Preserving *kyai* authority in modern society

A case study of Pesantren Cidahu, Pandeglang, Banten

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**ABSTRACT**

A pesantren is a typical component of the Indonesian cultural heritage. Besides being thought of as one of the oldest type of educational institutions in Indonesia, pesantren have played a significant contributing role in the process of nation building in modern Indonesia. Pesantren have many roles in society in education, the economy and in the social and political fields in which pesantren alumni play a role. Currently, pesantren roles are being challenged by modernization and they have to change or transform into modern institutions in order to survive. Nevertheless, traditional pesantren continue to resist change and they insist on preserving their identity in terms of authority and student teacher relationships. This article seeks to analyse the efforts that the traditional Pesantren Cidahu in Banten makes to preserve its identity and to maintain its authority in modern society. By hanging on to modest practices, Pesantren Cidahu manages to continue to exert strong influence over its students and over the society in West Java in general.

**KEYWORDS**

*Kyai*, pesantren, Pesantren Cidahu, Banten, authority, modernization.

**INTRODUCTION**

Pesantren Cidahu is located in the village of Cidahu, Cadasari, in the district of Pandeglang, in the province of Banten. Pandeglang is a rural area where...
most people work as farmers while others are traders and labourers in major
cities such as Jakarta and Bandung. Compared with other regions in Indonesia,
Pandeglang is underdeveloped with slow economic growth and many people
living below the poverty line.

The pesantren is named after the village of Cidahu to enable people to
recognize the institution’s location while it also reflects how well the pesantren
has already been known in the region. Many pesantren in Indonesia adopt the
name of the village or region in which they are located, for example Pesantren
Cipasung in Tasikmalaya, and Pesantren Kempek in Cirebon, both in West
Java, and Pesantren Sidogiri in Gresik, East Java, to name some examples. Most
of them are traditional pesantren. People prefer to use the name of the village
or the region not only to refer to the pesantren but also to show how influential
the kyai in these areas are. As a result, kyai are known under the name of the
village or the region as well, such as Kyai Cidahu who is famous in Banten.

Especially when a kyai is charismatic, he manages to maintain his authority
as he is considered the source of information par excellence about the main
truths of Islam. Because of this, a kyai occupies a highly special position and his
students will obey his every wish without ever critically doubting the validity
of his dogmatic religious teachings (Haryatmoko 2010:3). In this article, I will
use the term “authority” to refer to religious authority comprising of a kyai’s
influence and competence and the obedience he elicits. I will show why it is
important to study the authority of the kyai in this pesantren and I will explain
how Pesantren Cidahu maintains its authority in the midst of the waves of
modernization and globalization. To analyse the development of authority in
this pesantren I use the Dhofer’s three interrelated aspects of influence: kyai,
pondok (dormitory), and curriculum (Dhofer 1982: 28).

THE PARADOX OF PESANTREN CIDAHU

Located in a remote area in the province of Banten, Pesantren Cidahu still
upholds its modest and traditional educational management to this day.
Indeed, most influential pesantren in Indonesia are located in isolated regions.
This being so, they still manage to exert significant influence over society in
general. Kyai build their pesantren in places far removed from modern urban
society because of the impact society might have on their development. A
pesantren in a rural area is often in the centre of attention. Because pesantren
see themselves as important entities, people in their surrounding villages
or even in the region where they are located recognize pesantren as the most
important places in their region. Someone who wants to visit a pesantren can
thus easily get information about where it is localized, no matter how far
away it is removed from the city.

On the main road leading to Pesantren Cidahu, no signboard has been
placed to indicate its location. It is part of the tradition within the most
traditional pesantren in Banten that a real pesantren should not promote its
existence by means of any media promotion. Since Pesantren Cidahu maintains
this tradition, the institution’s nameplate has become of no consequence. If the
pesantren should have put a nameplate, it would have discredited the sense of sincerity the founders had in developing the pesantren.\footnote{Interview with Muhtadi, (68 years), Pandeglang, 13 July 2013.} People should recognize a pesantren in a natural fashion through their acknowledgment of a particular kyai’s presence. A pesantren is considered a kind of magnet because people who need to find it will automatically be drawn to it. Therefore, promoting the pesantren by putting up a nameplate is considered to diminish sincerity and simultaneously and automatically decreases the respect for and the authority of its kyai.

