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Behind The Walls of The Dayah: Between Noble Life Aspirations And The Reality Of Santri In Aceh

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the Dayah traditional Islamic educational institution in Aceh and its pivotal role in shaping the character, scholarship, and spirituality of the Muslim generation. Beyond the walls of the Dayah, known as a space for cultivating Islamic values, lies the dynamic life of the santri students, where the noble ideals of Islamic education intersect with the realities of their daily lives. This research explores the students' lived experiences regarding the meaning of Dayah education, the process of character formation, and the various challenges encountered in their daily environment. Employing a qualitative approach with a phenomenological method, the study delves into the students' subjective experiences concerning educational practices, social relationships, discipline, devotion to their teachers teungku, and their future aspirations. The findings reveal that the Dayah serves not only as a venue for transmitting religious knowledge but also as a space for instilling moral values such as simplicity, self reliance, patience, and responsibility. However, the students' lives also involve confronting realities such as limited facilities, the pressure to adapt, conflicts between educational ideals and the demands of modern life, and the challenge of upholding traditional values amidst social change. This study affirms that life within the Dayah represents a dialectical process between inherited ideal values and the social realities faced by the students, ensuring the institution's continued relevance in shaping a generation of Muslims with strong character in Aceh.

INTRODUCTION

The dayah is the oldest Islamic educational institution in Aceh, having played a significant role in the history of the spread of Islam and the shaping of the Acehnese community's socio-religious identity. As a pesantren style educational institution, the dayah serves not only as a center for the transmission of Islamic knowledge but also as a space for molding the character and morals of the younger generation (Azyumardi Azra, 2019). Within the social context of Aceh, the dayah is often viewed as an institution capable of upholding religious values amidst the tide of modernization. Consequently, the community holds high expectations that students educated in dayahs will emerge as a generation possessing noble character, extensive knowledge, and strong moral resilience (Saifuddin Dhuhri, 2001). However, recent studies indicate that the lives of students do not always

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align with the ideals established in Islamic educational discourse. Phenomena such as ghasab (unauthorized use of others' property), bullying, physical violence, and even cases of sexual harassment occurring in various pesantrens and dayah reveal structural issues that demand serious attention.

The dayah is a traditional Islamic educational institution that holds a strategic position in the history of Islam's development in Aceh. As the oldest educational institution, the dayah serves as a center for the transmission of Islamic knowledge, the cultivation of moral character, and the preservation of religious traditions deeply rooted in Acehnese society (Azyumardi Azra, 2019). The dayah plays a role not only in producing religious scholars and figures but also in acting as a moral bulwark that safeguards the community's Islamic identity amidst ongoing social change(Hasbi Amiruddin, 2008). From the perspective of the Acehnese community, a Dayah is often viewed as an Islamic educational institution deeply imbued with values such as religiosity, sincerity, simplicity, discipline, and devotion to Allah SWT. A Dayahserves not merely as a place to acquire religious knowledge, but also as an educational environment that plays a pivotal role in shaping the personality, character, and social conduct of its students santri. This perspective aligns with the ideas of Zamakhsyari Dhofier, who highlights the significance of the pesantren Islamic boarding school tradition in the transmission of Islamic knowledge and the character development of learners. In the context of contemporary Aceh, research by Helmi indicates that character education within thenDayah framework is fostered through various methods, including habituation, the provision of role models, moral counsel, practical application, and religious motivation. (Helmi, 2021).Consequently, the educational process in a Dayah is oriented not only toward the mastery of religious knowledge but also toward the internalization of Islamic values in daily life. This helps explain why some parents in Aceh choose a Dayah as an educational institution for their children. Research by Kaharuddin, Nyak Umar, and Masbur reveals that religious, environmental, educational quality, and economic factors influence parental decisions in selecting a Dayah with religious considerations being a particularly significant factor. (Kaharuddin, Mukhsin Nyak Umar, 2023).Furthermore, Rifqi and Dehham emphasize that the Dayah holds a vital position in preserving the religious identity of the Acehnese people through the Islamic educational traditions and systems that flourish within the community.(Rifqi, 2023).Therefore, a Dayah can be understood as an educational institution that does more than transmit Islamic knowledge; it also functions to cultivate morality, shape character, and preserve religious values within the life of the Acehnese society.

