

FROM CHARISMA TO LEGITIMACY: VILLAGE KYAI LEADERSHIP STRATEGIES IN MAINTAINING RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY ACROSS GENERATIONS

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Abstract : *The authority of village kyais in rural communities is often understood as inherent charisma. However, social change and shifting patterns of obedience among younger generations mean that personal charisma is no longer sufficient to maintain religious authority. This study aims to understand how the authority of village kyais transforms from charisma to social legitimacy and the leadership strategies used to maintain authority across generations. This study uses a qualitative case-study design to capture the dynamics of leadership in real life. Data analysis was conducted through a Miles and Huberman technique. The results show that the transformation of authority is formed through social presence, institutional recognition, rational legitimacy, conflict mediation, and digital adaptation. The findings also indicate that the sustainability of authority across generations is maintained through dialogic communication, the ability to bridge generations, social services, structural regeneration, and digital engagement. This research clarifies that the sustainability of the village kyais' authority is not an automatic inheritance but rather the result of a leadership strategy that is continuously built, negotiated, and adapted to social changes and competition for religious authority in the digital era.*

Keywords : *Religious Authority; Village Kyai; Social Legitimacy; Cross-Generational Leadership.*

Abstrak : *Otoritas kyai kampung dalam masyarakat pedesaan sering dipahami sebagai karisma yang melekat secara tradisional. Akan tetapi, terjadinya perubahan sosial dan pergeseran pola kepatuhan generasi muda membuat karisma personal tidak lagi cukup untuk mempertahankan otoritas keagamaan. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk memahami bagaimana otoritas kyai kampung bertransformasi dari karisma menuju legitimasi sosial dan strategi kepemimpinan yang digunakan untuk mempertahankan otoritas lintas generasi. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain studi kasus untuk menangkap dinamika kepemimpinan dalam kehidupan nyata. Analisis data dilakukan melalui teknik analisis data Miles and Huberman. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa transformasi otoritas terbentuk melalui kehadiran sosial, pengakuan institusional, legitimasi rasional, mediasi konflik, dan adaptasi digital. Temuan juga menunjukkan bahwa keberlanjutan otoritas lintas generasi dipertahankan melalui komunikasi dialogis, kemampuan menjembatani generasi, pelayanan sosial, regenerasi struktural, serta keterlibatan digital. Penelitian ini berkontribusi dengan memperjelas bahwa keberlanjutan otoritas kyai kampung bukan warisan yang otomatis, melainkan hasil strategi kepemimpinan yang terus dibangun, dinegosiasikan, dan disesuaikan dengan perubahan sosial serta kompetisi otoritas keagamaan di era digital.*

Kata Kunci : *Tradisi; Inovasi; Berbasis Digital; Pendidikan Karakter.*

INTRODUCTION

The authority of religious leaders is closely linked to the stability of religious life and the continuity of Islamic traditions within society. In rural settings, village kyais are positioned not only as spiritual guides but also as central figures shaping moral values, resolving social conflicts, and determining religious direction across generations (Maula et al., 2025; Mukarromah et al., 2024; Nu'man, 2025). However, the sustainability of village kyai leadership is increasingly challenged by social change, the emergence of digital religious authorities, and shifting preferences among younger generations, which often weaken the traditional charismatic influence of the village kyai. This reality is evident when differing views emerge regarding mosque management and religious activities, such as the appointment of imams, ritual procedures, or the division of administrator roles, which require the village kyais to act as mediators and maintainers of social stability (Analiansyah et al., 2024; Kasdi et al., 2022). Therefore, how the authority of the village kyais evolves from a purely charismatic basis to a more socially legitimized one is a crucial issue requiring research.