In traditional pesantren, sincerity, which is the translation of the Indonesian term ikhlas, has become their most important principle in their continued existence. In order to survive, Pesantren Cidahu always tries to uphold original traditions. When my research team and I visited Pesantren Cidahu, Kyai Murtadlo, Kyai Cidahu’s second son welcomed us warmly. Kyai Dimyathi (Kyai Cidahu) also known as Abuya Dimyathi or Abuya Cidahu is Pesantren Cidahu’s founder. Kyai Murtadlo is an unassuming and agreeable person just like his father. During our conversation, he was charming and he never stopped smiling while his words were full of advice. He also did not hesitate to offer us his written special prayer when one of our team members asked for his prayer. During our meeting, he exuded confidence but at the same time he kept a low profile. He kept his face down as a symbol of self-effacement and he kept talking while admonishing us with advice. He also talked about his intimate relationship with many high-ranking military officers and civil servants in Jakarta.

Kyai Cidahu taught his sons to develop the pesantren but to keep away from any attempts to get benefits and material incentives from dakwah (Islamic propagations). A kyai’s main duty is to offer words of wisdom but not to trade in them. He should be unassuming and not consider himself the most prominent person among his followers. Therefore, when Kyai Murtadlo decided to write his father’s biography, it took him a long time to decide whether it would be proper to write about and by so doing expose stories about his father. In the end he decided to write his book, which he entitled “Manaqib Abuya Cidahu”, however, he did so without intentionally glorifying his father. Rather, it was an attempt to preserve his father’s teachings.

Even though many people knew him (Kyai Cidahu) to be someone special and endowed with many sanctities, it would have been improper to directly mention this. Many people who loved him recognized his sanctity, which shows that he was considered a person very much loved by God. In writing the Manaqib, I always asked God to guide the writing process to help me to imbue it with a sense of sincerity and spirituality.\footnote{Interview with Murtadlo (65 years), Pandeglang, 13 July 2013.}

According to Kyai Murtadlo, the writing process was not simply one of writing, editing, and printing, but also involved spiritual aspects. While writing the Manaqib, he kept his body clean and purified in order to reach the
highest spirituality. The process of writing his father’s story was not merely his own intention but also because God Himself guided him. He kept the structure and the tone of the book natural, and he relied on his mind and his heart to decide which aspects of his father’s life should be written first. He believed that this is not just an ordinary book and that it is full of sanctity. He informed us that the book exudes the smell of perfume, which is a token of its sanctity.

When we wanted to purchase the book and inquired about its price, his reply was interesting. He explained that it is his family’s tradition that they are not allowed to sell the book or to derive any profit from it as it would reduce the book’s sanctity. In the end, he mentioned the amount of 250,000 rupiah, which he hastened to ask us not to consider its price, but merely for us to understand as a token of respect for the book’s value. Indeed, it has no fixed price but people will show their respect for the book by paying a higher price in order to obtain the kyai’s blessing. People will rate the book’s price differently according to their sense of sincerity. Since the book has no fixed price, people would willingly rate it themselves and they usually pay a higher price. This is so because people will recognize the book’s special “significance” that is its blessings; therefore, it has become priceless. Kyai Murtadlo himself courteously stated the following about the book’s price:

We may not sell the Manaqib because our father taught us not to trade in religious knowledge. If you want to appreciate the value of this book, it is not part of a buying and selling activity.\(^3\)

Although the kyai does not want to sell the book, paradoxically yet again, in reality, people who visit him paid more money than the real price of the book. The way people treat the Manaqib is also determined by the intimacy of their relationship with the kyai. People who highly respect him are prepared to pay more as they do not only consider its artificial meaning but rather seek the books’ sanctity. The simple tradition of remaining silent and keeping away from publicity has in fact strengthened the kyai’s authority. Not selling the book does not mean that he does not get a higher price for it. Through this tradition and by maintaining its sense of sincerity, Pesantren Cidahu has started to build its reputation in Banten and by now has become one of the most influential pesantren in Banten and even in the whole of Java.