In the perspective of Acehnese society, Dayah is often seen as an institution filled with the values of purity, sincerity, simplicity and devotion to Allah SWT. The students who study at the Dayah are believed to be undergoing an educational process that is not only aimed at gaining religious knowledge, but also at forming a noble personality and morals (Zamakhsyari Dhofier, 2015). This view makes the Dayah one of the main choices for parents in educating their children so that they have a strong understanding of religion and character that is in accordance with Islamic values. However, beneath this ideal image, the lives of santri students in dayah(Islamic boarding schools involve various dynamics that do not always align with the normative perceptions held by the wider community. Their daily lives are often marked by numerous challenges ranging from limited facilities and family economic constraints to the need to adapt to a highly disciplined environment and the psychological strain of prolonged separation from their families (Mujamil Qomar, 2007). These realities are integral to the educational experience that shapes the character and resilience of the santri during their time at the dayah.

The changing times also bring new challenges for dayah institutions. The currents of globalization, advancements in information technology, and shifts in the mindset of the younger generation require dayah to continuously adapt without losing the identity and traditional values that define them (Abuddin Nata, 2018). In this context, the lives of the santri students constitute a crucial

aspect requiring attention, as they are the central subjects of the educational process within the dayah environment. The changing times present new challenges for dayah (Islamic boarding school) institutions, particularly in navigating the currents of globalization, advancements in information technology, and shifts in the mindset of the younger generation. Such conditions necessitate that dayah institutions adapt to social and technological developments without compromising their core identity, Islamic scholarly traditions, or the moral values that define them. A UNESCO report emphasizes that the integration of technology into education must account for relevance, equitable access, the quality of learning, and the needs of students; this ensures that technology serves not merely as a tool for modernization, but also as a substantive support for educational goals.[1] In the context of dayah education in Indonesia, Nazaruddin et al. explain that digitalization can broaden access to information, enhance learning interactivity, and improve institutional management efficiency though its implementation still faces hurdles related to infrastructure, human resource readiness, and costs.(Nazaruddin, Ahmad Yani, Chalirafi, Alfi Khaira, 2024).

Within this framework, the lives of santri students emerge as a crucial aspect requiring attention; they are not merely objects of instruction, but active subjects possessing their own aspirations, needs, experiences, and hopes for the future. Research by Jahidin on the well-being of santri in traditional pesantren highlights the importance of considering their affective well-being and life satisfaction within a residential educational environment.(Wayan Widiana, Sulis Triyono, Gede Sudirtha & Wulandari, 2023).Consequently, the lives of santri must be understood holistically encompassing the cultivation of character akhlaq, mastery of religious knowledge, discipline, social relationships, personal well-being, and the aspiration for a better life upon completing their education. Thus, research into the lives of santri in Aceh is essential for examining the relationship between the lofty ideals that society associates with dayah education and the daily realities experienced by the students themselves. Given this context, it is crucial to examine the lives of santri students within the walls of dayah Traditional Islamic boarding schools. This study aims not only to understand the noble aspirations upheld by dayah institutions but also to reveal the various realities santri face in their daily lives. Thus, this paper seeks to provide a more comprehensive picture of the relationship between the educational ideals of Islam which constitute the dayah's objectiveand the social realities experienced by santri throughout their education. The research addresses the following questions: what is the reality of santri life in Acehnese dayah, and what transformation efforts are being undertaken to create an educational environment that is safe, humane, and aligned with Islamic principles

