-Muslims. One of his students, KH. Ali Manshur Kastam, the current head of the pesantren (1994-present), was often tasked with buying the paper. When asked why he chose to read a newspaper published by non-Muslims, Kyai Salim answered plainly, "So we can understand the desires and aspirations of non-Muslims".⁴⁶

Kyai Salim was accustomed to walking around the classrooms to monitor the activities of teaching and learning. Ihsanuddin, a student

⁴⁴ Ali Manshur Kastam, Sartian, Ihsanuddin, interview by author.

⁴⁵ Ali Manshur Kastam, Sartian, Ihsanuddin, Arif al-Imroni, interview by author.

⁴⁶ Ali Manshur Kastam, interview by author, Kertosono, November 27, 2023.

who studied at the pesantren from 1970 to 1973, shared a memorable moment when Kyai Salim toured the classrooms.⁴⁷ At that time, Ihsanuddin was entrusted with teaching the *tafsir* (interpretation) of the Qur'an. The verse being interpreted was Q.S. al-Baqarah/2: 19, which includes the phrase: *yaj‘alūna aṣābi‘ahum ażānihim*. Kyai Salim stopped in the doorway of the classroom and listened to the senior student interpret the verse in front of junior students. The literal meaning of the verse is: "They put their fingers in their ears." Ihsanuddin, using *Ilmu Balaghah* (science of rhetoric), explained that this phrase was an example of *majaz mursal* (a metaphorical expression). It was impossible for all of one's fingers to fit in the ear; only one finger could fit. This concept is referred to as *dzikr al-kull wa irādat al-juz* (mentioning the whole but intending only a part). After hearing this explanation, Kyai Salim continued his walk to another classroom, seemingly satisfied with the senior student's correct interpretation of the Qur'an. Kyai Salim was not hesitant to correct senior students who did not teach junior students accurately. For instance, when a senior student explained that the Prophet Muhammad, in his efforts to spread Islam, was tireless, climbing mountains, crossing ravines, and entering forests, Kyai Salim immediately corrected him. "Your historical account is incorrect. Are there forests in Arabia?" asked Kyai Salim.⁴⁸

Kyai Salim was known for his independence. He did not like to be served or depend on others. Anything that could be done by himself, he would do without asking anyone else for help. Kyai Salim did not hesitate to repair the blackboard or fix broken chairs. He would also repaint the walls when the paint had worn off. This dedication inspired students like Mardullah, Ali Bahrudin, Muqri, and others to assist Kyai Salim without being asked. However, when students helped him, Kyai Salim did not assume the role of a supervisor, simply instructing with a finger; he worked alongside them. In addition to his self-sufficiency, Kyai Salim did not rely on handouts from others. To meet his daily needs, he raised chickens. Occasionally, a student would help him feed the chickens, and the eggs would be sold at the Kertosono market.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Ihsanuddin, interview by author, Surabaya, November 24, 2023.

⁴⁸ Ihsanuddin, interview by author, Surabaya, November 24, 2023.

⁴⁹ Ali Manshur Kastam, Sartian, Ihsanuddin, interview by author.

During the fasting and Idul Fitri holidays, Kyai Salim had more time to repair the pesantren's facilities. Using whatever tools were available, Kyai Salim would saw and nail together broken tables and chairs. Since the pesantren did not charge tuition fees, Kyai Salim often had to dip into his personal funds to cover the costs. If he did not have enough money, he did not hesitate to pawn his own belongings for the pesantren's needs. Several alumni recall an incident when Kyai Salim asked a student named A. Muqri Bahruddin to take his beloved jacket to the pawnshop. At the time, Kyai Salim needed money to paint the pesantren but had no funds, so he had to pawn his cherished jacket.⁵⁰

The Passing of Kyai Salim

Kyai Salim's death was caused by complications from a series of illnesses, which began with him slipping in the bathroom. It was discovered that he had been suffering from underlying health issues. After the incident, Kyai Salim's health gradually deteriorated. He was treated for a month at Dr. Soetomo Hospital in Surabaya, with several senior students by his side. Kyai Salim passed away on Monday, August 28, 1974, after Subuh (dawn prayer), around 05:00 WIB, at the YTP pesantren.