However, these attempts at hiding the pesantren from modern society, for example by not putting any signboard on the road, not wanting to be exposed to the outside world and not setting the price of the book, prove a kind of paradox. Although Pesantren Cidahu does not like to be exposed to the public, in reality I observed that it is well known among ordinary people in Banten and among many high-ranking bureaucrats and political party leaders. In fact, Pesantren Cidahu remains a centre of political power and it provides religious references for its santri (students) and for ordinary people.

\(^3\) Interview with Murtadlo, Pandeglang, 13 July 2013.
as well. Clearly, Pesantren Cidahu is well known for the profound influence it has for the people in Banten, and not from its sign plate, which, indeed, it does not need at all (Figure 1).

![Figure 1. Pesantren Cidahu is a part of the surrounding neighbourhood and it blends in with the houses of the people in the village of Cidahu. There is no sign to indicate the pesantren’s name (photograph by Ade Nurrahmah, 2013).](image)

Why is Pesantren Cidahu’s influence on its students and the people surrounding the pesantren still high in the midst of swift modernization and social change? The following part of the article will describe the characteristics of Pesantren Cidahu more in depth and will show how the pesantren preserves its traditional values. We will return to Dhofier’s three aspects of a pesantren (the figure of the kyai, dormitory, and curriculum) that determined Pesantren Cidahu’s development and the increase of its authority.

**KYAI**

In general, pesantren consist of the three interrelated elements mentioned above. Nowadays, these three elements have gone through significant changes but Pesantren Cidahu still preserves these elements in their original form.

A kyai occupies a pivotal role in influencing the prevailing education system and the behaviour of the students in a pesantren (Dhofier 1982: 29). He has a very special position for the students and they always follow-up whatever he commands. A kyai is a strong figure and he has the ability to control the truth. In this case, a kyai is considered to have total and unquestionable authority. Because of his authority and his ability to dominate religious truth, he manages to attract the masses in large numbers. He is a symbol of integrity, prestige, knowledge and charismatic leadership (Soebahar 2013: 70). The question we are concerned with here is the way the kyai in Pesantren Cidahu maintains
his religious authority. In order to get a picture of the changing patterns of kyai’s authority in Indonesia, it may serve to analyse the role of the kyai in the influential Pesantren Cidahu.

The kyai in Pesantren Cidahu occupies a key position. He is a highly respected religious scholar and whatever he says is gospel to the students. Currently, Pesantren Cidahu is famous mostly due to two figures, Kyai Muhtadi and Kyai Murtadlo, the late Kyai Cidahu’s sons. Kyai Cidahu was a charismatic figure who founded the pesantren in the early twentieth century. His full name was Muhammad Dimyathi but later he was called Abuya Dimyathi. In the pesantren, Abuya Dimyathi’s two sons have preserved their father’s heritage by maintaining his style/model of management. Both are quite well known in Pandeglang mostly because of their father. Both organize pengajian (religious gatherings) that thousands of people coming from outside the pesantren attend. Compared to most modern pesantren in Java, the most interesting feature of this traditional pesantren is the fact that the brothers’ religious gatherings always involve large numbers of people from the areas directly surrounding the pesantren but from other regions as well. Their houses have turned into places where many people visit to ask for their blessings and prayers.

In general, Pesantren Cidahu’s existence cannot be seen in separation of its founder himself, Abuya Dimyathi. Abuya Dimyathi (Abuya Cidahu) is a very influential figure in Banten and is well known among many other influential kyai in Java. In Sufi terms, he is a wara, a humble person. He was born in 1920 in the village of Kahalang, Cadasari in the district of Pandeglang, Banten and he passed away in 2003. Dimyathi’s grandfather was a nobleman named Tubagus Buang, who was also known as Sheikh Abdullah. His full name was Pangeran Ariya Qodli Djayasantika bin Pangeran Mandura bin Sultan Maulana Abdul Mufakhir Mahmud Abdul Qodir bin Sultan Maulana Hasanuddin Albantani bin Syarif Hidayatullah. The stories about Abuya Dimyathi, as stated in the book of Manaqib, are mostly related to his merits in relation to sanctity or karomah, wide networks, and teaching method.