To analyze the relationship between the educational aspirations and the lived realities of santri Islamic boarding school students, this study employs Bloom’s Taxonomy as an educational analytical framework. As revised by Anderson and Krathwohl, Bloom’s Taxonomy categorizes cognitive processes into six levels: remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating. This framework facilitates an examination of how santri do not merely recall and comprehend Islamic teachings, but also apply them, analyze their own social experiences, evaluate educational practices, and contribute to fostering a safer and more humane environment within the dayah Islamic boarding school. (Wayan Widiana, Sulis Triyono, Gede Sudirtha & Wulandari, 2023). Nevertheless, Bloom’s Taxonomy is primarily a framework for classifying learning objectives and processes; it is not a theory that directly explains broader social issues, power relations, or the protection of santri Islamic boarding school students. Therefore, its application in this study must be integrated with a contextual analysis of dayah Islamic boarding school) culture, caregiving practices, social relations, and the ethical principles of Islam.(Wayan Widiana, Sulis Triyono, Gede Sudirtha & Wulandari, 2023). Thus, this study aims to develop a comprehensive understanding of the alignment between the ideals of Islamic education in dayah Islamic boarding schools and the social realities experienced by santrimstudents) in Aceh, while simultaneously identifying transformative efforts that can foster an educational environment that is safe, humane, and consistent with Islamic values.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach, specifically a phenomenological one. This approach was selected because the research seeks to understand the lived experiences of santri (Islamic boarding school students) within the dayah environmentparticularly the relationship between the ideal educational aspirations taught to them and the realities of their daily lives. Through this approach, the researcher is able to explore the subjective meanings the students construct regarding their various social, educational, spiritual, and cultural experiences within the dayah setting. Qualitative research aims to understand social phenomena from the participant's perspective in depth and comprehensively in a natural context (Lexy J. Moleong, 2018). Therefore, this approach is considered relevant for uncovering various dynamics of students' lives that cannot be explained only through statistical data. In qualitative research, social reality is understood as something complex, dynamic, and formed through social interactions that take place in everyday life. Researchers not only try to obtain data regarding the facts that occurred, but also try to understand the meaning contained behind the actions, behavior and experiences experienced by the students while studying at Dayah.

The phenomenological approach starts from the assumption that each individual has a unique experience with a phenomenon. This experience forms different perspectives and interpretations of the reality faced. According to Creswell, phenomenology is an approach used to describe the general meaning of the life experiences of a number of individuals regarding a particular concept or phenomenon (John W. Creswell dan Cheryl N, 2018). In the context of this research, the phenomenon studied is the life of students in Islamic boarding schools, which have often been seen as an ideal representation of Islamic education that emphasizes the formation of morals, deepening religious knowledge, discipline, and strengthening the spirit.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

The Reality of Santri Life Behind Dayah Walls

Dayahs in Aceh play a crucial role in shaping the character and Islamic identity of santri (students). These institutions serve not only as centers for the transmission of religious knowledge but also as institutions for moral, spiritual, and social development. From the outset, the dayah educational system has been geared toward producing individuals who possess a balance of intellectual, spiritual, and ethical qualities As traditional Acehnese Islamic educational institutions, dayahs serve as environments for instilling religious values, discipline, and self-reliance, while strengthening student character through an intensive educational process integrated into daily life.

Insights from the students santri

> "One student, who preferred to remain anonymous, shared that adapting to a disciplined life involves learning to sustain one's motivation and manage one's emotions while living away from parents. At times, a packed schedule can be exhausting. Furthermore, since every student has a distinct personality, we must learn to respect our differences. We strive to face the challenges of the modern era by practicing patience, refining our intentions, seeking guidance from our Teungku religious teacher, and maintaining good relationships with our fellow students".(wawancara santri 2026, n.d.)

The Meaning of Dayah Life for Students: Between Challenges and Self-Formation

Dayah life provides important experiences in building independence and social maturity. However, this experience must be directed so that it becomes a positive educational process, not

pressure that hinders the students' psychological development. Therefore, the future of Dayah is very dependent on the institution's ability to maintain a balance between maintaining Islamic scientific traditions and carrying out educational innovations. Dayah must remain a place for the formation of knowledgeable and moral people, but with a more humanistic educational approach. In dayah life, students santri are shaped through various educational activities, such as the study of classical Islamic texts kitab kuning, the practice of communal worship, showing respect to teachers teungku, leading a simple life, and cultivating self-reliance. This process serves as a vehicle for character education, fostering discipline, responsibility, patience, and adherence to religious values. ayah education is not solely oriented toward the transmission of Islamic knowledge but also focuses on shaping the students' character by instilling moral, spiritual, and social values in their daily lives.

However, the ideal nature of dayah education is not immune to the challenges posed by changing times. The modernization of education, shifts in the character of the younger generation, and advancements in information technology require dayah institutions to adapt so they can continue to fulfill their educational role without losing their traditional values.