Charisma has long been considered a source of religious authority, particularly in traditional Islamic societies. The symbolic representation of sacredness, mastery of religious knowledge, and personal piety among the kyais is often the primary reason for community obedience (Abdul et al., 2024; Ahmad et al., 2025). However, in rural social realities, charisma does not always operate stably when communities experience generational change and increasingly diverse patterns of religious reference (Berger, 2024; Lin & Saito, 2025). For example, in some communities, regular religious study groups, once the center of religious activity, have begun to show declines in participation among younger generations. In contrast, some young people prefer to access sermons from popular religious figures through digital platforms (Akram et.al., 2025). This situation suggests that charismatic authority tends to be fragile when it is not supported by institutional mechanisms or social legitimacy, especially when leadership must be passed down from generation to generation (across generations). In many cases, the authority of the kyai's successor is not automatically inherited, although the genealogical line is maintained (Mahmudah et al., 2025; Muntoha et al., 2025). In practice, this situation is evident when an elderly kyai dies and is succeeded by his son or son-in-law (Fajriyah, 2024; Hasanah et.al., 2024; Wardi et.al., 2023). However, the successor still has to face a process of social acceptance, and it is not uncommon for shifts in congregational loyalty or minor fragmentation within the community to occur (Soles, 2025; Boon, 2023). This shows that religious authority requires not only personal charisma but also strategies that strengthen its legitimacy in society's eyes.

Previous research has extensively discussed the leadership of kyais (Islamic clerics) in the context of Islamic boarding schools (pesantren), emphasizing their centrality as cultural bridges, decision-makers, and guardians of religious traditions (Azizah et al., 2023; Ellethy, 2022; Ja'far, 2024). Other studies have also addressed the role of kyai authority in shaping community adherence and collective religious identity (Alagaraja, 2023; Zuhrah et al., 2025). Furthermore, studies of religious leadership emphasize that legitimacy is increasingly negotiated through social recognition, communication patterns, and public trust, rather than solely relying on inherited status (Achmadin et al., 2024; Suresman et al., 2026). However, most of these studies have focused on kyais in Islamic boarding schools (pesantren). In contrast, the leadership dynamics of village kyais, particularly their strategies for maintaining authority in rural settings, have received limited comprehensive exploration and discussion.

The above descriptions reveal a research gap. Existing studies tend to treat the authority of the kyai as a fixed social reality, where charisma and legitimacy are considered inherent to the kyai's status (Bisyri, 2025; Rohmah et al., 2025). This means that there is still little research specifically examining how village kyais actively construct legitimacy through everyday leadership strategies, such as adapting to generational changes, negotiating with modern religious narratives, and striving to maintain religious beliefs in rural communities. Similarly, the process by which charismatic influence is transformed into a legitimacy that endures across generations remains understudied. Thus, village kyai leadership requires a deeper analytical focus, not merely as a cultural phenomenon but also as a strategic practice (Ja'far, 2024).

In contemporary rural communities, village kyais face distinct and complex challenges compared to those experienced by kyais in Islamic boarding schools (pesantren). Kyai leadership is generally embedded in the informal social structure of the community, relying heavily on social networks, symbolic interactions, and moral authority rather than formal institutional power (Maula & Rofiki, 2025; Nu'man, 2025). Conversely, the emergence of new religious influencers, digital platforms, and alternative sources of Islamic knowledge that compete with conventional leadership is increasingly shaping contemporary religious authority (Suryati et al., 2025; Umur et al., 2025). Therefore, the ability of village kyais to maintain authority is not solely determined by charisma but also by their strategies for gaining legitimacy, maintaining trust, and positioning themselves as relevant figures to younger generations.

This study aims to understand the transformation of village kyai authority from charisma to legitimacy in the maintenance of religious leadership across generations. In this context, village kyai leadership cannot be understood solely as a personal attribute, but as a dynamic process involving social negotiation, cultural adaptation, and strategic

communication. Furthermore, this study seeks to examine in depth the strategies used by village kyais to maintain their religious authority and to identify the factors shaping the sustainability of their leadership in a changing rural society.