Karomah is a special gift that God gives to the chosen people because of their close relation with the creator. In establishing his religious authority, it is important for a kyai to have the ability to beget karomah. Among his followers, many irrational stories circulate about Abuya Dimyathi, which they usually were told by his closest disciples or his family. Abuya Dimyathi was believed to be a kyai endowed with exceptional characteristics ordinary people do not possess. Kyai Dimyathi’s followers and his family believe that only exceptional people are granted to become a wali (holy saint). Abuya Dimyathi somehow was considered as wali. Many stories in the Manaqib attest to these claims. As a child, for instance, Dimyathi used to wake up at night to worship and would not go back to sleep until the morning. He kept to this habit until he had grown into a great kyai.

Because of the many special events that happened to him, many people believe that Abuya Dimyathi was an emblematic kyai who had reached the
highest level. During his life, the people knew him as a person who focused on the hereafter and he lived in a very modest way. Therefore, he was regarded as a kyai khos (a special kyai). In Indonesia, only very few kyai who were very influential in society, have ever been considered kyai khos. In fact, kyai are distinguished into two types, kyai akherat (hereafter-oriented kyai) and kyai dunia (world-oriented kyai). The first type usually shies away from political activities, avoids publicity, while the second is often involved in politics and enjoys publicity (Turmudi 2004: 60). Indeed, those who are considered kyai dunia today mostly only think about the need to meet the interests of the world and they are often involved in worldly transactions.

Before becoming known as a great kyai in Banten, Abuya Dimyathi spent most of his time studying in pesantren in Banten, West Java, Central Java, and East Java. Most of the pesantren he visited for his studies were recognized at the time as the most influential ones in Java. When he studied at these pesantren, he was already recognized as a special student. His love to study actually never ended and he often left his family at home only to continue his learning with a great kyai in Java.

He began his study at Pesantren Kadupeusing in Pandeglang under the guidance the great kyai Al-Alim Al-Allama Tubagus Abuya Abdul Halim bin Muhammad Amin. The Manaqib relates that he made the six kilometres distance from his village to the pesantren by foot. Along the way, he kept his face down and did not look to any directions except when he was about to cross a road (Dimyathi 2008: 56). During his studies at Pesantren Kadupeusing, to meet his daily needs he only brought with him two litres of rice, one bottle of coconut oil and the one piece of clothing that he wore. Abuya Dimyathi displayed this kind of humble behaviour from the time he was a child until he passed away. For his entire life, he only focused on the interests of the hereafter. He only partook of very simple food and he ate it moderately. He did not finish one full plate of rice a day. He only ate burned rice crust that stuck to the pan. He actually did not satisfy his hunger by just consuming a little bit of food because when he was asleep, he dreamed of eating much food and after waking up, he felt full. Often, he also merely ate papaya leaves, bean leaves, and sago. He acted this humbly out of principle because of his religious attitude and he firmly held on to these acts when dealing with his worldly needs.

After completing his study at Pesantren Kadupeusing he went to Pesantren Sempur in Plered, Purwakarta, West Java. He started his learning process in Sempur with a letter of introduction written by Kyai Abdul Halim to Kyai Sempur asking him to accept Dimyathi as his disciple. In Pesantren Sempur, many exceptional stories about Dimyathi were told. Because he did not have any money, Dimyathi never used writing books or owned any religious books known as kitab kuning (loose-leaved books printed on yellow paper). He relied on his strong memory to remember the knowledge he got from his great teacher. During his study at Pesantren Sempur, he got married but he left his wife at home to continue his studies. After finishing his study of
religious knowledge in the most influential *pesantren* in Banten and West Java, Dimyathi continued his studies in Magelang and Yogyakarta in Central Java, and in Kediri in East Java (Dimyathi 2008: 59).