The Perspective of Dayah Students

> “In our view, dayah Islamic boarding school education must continue to uphold the tradition of studying religious knowledge and cultivating moral character. In this modern era, students also need space to express their opinions, engage in discussions, and develop practical skills that will be beneficial for their future. We hope that the enforcement of discipline is always accompanied by educational explanations and effective communication. In this way, we the students will not merely comply with the dayah’s rules, but will also come to understand the reasoning and values that underpin them”.(The Perspective of Dayah Students 2026, 2026)

The Gap Between the Ideal Values of Islamic Education and the Social Reality of Santri

The life of Islamic boarding school students in Dayah shows complex experiences. Santri not only undergo a religious learning process, but also experience a process of social adaptation in the dormitory environment. They are required to adapt to various rules, regulations, structured activity schedules, and patterns of living together with other students. These conditions make Dayah an educational space that not only transmits religious knowledge, but also shapes the social experiences and character of students through daily interactions. Dormitory life offers a positive experience for the personality development of santri (Islamic boarding school students). Social interactions within the dayah environment foster cooperation, solidarity, responsibility, discipline, and independence. Through shared activitiessuch as religious study sessions, congregational worship, cleaning duties, and other forms of communal living students learn to understand diverse personalities and develop the ability to resolve issues collaboratively.

However, communal life within the dormitory environment also presents challenges. Social issues such as a culture of seniority, the practice of ghasab (using others' belongings without permission), peer pressure, and the potential for bullyingcan arise as consequences of intense social interaction. These phenomena indicate that a boarding-based educational system requires continuous supervision, a humanistic approach to guidance, and the strengthening of a culture of mutual respect among the dayah community members. This issue demonstrates that character education cannot rely solely on the theoretical transmission of religious values; rather, it must be realized through an environmental system that supports the practice of these values in daily life. In Islamic educational institutions such as dayah, character education requires the teacher teungku to set an example, the cultivation of good behavioral habits, the reinforcement of a culture of discipline, and the management of healthy social relationships between students and the entire educational community.

Islamic education as implemented within the dayah tradition is fundamentally oriented toward shaping individuals who possess a balance of intellectual, spiritual, and social-moral qualities. The dayah serves not merely as a venue for the transmission of religious knowledge but also as a space for character development, fostering values such as compassion, brotherhood ukhuwah, respect for teachers ta'zim , simplicity, and noble conduct in daily life. However, in the actual lives of santri (students), the process of internalizing these values encounters various social dynamics; this necessitates a strengthening of the guidance approach so that the ideal values of Islamic education can be more optimally realized in the students' behavior and social interactions. his gap can be influenced by several factors, including senior-junior relationship dynamics, a disciplinary system that places excessive emphasis on obedience, and a lack of psychological approaches in educating santri Islamic boarding school students. While discipline is indeed a crucial part of Islamic education, it must be fostered through an approach that is both educational and humane.

Allah the Almighty says:

فَبِمَا رَحْمَةٍ مِّنَ اللهِ لِنْتَ لَهُمْ ۚ وَلَوْ كُنْتَ فَظًّا غَلِيْظَ الْقَلْبِ لَانْفَضُّوْا مِنْ حَوْلِكَ

Meaning: "So, thanks to Allah's grace, you will be gentle towards them. If you were hard and harsh, they would surely stay away from those around you." (QS. Ali Imran: 159)

Transformation Towards Child-Friendly Dayahs and Compassion-Based Education

Social change requires dayahs to transform their approaches to the education and upbringing of santri (students). This transformation does not entail abandoning dayah traditions but rather reinforcing core Islamic values to align with the needs of modern society. The concept of a child-friendly dayah (Islamic boarding school) represents a relevant approach to providing an Islamic education that is safe, comfortable, and respectful of students' rights. The educational environment must be capable of protecting students from various forms of violence, whether physical or psychological.

Several steps that can be taken in the transformation of dayah Islamic boarding schools include:

a. Establishing a student protection system through clear regulations regarding the prevention of violence and bullying.
b. Developing a positive discipline approach that prioritizes guidance and nurturing over punishment.
c. Enhancing the capacity of teungku religious teachers) and caregivers to understand students' psychological development.
d. Integrating the Islamic values of rahmatan lil 'alamin mercy to all creation into the entire educational process.
e. Adopting a phenomenological approach, where the lived experiences of students at the dayah demonstrate that education occurs not only in the classroom but through all aspects of daily life; social interaction, discipline, acts of worship, and communal living all serve to shape the students' character.