METHOD

Using a qualitative research design and a case study approach, this study aims to explore and understand the various approaches used by village kyais to manage religious authority across generations (Priya, 2021). The case study approach was chosen because the phenomenon of kyai leadership is highly contextual, shaped by social relations, and cannot be adequately understood through numbers alone. This design allows researchers to observe leadership practices in real-life situations, particularly in daily interactions as kyais build legitimacy, respond to generational change, and maintain public trust in the religious life of rural communities. As part of the research process, the objective is to understand how kyai authority changes, shifting from influence reliant on personal charisma to legitimacy generated through social negotiations at the community level.

The primary data sources in this study consisted of village kyais, mosque administrators, community leaders, elderly congregants, and younger community members directly involved in or close to religious activities and local leadership dynamics. Informants were selected using purposive sampling based on their relevance to the research objectives and their depth of knowledge and experience regarding leadership continuity, religious authority, and cross-generational engagement. This process was then expanded using a snowball technique to identify additional participants who met the criteria and could enrich the data with more diverse perspectives, particularly those knowledgeable about local-level leadership transitions and religious conflict.

Data were collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation (Rahman et al., 2021). Observations were conducted to capture naturally occurring social interactions and religious practices, such as regular religious study sessions, mosque activities, communal rituals (tahlilan, regular yasinan (recitation of the Qur'an), istighosah (recitation of the Qur'an), etc., and conflict resolution deliberations where the kyai's authority is exercised and negotiated. In-depth interviews were conducted using a structured interview guide to ensure consistency in describing leadership strategies, legitimacy-building mechanisms, patterns of authority recognition, and differences in religious orientation between generations. Documentation was used to supplement the observation and interview data, including mosque organizational structures, activity records, sermon materials, and relevant digital da'wah content, where available, which facilitated the analysis of authority representations and community responses.

All interview data were transcribed verbatim, while observation notes and documents were systematically compiled into a single, integrated data corpus (Sitorus, 2021). Data analysis began with repeated readings to gain an in-depth, contextual

understanding, followed by analytical memos as a basis for reflective interpretation. Initial coding was conducted by identifying and highlighting meaningful sections from transcripts, observation notes, and documents, with a focus on leadership practices, legitimacy negotiations, authority challenges, and intergenerational dynamics. The resulting codes were then reviewed, refined, and organized for consistency across data sources. Next, interrelated codes were grouped into categories and developed into key themes through the identification of recurring patterns, contrasts, and relationships among findings. In the final stage, emerging themes were reviewed against the raw data to ensure analytical coherence and alignment with participants' experiences and the observed leadership context.

To ensure ethical compliance, informed consent was obtained prior to data collection, and all informants are identified using pseudonyms. The presentation of findings is conducted in an aggregate and selective manner to prevent indirect identification, protect participants' social position, and maintain the integrity of the community, given that issues of religious authority and leadership disputes are highly sensitive matters in society.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study explores in more depth how the authority of village kyais is formed, transformed, and maintained amidst social change and generational shifts in rural religious life. Through in-depth interviews and observations, this study found that religious authority no longer relies solely on personal charisma but increasingly on social legitimacy, which is continuously negotiated through daily interactions, institutional engagement, rational communication, conflict mediation, and adaptation to digital religious references. This finding aligns with the social legitimacy perspective, which emphasizes that authority is strengthened when collectively recognized and demonstrated through concrete practices in community life. The implications of this study indicate that the sustainability of village kyai leadership across generations is largely determined by adaptive leadership strategies, including dialogic communication with younger generations, the ability to bridge intergenerational differences, consistent social service delivery, regeneration through structural engagement, and engagement in digital spaces. In the following discussion, this study will outline the main findings from both results, their implications, and why this transformation is important for understanding rural religious leadership in the context of contemporary society.

1. Uncovering the Transformation of Charisma Into Social Legitimacy

The transformation of a village kyai's authority from charisma to social legitimacy is a process that occurs through daily interactions, social negotiations, and ongoing demonstration of leadership. In rural contexts, a kyai's charisma initially stems from

personal piety, mastery of religious knowledge, and the sacred symbols inherent in the kyai's figure. However, with generational changes, increased access to religious knowledge through digital platforms, and internal mosque dynamics, personal charisma is no longer sufficient to maintain a kyai's authority. Therefore, village kyai seek to build social legitimacy through more practical, institutional, and community-based strategies.