Abuya Dimyathi used a unique method to teach his sons and he instructed them to continue to develop the *pesantren*. In his view, the responsibility to educate the community was an integral part of his obligation to educate. When he taught religion in the *pesantren*, it meant that he taught his sons while other students, who attended his circle, also supported his effort to teach the other children. Abuya Dimyathi often took his sons along during his visits to *pesantren* outside Banten either to preach or simply to gain knowledge from famous *kyai*. During his visits, he gave many lessons to his sons through experiences. He intended to make them follow the way he interacted with people and gained knowledge. One of his sons, Murthadlo was the most fortune one since Abuya Dimyathi often brought him during his “spiritual journey”. Until the present, his two sons, Kyai Muhtadi and Kyai Murtadlo, still use these ways of instruction in Pesantren Cidahu and they are currently considered to have full authority.

Kyai Muhtadi is Abuya Dimyathi’s eldest son. He is an unassuming figure who likely inherited his humble character from his father. He lives in a modest house surrounded by students who are always ready to help him. Just like his father, Kyai Muhtadi inherited his father’s knowledge about the classical *kitab kuning*. Behind his house, he built a large hall in which he teaches the students and the community. The hall is also made to act as a shelter for the children. He hopes that his own children will continue his position and will become *kyai* in *pesantren*. The hall, according to him, is big enough to accommodate all his children and his entire future family.

Muhtadi’s teaching focuses on *kitab kuning*, which are divided into “big” books and “small” books. Big books include books on religious knowledge and jurisprudence and mostly discuss complex religious issues. They are larger and often contain many volumes. Small books, as the designation suggests, are smaller and have a simpler format. They discuss less complicated religious knowledge and the ways to execute daily religious practices. What Kyai Muhtadi teaches today is exactly what his father already taught in the past and nothing has changed.

Kyai Muhtadi’s brother, Kyai Murtadlo, is somewhat different. He somehow inherited other aspects from his father. He follows his father’s characters in terms of his wide networks and social interactions. He appears to be a more influential *kyai* than his brother and his name is widely known in Banten. Unlike his brother, Murtadlo lives in a large and luxurious house. Often, he tends to proclaim himself as the successor of his father’s position and he had a closer relationship with his father compared to his elder brother. That is why he started writing his father’s biography entitled *Manaqib Abuya Cidahu* as mentioned above.

If Kyai Muhtadi continues his father’s role as a religious teacher equipped

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4 Interview with Muhtadi, Pandeglang, 13 July 2013.
with profound knowledge of Islamic classical books, Kyai Murtadlo focuses more on his role of mediator with the wider community. He has become a source of public reference and contributes to solve problems in society. Kyai Muhtadi is thus better known as a “sufi” and as an ascetic figure while Kyai Murtadlo is better known for his popularity and proximity to the larger community. Both occupy special positions for the students in Pesantren Cidahu and in Banten’s larger society.

**Kobong (simple dormitory)**

A kobong is a kind of simple shelter for pesantren’s students where they sleep, study, and interact with each other. Most of the students live in a kobong. However, some students are called santri kalong ‘fruit bats santri’, because they only come to study during the day and return to their own houses during the night.

In Pesantren Cidahu, a kobong is a simple construction usually made of wooden boards with palm leaves for the roof. Some students like to stay in older kobong they inherited from senior students but others are freshly built by the students themselves. Other students prefer to bring a kobong from their own village and to rebuild it on the pesantren grounds. Around 10-20 students live in one large kobong which consists of one large room. It is clear that in Pesantren Cidahu, a kobong does not merely function as a place to stay and sleep but also has a special meaning in the process of transferring knowledge. The students are responsible to keep it clean and they have to develop a sense of belonging to their kobong. There is a sense of blessing within a kobong and everybody enjoys living in it. One of our respondents from West Java told us about his experience living in kobong.