Soon after his passing, the students gathered to discuss the location of Kyai Salim's final resting place. Some students proposed that Kyai Salim be buried at the pesantren to serve as a reminder of his teachings and to symbolize the spiritual heart of the pesantren. Others suggested that he be buried in a public cemetery, so that his grave would not be idolized. After a brief discussion, it was decided to bury Kyai Salim at the public cemetery in Banaran Village, Kertosono, Nganjuk. He was buried in the middle of the public cemetery, and as a result, few people today know the exact location of his grave.⁵¹

Hundreds of people attended Kyai Salim's funeral prayers and escorted him to his final resting place, including representatives from the local government. Slamet Wedono, who represented the government, delivered a short but profound speech. He remarked, "When a kyai

⁵⁰ Ali Manshur Kastam and Ihsanuddin, interview by author.

⁵¹ Ali Manshur Kastam, Sartian, Ihsanuddin, Arif al-Imroni, and Hanif Azhar, interview by author.

passes away, it is difficult to find a replacement; on the other hand, when an official dies, many line up to take their place.” The death of a kyai leaves a deep sorrow not only for the family but also for the pesantren and the community, as the passing of these inheritors of the prophets means that Allah gradually takes away knowledge from the world.⁵²

After several days of vacancy in the leadership of the pesantren, a meeting of senior students and alumni requested Musta’in Kastam, one of the senior students, to succeed Kyai Salim. Musta’in Kastam (later known as Kyai Ta’in) was a beloved student of Kyai Salim and was highly skilled in the *Alfiyah* of Ibn Malik. Long before his passing, Kyai Salim had entrusted Kyai Ta’in with a will to remain at the pesantren and not return to his hometown in Dengok, Paciran, Lamongan.⁵³

Two years prior to his death, Kyai Salim had indicated his choice for the future leader of the pesantren to Professor Abdul Kahar Muzakkir during a visit to Pondok YTP. The chosen successor was Musta’in, signaling that he should be ready to take on the leadership of the pesantren. In addition to Kyai Ta’in, Kyai Salim had another favored student, Kyai Mukhlis Sulaiman. However, Kyai Salim had already permitted Kyai Mukhlis to lead a Muhammadiyah pesantren in Babat, Lamongan.⁵⁴

Talcott Parsons proposed the theory of social roles, emphasizing the importance of integrating social systems through the roles played by individuals within a society. In the context of Kyai Salim’s journey, this theory provides insight into how he adapted to diverse social environments during his time as a *santri* and his extensive travels. From the outset, Kyai Salim was placed in the highly specific role of a *santri*, requiring adherence to the religious values and traditions of the pesantren. However, through his extensive journeys—both domestically and internationally—Salim developed new roles as an educator, reformer, and leader of a pesantren capable of integrating traditional pesantren values with modern principles.

⁵² Ihsanuddin, interview by author, Surabaya, November 24, 2023.

⁵³ Ali Manshur Kastam, Sartian, Ihsanuddin, Arif al-Imroni, and Hanif Azhar, interview by author.

⁵⁴ Ali Manshur Kastam, Sartian, Ihsanuddin, Arif al-Imroni, and Hanif Azhar, interview by author.

This transformation aligns with Parsons' assertion that individuals must conform to existing social norms while simultaneously contributing to broader structural changes in more dynamic contexts. Kyai Salim's ability to adapt and innovate highlights the dual nature of social roles: adhering to tradition while also driving systemic renewal.

The application of social role theory is evident in Kyai Salim's efforts to establish the Ar-Raudlatul Ilmiyah Islamic Boarding School. This pesantren serves as a testament to the integration of traditional values and educational reform. As a leader, Kyai Salim assumed the role of a caretaker who taught not only religious sciences but also general subjects—an unconventional practice for pesantren at the time. This decision represented his achievement status—a status earned through his actions—rather than ascribed status, which is inherited through lineage.