Based on interview and observation data, the transformation of a village kyai's authority from charisma to social legitimacy occurs through five main mechanisms. The following data demonstrate that social legitimacy is not formed automatically but is acquired through leadership practices recognized and negotiated by the community;

Table 1: Interview Data on the Transformation from Charisma to Social Legitimacy

Interview Data	Description	Code
<i>Village Kyai: "Nowadays, if a kyai only appears when asked to lead prayers, that is not enough. People need the kyais to be present when there are problems."</i>	Authority is no longer sufficient if based solely on symbolic status; it must be demonstrated through social presence.	Social Presence
<i>Community leader: "People assess a kyai based on his closeness to them. If there is a community problem and he steps in, that is what earns respect."</i>	Recognition emerges from real involvement in community life.	Social Presence
<i>Mosque administrator: "In the past, it was enough for the kyai to be an imam and preacher. Now he joins meetings, helps organize activities, and becomes a reference for the management."</i>	Legitimacy is strengthened through involvement in the mosque's organizational structure.	Institutional Recognition
<i>Mosque administrator: "If mosque decisions do not involve the kyais, people usually protest. So the kyai acts as the one who validates decisions."</i>	The kyai becomes a source of social validation for institutional decisions.	Institutional Recognition
<i>Elderly congregant: "In the past, people obeyed simply because he was a kyai. Now, young people often ask for evidence and reasons. So the kyai must explain."</i>	The pattern of obedience has shifted from traditional to rational.	Rational Legitimacy
<i>Young congregant: "I respect him, but I also want clarity. If the kyai explains step by step, I trust him more."</i>	Legitimacy is built through argumentation and the ability to provide clear explanations.	Rational Legitimacy
<i>Community leader: "If there is a conflict among the mosque board, the kyai is the one people look for. When he speaks, people usually hold back."</i>	Legitimacy arises from the role of conflict mediation.	Conflict Mediation

<i>Mosque administrator: "There was a disagreement about the imam and certain rituals. The kyai mediated so the congregation would not split."</i>	The kyai functions as a guardian of social stability.	Conflict Mediation
<i>Young congregant: "Now, many sermons are on YouTube. However, if the kyais adapt, for example, by sharing sermons in WhatsApp groups, it is more relatable."</i>	The kyai adapts to the digital sphere to maintain influence.	Digital Adaptation
<i>Mosque administrator: "If the kyais completely refuse to use media, young people quickly shift their reference to online preachers."</i>	Authority weakens if it is not adaptive to changing sources of reference.	Digital Adaptation

Table 1 above shows that the transformation of charisma into social legitimacy consists of five mechanisms. Therefore, the data above explains the following findings;

First, social legitimacy is built through social presence. The data discussed in Table 1 demonstrates that the charisma of a kyai is no longer simply maintained through symbolic status but must be strengthened through concrete social involvement. The village kyai is valued by the community not only for his scholarly capacity but also for his willingness to be present when residents experience social, family, or community conflict. This social presence underpins legitimacy because the community links the kyai's authority to practical functions in daily life.

Second, legitimacy is strengthened through institutional recognition within the mosque structure. The findings from the interviews above indicate that the village kyais increasingly gain legitimacy when they are involved in formal community mechanisms, particularly in mosque management (directly involved in every situation). The kyais are no longer merely ritual leaders but also part of the decision-making process. Under certain circumstances, the kyai even serves as a social "validator" of the administrator's decisions, so that decisions not involving the kyai are deemed less legitimate in the eyes of the congregation.