DISCUSSION

The Reality of Santri Life Behind Dayah Walls

Dayahs in Aceh play a crucial role in shaping the character and Islamic identity of santri (students). These institutions serve not only as centers for the transmission of religious knowledge but also as institutions for moral, spiritual, and social development. From the outset, the dayah educational system has been geared toward producing individuals who possess a balance of intellectual, spiritual, and ethical qualities (M. Hasbi Amiruddin, 2013). As traditional Acehnese Islamic educational institutions, dayahs serve as environments for instilling religious values, discipline, and self-reliance, while strengthening student character through an intensive educational process integrated into daily life.

In dayah life, students santri are shaped through various educational activities, such as the study of classical Islamic texts kitab kuning, the practice of communal worship, showing respect to teachers teungku, leading a simple life, and cultivating self-reliance. This process serves as a vehicle for character education, fostering discipline, responsibility, patience, and adherence to religious values (M. Arifin, 2021). Dayah education is not solely oriented toward the transmission of Islamic knowledge but also focuses on shaping the students' character by instilling moral, spiritual, and social values in their daily lives (Muhammad Iqbal dan A. Rahman, 2022). However, the ideal nature of dayah education is not immune to the challenges posed by changing times. The modernization of education, shifts in the character of the younger generation, and advancements in information technology require dayah institutions to adapt so they can continue to fulfill their educational role without losing their traditional values.

The Gap Between the Ideal Values of Islamic Education and the Social Reality of Santri

The lives of santri students) in a dayah Islamic boarding school reflect a complex set of experiences. They do not merely undergo a process of religious learning but also navigate social adaptation within the dormitory environment. They are required to adjust to various rules, regulations, structured schedules, and the dynamics of communal living with fellow students. These conditions position the dayah as an educational space that not only transmits religious knowledge but also shapes the students' social experiences and character through daily interactions (Husein Muhammad Yusuf, 2022). Dormitory life offers a positive experience for the personality development of santri Islamic boarding school students (Arifin et al., 2025; Setiawan et al., 2023). Social interactions within the dayah environment foster cooperation, solidarity, responsibility, discipline, and independence. Through shared activitiessuch as religious study sessions, congregational worship, cleaning duties, and other forms of communal living students learn to understand diverse personalities and develop the ability to resolve issues collaboratively (Ahmad Fauzi dan Nurul Huda, 2023).

However, communal life within the dormitory environment also presents challenges. Social issuessuch as a culture of seniority, the practice of ghasab using others' belongings without permission, peer pressure, and the potential for bullying can arise as consequences of intense social interaction (Rigby, 2003; Vanderbilt & Augustyn, 2010; Wolke & Lereya, 2015). These phenomena indicate that a boarding-based educational system requires continuous supervision, a humanistic approach to guidance, and the strengthening of a culture of mutual respect among the dayah community members (M. Ridwan dan Zainal Abidin, 2024). This issue demonstrates that character education cannot rely solely on the theoretical transmission of religious values (Bar-El et al., 2013; Flor & Knapp, 2001); rather, it must be realized through an environmental system that supports the practice of these values in daily life. In Islamic educational institutions such as dayah, character education requires the teacher teungku to set an example, the cultivation of good behavioral habits, the reinforcement of a culture of discipline, and the management of healthy social relationships between students and the entire educational community (Siti Rahmah, 2021).

CONCLUSION

This research demonstrates that dayah play a crucial role in shaping the character, scholarship, and spirituality of santri students. A dayah is not merely an Islamic educational institution that imparts religious knowledge through the study of classical texts kitab kuning; it also serves as a setting for cultivating life valuessuch as discipline, simplicity, self-reliance, and respect for teachers teungku and for fostering noble character. The ideal aspiration of the dayah is to produce a generation that possesses deep religious knowledge and good character, and is capable of serving as leaders and contributors to society.

However, beneath these noble values, the lives of santri students in dayah Islamic boarding schools) also involve navigating complex realities. They do not merely engage in religious learning; they also face psychological, social, and economic challenges, as well as limited facilities and the need to reconcile traditional dayah life with the demands of the modern era. Their experiences reveal a dynamic interplay between the ideal aspirations of dayah education and the realities of their daily lives.Thus, the dayah is an educational institution that constantly navigates the process of balancing the preservation of Islamic traditions with the need to respond to social change. Its success is measured not only by its ability to uphold traditional values but also by its capacity to foster the development of students' potential, enabling them to face the challenges of contemporary life without losing their Islamic identity.

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