Thus, Kyai Salim not only played the role of a teacher and religious leader but also acted as an agent of social change. He embraced diverse societal groups, imparted values of inclusivity and pluralism, and created educational opportunities for women—something still rare in many pesantren during that era. This progressive stance aligns with Parsons' concept of individuals maintaining equilibrium within larger social structures through adaptation and reform.

By integrating tradition with modernity, Kyai Salim contributed significantly to balancing societal expectations while introducing meaningful educational and social advancements. His actions reflect the dynamic interplay between individual roles and systemic change, as described in Parsons' theoretical framework.

Conclusion

KH. Salim Achjar, a student of KH. Hasyim Asy'ari, successfully merged classical religious traditions with Islamic modernism at the Ar-Raudlatul Ilmiyah Islamic Boarding School he founded in Banaran Village, Kertosono, Nganjuk, East Java. The education provided at this *pesantren* not only focused on traditional religious sciences but also incorporated general subjects such as Mathematics, Geography, and Botany, taught using Arabic reference texts. These innovations

reflected KH. Salim's broad and open-minded perspective toward change, despite his educational background in a traditionally conservative *pesantren*.

KH. Salim also demonstrated remarkable progressiveness by accommodating female students—a bold move for his time. In the early 1950s, educational opportunities for women were limited, and most *pesantren* accepted only male students. However, KH. Salim provided equal access to education for women, adhering to his belief that seeking knowledge is a duty for every Muslim, regardless of gender. This initiative not only expanded the scope of *pesantren* education but also contributed to the empowerment of women in Islam, a rare phenomenon during that era.

KH. Salim's extensive learning experiences, both domestically and internationally, greatly influenced his religious outlook and educational approach. His travels to various countries, including Malaysia, Thailand, Burma, India, Mecca, Iraq, Syria, Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia, Somalia, Yemen, Ceylon (Sri Lanka), and Singapore, enriched his understanding of diverse religious traditions and cultures. This exposure enabled him to embrace Islamic reform ideas and chart a different path from his teacher at Tebuireng. It also allowed him to develop more inclusive and adaptive teaching methods, aligned with the demands of the times.

Overall, KH. Salim Achjar successfully established a *pesantren* that not only preserved classical religious traditions but also accommodated the demands of modernity. The Ar-Raudlatul Ilmiyah Islamic Boarding School, also known as Pondok YTP, stands as tangible evidence of KH. Salim's achievement in integrating traditional values with Islamic reform. His courage and progressive vision in educating female students reaffirm his commitment to equality in education. Thus, KH. Salim Achjar contributed not only to the development of *pesantren* education in Indonesia but also to broader social transformation. Notably, Pondok YTP did not affiliate with any religious movements, whether modernist or traditionalist, as KH. Salim firmly upheld the principle of anti '*asabiyah* (tribalism).

Talcott Parsons' social role theory, which emphasizes the integration of social systems through individual roles, provides a framework for understanding KH. Salim's journey. The theory illustrates how he adapted to different social environments—from a *santri* adhering to *pesantren* traditions to a teacher, reformer, and leader of a *pesantren* that blended

traditional values with modernity. Furthermore, the establishment of the Ar-Raudlatul Ilmiyah *pesantren* by KH. Salim underscores his role in fostering social change, teaching both religious and general knowledge, and offering educational opportunities for women. This reflects the individual's role in creating social equilibrium through adaptation and innovation, in line with Parsons' theory.

This study has several limitations, including reliance on limited data sources derived from interviews with KH. Salim Achjar's students, which may reduce the diversity of perspectives and introduce bias. Additionally, the findings have not been corroborated through other verified sources, and the focus remains solely on the Ar-Raudlatul Ilmiyah *pesantren* without comparison to other *pesantren* with similar backgrounds.

Future research should expand data sources by involving official archives and interviewing more alumni, conducting comparisons with other *pesantren*, and delving deeper into the social, cultural, and gender aspects of religious tradition changes in *pesantren*. A multidisciplinary approach could also enrich the understanding of KH. Salim Achjar's contributions to *pesantren* education reform and his role in society.

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