> I brought my kobong from my village and after finishing my study in the pesantren, I gave my kobong to other students. I was happy and enjoyed living in the kobong because it gave me a lot experiences about life.\(^5\)

In Pesantren Cidahu, a special, historical kobong was once occupied by Abuya Dimyathfi. It is famous among the students since many of them hope one day to be allowed to stay in it. Kyai Murtadlo told us that many important figures in the country have tried to live in this special kobong and in pesantren terms, this tradition is about being “splashed with the sanctity” of the kyai and his legacy. As described by Millie (2009), for pesantren students and followers of certain Sufi orders, being “splashed by sanctity” is very important. This kind of spiritual experience is very useful for a person who wants to follow in the spiritual footsteps of a great person. I was told that the former president of Indonesia, Abdurrahman Wahid, had stayed in this special kobong. Besides Wahid, many other high-ranking officials from civilian and military institutions also lived in the kobong as a ritual to obtain blessings, if for only one night.

The kobong, which are built at Pesantren Cidahu, are integrated with the

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\(^5\) Interview with Matin (55 years), 13 July 2013.
people’s homes in the village of Cidahu. This integration intends to enable students to develop good interactions with villagers. Unlike most pesantren in Indonesia that exclusively build their building and dormitories away from the villagers, Pesantren Cidahu blends in with the villagers’ houses. Indeed, for someone who visits the pesantren for the first time it will be hard to find the pesantren since there is no sign plate and there seems to be no difference between the pesantren and the people’s dwellings. The only distinguishable feature is the unique kobong as they reflect the existence of Pesantren Cidahu (Figure 2).

The kobong tradition teaches students to live in very modest ways. Therefore, the pesantren is often accused of only wanting to teach students who care about their lives in the hereafter (Zazin and Umiarso 2011: 13). However, although the students in Pesantren Cidahu live very modestly, they are highly spirited in their daily lives and they meet students from different backgrounds in the kobong. In the kobong, students learn, memorize the Qur’an and the kitab kuning, cook, eat, wash, and do other activities together. Students at Pesantren Cidahu do not have to pay money because they come from lower class families. Their parents are mainly farmers or small traders who live in Banten and various places in East Java and Sumatra. Apart from performing their tasks in the kobong, they also help their kyai and perform daily activities, such as gardening and taking care of the daily affairs at the kyai’s house. Until now, all kobong are left in their natural conditions and they should not be changed. The students study at the pesantren because they have families or friends who are studying at the pesantren or had studied there before them. The students choose to study at Pesantren Cidahu because they want to be religious teachers or leaders in their region.

Figure 2. A kobong at Pesantren Cidahu gives students many experiences (photograph by Yuzki, 2013).
Nowadays, about 300 students stay at Pesantren Cidahu. Students who share the same kobong usually come from the same region and they inherit the kobong from their senior fellow students. Students from East Java, for instance, share the same kobong and they build close interactions during their stay as they build their networks and share information about the pesantren either with other students, families, and friends. Not surprisingly, most of them become sources of information on the reputation of the pesantren. The traditional linkages through family and friends are very strong and are maintained from generation to generation. The santri tradition in rural areas shows the interesting phenomenon that santri maintain their loyalties and obedience to their kyai. As in other pesantren, this tradition is fully preserved in Pesantren Cidahu. It is their kyai who disciplines them and who punishes them when they violate the pesantren’s regulations (Alamsyah 2009: 75).

CURRICULUM

The curriculum in Pesantren Cidahu is very traditional and follows the model of religious education that was passed down by its founder. Since its establishment, the curriculum has never been changed. Students are required to visit the kyai to attend pengajian about the classical yellow books, which take place in the mornings, afternoons, and at night. This model of education allows for close interaction between the students and the kyai. When the kyai has finished reading and has giving his explanations on the contents of the yellow books, the students do not ask him any questions as it is considered impolite to so; therefore, the contents of the Islamic knowledge they just received should not be discussed but should be put in practice.

Students treat their kyai as the source of Islamic knowledge and they must respect him because he transmits God’s knowledge. They should be spiritually prepared before attending his gatherings where the Qur’an or the classical books are discussed. Since the pesantren has its own curriculum, it does not follow the curriculum set by the Ministry of Religious Affairs. The students are required to master a particular classical book and to put its lessons into practice in public. Pesantren Cidahu does not use classes or other modern media for educational activities. The knowledge is transferred through the sorogan system in which the students sit around the kyai to listen to his reading and his explanations of the yellow books (Subhan 2009: 75).