Third, authority shifts to rational legitimacy due to generational change (Rational legitimacy). Interview data show a shift in how society, especially the younger generation, assesses religious authority. While the older generation tends to obey out of tradition and respect for the kyais' status, the younger generation demands more open arguments, evidence, and explanations to agree with the village kyais' position ultimately. This situation forces the village kyais to adopt a more communicative leadership style, building legitimacy by explaining and convincing rather than simply gaining respect.

Fourth, social legitimacy is strongly established through conflict mediation. Findings indicate that village kyais gain the strongest legitimacy when they mediate social and internal religious conflicts. Conflicts such as the appointment of imams, differences in ritual practices, and the division of roles among mosque administrators are the primary arenas in which the kyais' authority is tested. In these circumstances, the kyai's legitimacy arises not solely from his position but from his ability to maintain stability, defuse tensions between parties, and ensure the congregation remains unified and undivided.

Fifth, legitimacy is strengthened through adaptation to digital authority (digital adaptation). According to data collected from interviews involving young people, village kyais are competing with digital religious figures who are more popular among teenagers. However, kyais who can adapt, for example, by distributing their sermons via WhatsApp or adapting research topics to the needs of the younger generation, tend to be more able to maintain legitimacy. Conversely, kyais who reject the digital space entirely tend to experience weakened influence, especially among younger groups.

Overall, the findings of this study indicate that the power of village kyais must be created and maintained through social legitimacy agreed upon in the daily lives of the community. It should no longer rely solely on personal charisma. When kyais can establish a social presence, gain institutional recognition within mosque structures, adapt communication patterns to the rational demands of the younger generation, play an active role as conflict mediators, and adapt to changes in religious reference sources in the digital space, this transformation will occur and be accepted by various parties, including young people.

2. Strategies for Maintaining Authority Across Generations

The strategy for maintaining intergenerational religious authority among village kyais is determined not only by their social position as religious leaders but also by their ability to interpret social changes, adapt communication patterns, and manage relationships between older and younger generations. In contemporary rural communities, village kyais face increasingly complex situations due to shifting patterns of religious reference, the emergence of alternative authorities, and the demands of a more rational and open younger generation. Therefore, village kyais need to implement adaptive leadership strategies to ensure their authority remains accepted, trusted, and maintained over the long term.

Based on interview and observation data, the village kyais' strategy for maintaining intergenerational religious authority is structured around five main

strategies. The following data demonstrates that these strategies are implemented through social practices, communication, and strengthening the kyais' position within the local religious structure.

Table 2: Interview Data on Strategies for Maintaining Authority Across Generations

Interview Data	Description	Code
<i>Village Kyai: "When I deliver religious lectures now, I cannot just preach. I have to invite discussion so that young people feel involved."</i>	The kyai modifies his communication style to make the younger generation feel included.	Dialogic Communication
<i>Young congregant: "If the kyai is willing to engage in dialogue, I feel more comfortable. I do not feel lectured, but guided."</i>	Participatory communication strategies strengthen acceptance.	Dialogic Communication
<i>Mosque administrator: "The kyai does not get angry immediately when young people have different opinions. He calms the situation and then looks for common ground."</i>	The kyai maintains balance between generations to prevent division.	Intergenerational Bridging
<i>Elderly congregant: "He embraces everyone. Young people are given space, but traditions are still preserved."</i>	The kyai acts as a bridge between tradition and change.	Intergenerational Bridging
<i>Community leader: "When there is a community problem, the kyai always steps in first. That is why people trust him – because he is present."</i>	Consistent social service builds long-term trust.	Social Service
<i>Congregant: "What keeps the kyai respected is that he is always ready to help, without favoritism."</i>	Authority is reinforced through service and social closeness.	Social Service
<i>Mosque administrator: "The kyai involves young people as committee members and administrators. Over time, they feel a sense of ownership of the mosque."</i>	The kyai prepares regeneration through structural involvement.	Regeneration Strategy
<i>Young congregant: "I used just to follow along. However, after being involved, I began to feel responsible."</i>	Involving the younger generation strengthens community loyalty.	Regeneration Strategy
<i>Village Kyai: "If sermons are not shared in WhatsApp groups, young people will not listen. So I allow them to be recorded."</i>	The kyai uses digital media to maintain influence.	Digital Engagement
<i>Mosque administrator: "The kyai does not reject technology. Instead, he uses WhatsApp groups to share information about religious gatherings."</i>	Digital adaptation becomes a strategy to maintain relevance.	Digital Engagement