At Pesantren Cidahu, students do not need to think about what knowledge they will get. The only thing they want is to get knowledge that is of manfaat (use) and the barokah (blessing) of their kyai. To get useful and blessed knowledge, students should not differ of opinion with their kyai in religious matters. Most students in this pesantren follow their kyai’s views and suggestions regarding their daily activities, including political issues. It is clear that the educational system in this pesantren does not allow any disagreement between the students and the kyai as these are considered forms of disobedience, which will hamper the transmission of useful and blessed
knowledge. The kyai at Pesantren Cidahu has full authority in transferring knowledge and students must come to the pengajian completely focused and full of respect.

The students are accustomed to be patient, to wait for the kyai to arrive and they do not try to call him if he has not yet appeared. While waiting for the kyai, they are also not allowed to talk to each other. They need to prepare themselves fully to receive his knowledge. It is clear that the students do not only highly respect the knowledge they receive but also the person who passes it on. This is because the lives of those who disrespect the kyai will be useless. The model of education and teaching at Pesantren Cidahu ensures the close supervision of the kyai over his students and they are convinced that even in his absence, the kyai supervises and watches over them, no matter where they are.

Most students who study at Cidahu want to become religious leaders and preachers in their home villages and to spread the knowledge they obtained from their kyai. In this way, they continue to uphold this tradition and they teach what they have learned to the public. They teach people in the villages to respect the kyai and their knowledge. They try to imitate the tradition that they were familiar with in the pesantren and to apply it in their society as much as possible. They usually do this by starting to establish a new pesantren in their home village and by maintaining their ties with Pesantren Cidahu. They posit themselves as Pesantren Cidahu’s representatives and persuade new students to go to Pesantren Cidahu to study religious knowledge. Through this network, the relations between the alumni and the kyai are maintained. They are ready to disseminate any information from their kyai in Pesantren Cidahu. Moreover, the alumni often visit him in order to preserve their connection.

Students who study at Pesantren Cidahu are not motivated by material incentives. They no longer think of getting a job after they have finished their study. They only think of learning seriously in order to become religious preachers. Their devotion to the kyai is considered a means to become successful in their lives. Therefore, they do not think of getting a formal degree from the institution since they only need the informal ijazah (certificate) of their kyai. In this way, the absence of a formal curriculum and because they do not get a degree at Pesantren Cidahu makes the students highly dependent on their kyai. Here, their study is not limited by time but rather depends on the patterns of interaction the students build between themselves and the kyai. It is the students’ task to study sincerely and the kyai will inform them when they should stop. On average, students at Pesantren Cidahu spend at least five years there and some even take up to ten years to finish their “religious training”. Some senior students even choose not to return to their villages but decide to devote themselves to assist their kyai. Among the students, becoming the kyai’s assistant is considered a prestigious position.

Unlike Pesantren Cidahu, other Islamic educational institutions use brochures and disseminate information to promote themselves. They rely on information from religious scholars and students. Pesantren Cidahu does not
need to promote itself through modern information media but relies on word of mouth and those who studied at the school will inform the public so they come to study at Pesantren Cidahu. Students who are studying there already understand Cidahu’s highly traditional boarding conditions. Those who come from distant places just want to learn and seek the charismatic cleric’s blessing.

Since the curriculum at Pesantren Cidahu is unstructured, the students can learn from direct interactions with the people around the pesantren and from their kyai. They observe how the kyai deals with his guests and assist him. Later, they may imitate the kyai’s ways and apply them in their own lives. Some senior students are assigned to serve guests, listen to the people’s problems, and they accept the simple gifts visitors bring as presents for the kyai (Figure 3). Villagers who come to ask for the blessings of Kyai Murtadlo or Kyai Muhtadi at Pesantren Cidahu usually bring rice, sugar, and basic food. In the event of maulid (the Prophet’s birthday) and haul (the yearly celebration of Abuya Cidahu death) thousands of people will attend. Villagers and the kyai’s followers bring simple gifts while the kyai serves food and drinks. In 2013, both Kyai Muhtadi and Kyai Murtadlo organized a haul, they slaughtered buffalos and the meat was distributed to their guests and followers. This is the part of the teaching curriculum that students likely favour the most.