Table 2 above shows that the strategy for maintaining intergenerational authority comprises five main elements. Therefore, the above data explains the following findings:

First, a strategy of dialogic communication with the younger generation. Data from various informants indicates that village kyais maintain their authority by shifting their communication patterns to a more dialogic one (two-way communication). The kyais not only deliver one-way lectures but also provide space for discussion, listen to questions, and respond to the younger generation's concerns. This strategy makes young people feel valued rather than positioned as those who "simply have to obey," thereby strengthening their acceptance of the kyai's authority. Thus, intergenerational authority is maintained through a participatory and adaptive communication approach.

Second, a strategy of bridging the older and younger generations (intergenerational bridging). The findings indicate that village kyais act as figures who bridge differences in values and perspectives between generations. In some cases, the kyais do not take extreme sides but instead strive to find a middle ground, maintaining traditions while giving the younger generation space to play a role. This strategy is important because conflicts in rural communities often arise from clashes between ritual traditions maintained by older generations and the younger generation's more open-to-change tendencies. When the kyai can mediate, his authority is strengthened because he is perceived as just and nurturing.

Third, the strategy of social service and emotional closeness (social service). Interview data shows that the authority of the village kyais is maintained through consistent, tangible social services. The kyai is present not only in rituals but also in social needs such as family conflicts, deaths, disasters, and community issues. This strategy strengthens the emotional bond between the kyais and the community, so that the kyais' authority is seen as useful and relevant in daily life. In this context, social closeness serves as a strong foundation for maintaining legitimacy across generations.

Fourth, a regeneration strategy through structural involvement of the younger generation (regeneration strategy). The findings from Table 2 indicate that village kyais maintain their authority across generations by involving younger generations in mosque and religious activities. This involvement is not merely symbolic but also takes concrete form through committees, management, and program responsibilities. This strategy fosters a sense of ownership among the younger generation, preventing them from feeling that the mosque belongs solely to the older generation. Thus, the kyais not only maintain their own authority but also prepare for the continuity of leadership and the next generation's involvement.

Fifth, a digital adaptation strategy to maintain the relevance of their authority (digital engagement). The data shows that village kyais maintain their authority by adapting to new patterns of religious reference emerging through digital media. Some kyais allow their sermons to be recorded, disseminate them through WhatsApp groups, or use digital media for religious communication. This strategy is crucial because younger generations are more familiar with digital references than with traditional forums. When kyais can enter these spaces, their authority remains relevant and is not easily displaced by other digital religious figures.

Looking at various perspectives, the results of this study indicate that the sustainability of the village kyais' authority across generations is determined by the kyais' ability to implement adaptive and inclusive leadership strategies. These strategies include dialogic communication with younger generations, bridging intergenerational differences, consistent social services, regeneration through structural engagement, and adaptation to digital spaces. With these strategies, the village kyais not only maintain their influence as ritual leaders but also strengthen their social position as relevant figures (keeping up with the times), trusted, and continuously recognized in the increasingly dynamic changes of rural society.

This research identified two key findings. First, the authority of village kyais (Islamic clerics) is transforming personal charisma into social legitimacy built through daily leadership practices. This transformation occurs through five main mechanisms: social presence, institutional recognition, rational legitimacy, conflict mediation, and digital adaptation. Second, the sustainability of authority across generations is maintained through five leadership strategies: dialogic communication, generational bridging, consistent social service delivery, structural regeneration, and digital engagement. Overall, these two findings confirm that the authority of village kyais is no longer automatic but is continually negotiated within changing social, cultural, and technological structures.