Figure 3. Most students learn the meaning of live from their daily interactions with their clerics and ordinary people. As seen at this photograph, two students are given responsibility to receive some charitable gifts from villagers to be exchanged with the kyai’s blessing (photograph by Ade Nurrahmah, 2013).

In Pesantren Cidahu, the students’ strong dependence on their kyai in obtaining knowledge makes them tend to accept anything the kyai provides unreservedly. There is no reason to reject anything the kyai says or to dispute with him regarding the teachings and his knowledge because students at
this level do not have any alternative reading or reference material. In the _pesantren_ tradition, especially in Pesantren Cidahu, students must directly sit with the _kyai_ in order to obtain authoritative Islamic knowledge and they are not allowed to learn individually or directly from printed materials. Learning Islamic knowledge from anyone else but the _kyai_ or another teacher is considered unlawful since it might invite Satan to take over, something that is much feared and should be avoided at all cost. Therefore, gaining blessing and beneficial knowledge are far more useful than the amount of knowledge a student might gain.

**Conclusion**

The efforts of the _kyai_ in Pesantren Cidahu undertake to defend their religious authority can be seen in the way they preserve all the learning traditions that were handed down by their father, Abuya Cidahu. They live harmoniously and their lives are full of happiness while they serve God by maintaining the teachings of the founders in educating their students. Even though both Kyai Muhtadi and Kyai Murtadlo disagree that they are considered agents that preserve _kyai_ authority in the _pesantren_ because they shy away from publicity and modernity, they actually have gained wide attention from the Muslim community in Banten and surroundings.

In the _pesantren_, the role of the _kyai_ as cultural brokers has not changed much because his successors guard almost every tradition their father practiced. However, currently, the full authority Abuya Dimyathi once possessed is divided over his children and not all of them were able to inherit Abuya Cidahu’s authority and charisma. However, they were able to follow only part of their father’s traits. Kyai Muhtadi mostly inherited his father’s persistence and competence in mastering the classical books, while Kyai Murtadlo continues his father role in mediating people’s day-to-day concerns.

Indeed, the _kobong_, as a kind of dormitory for students, are kept in their original condition and until now, they have not changed. Many students have obtained rich experiences during their stay in a _kobong_ and having lived there taught them a lot about the meaning of life. Their future success as religious leaders and preachers is closely related to their daily life in the simple _kobong_. It offers unforgettable spiritual experiences and everlasting interactions.

To reinforce their strong influence over their students, Kyai Muhtadi and Kyai Murtadlo both maintain the traditions of educational socialization by providing for an unstructured curriculum that differs much from the modern curriculum. The teachings that focus on the study of the classical books rely on the _kyai_ as the source of knowledge. Students should gather at his house in order to receive religious knowledge based on the time schedule the _pesantren_ provides. The time that is set up for religious gatherings should be respected and any guest who visits the _pesantren_ during teaching hours has to wait until the _kyai_ has finished. Even though the curriculum at Pesantren Cidahu looks informal and unstructured, its curriculum is well established with reference to the absolute authority of the _kyai_.

In general, the ability of the kyai at Pesantren Cidahu in maintaining religious authority symbolizes his capacity to survive in the face of the challenges of modernity. Santri and the society surrounding the pesantren consider the kyai at Pesantren Cidahu as a source of knowledge and a focus of religious reference. The students’ very strong dependence on their kyai is the key why they still highly respect the kyai at Pesantren Cidahu. However, right now the number of pesantren in Indonesia that follow the traditional model Pesantren Cidahu practices has declined because of their inability to survive modernity and the social changes that are happening rapidly in society (Soebahar 2013: 41).

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