The research findings also underscore that the authority of village kyais is increasingly dynamic and contested. Although kyais remain positioned as religious symbols and moral reference points, social legitimacy is no longer established solely through traditional status (Masithoh et al., 2025; Namora et al., 2025). Generational changes, increased access to religious knowledge through digital media, and the strengthening role of mosque structures are driving a shift in authority toward greater reliance on social proof and adaptability (Douhan, 2025). Thus, village kyais are not only required to perform ritual functions, but also to become social actors capable of responding to community needs, maintaining stability, and managing intergenerational relations (Purwanti et al., 2025).

The findings regarding the shift from charisma to social legitimacy align with Karim et al. (2025) and Sefina et al. (2025) The concept of authority, particularly charismatic authority, can weaken if not transformed into a more stable, institutionalized form of

legitimacy. In this context, the charisma of the village kyai remains the initial source of authority, but legitimacy is increasingly determined by community recognition through social involvement, institutional functions, and rational-communicative capacity (Holilah et al., 2025).

Furthermore, the findings regarding the shift in how younger generations assess authority can be understood through the concepts of modernization and rationalization, where acceptance of religious leaders is increasingly influenced by argumentation, transparency, and the ability to explain (Lamabawa et al., 2025; Nurwahyu, 2024). Meanwhile, findings on digital adaptation indicate that religious authority is now being formed in a new mediation space, where local figures compete with online religious figures with a broader reach (Gede et al., 2024; Suhandi et al., 2026). In this context, digitalization is not only a means of communication but also an arena for the production of legitimacy that shapes the religious reference patterns of the younger generation.

The novelty of this research lies in mapping the mechanisms of authority transformation among village kyais in a more systematic, socially practice-based manner. This research shows that social legitimacy is not built through a single factor, but rather through a combination of interrelated mechanisms; 1) social presence, 2) institutional recognition, 3) rational legitimacy, 4) conflict mediation, and 5) digital adaptation. Furthermore, this research offers a novel contribution, demonstrating that strategies for maintaining authority across generations are not simply da'wah activities but rather complex social leadership strategies. Village kyais act simultaneously as religious leaders, conflict mediators, managers of mosque structures, actors in community regeneration, and figures who must negotiate within the digital authority arena (Farihah et al., 2025; Wulan et al., 2025). This perspective broadens studies of local religious leadership, which have tended to place kyais solely within the framework of traditional charisma.

The implications of this research also emphasize that strengthening village kyai leadership cannot rely solely on charismatic traditions but needs to be supported by adaptive social and institutional strategies. For mosque and community structures, these findings suggest that kyai legitimacy can be strengthened when kyais are openly involved in decision-making and conflict management. For the younger generation, these findings underscore the importance of a more rational, participatory dialogic communication model. Thus, mosques have the potential to become spaces for social regeneration if the kyais and administrators can build an inclusive, responsive, and open leadership system that is adaptable to changing communication patterns (Analiansyah et al., 2024; Glasserman, 2023). In practice, this research also suggests that digital engagement should not be treated as a supplement but rather as a key strategy for maintaining the authority of village kyais, particularly in building closeness and relevance with younger generations.

Although this research is based on the context of village kyais, the findings have global relevance because they illustrate the dynamics experienced by many local religious

leaders across religious communities worldwide. Generational change, the rationalization of authority, and competition with digital religious figures are transnational phenomena that influence how religious authority is produced and maintained (Muallimin, 2025; Rizkiyah et al., 2025). This research contributes to the global discourse on local religious leadership by emphasizing that the sustainability of traditional authority is not solely determined by symbolic legitimacy but depends on the leader's ability to build social legitimacy through concrete practices, institutional strategies, and adaptation of communication across generations. Thus, this finding strengthens the understanding that local religious communities can remain stable amid modernity if their leadership can adapt.

This research has several limitations. *First*, it used a qualitative case study design, so the findings are contextual and cannot be statistically generalized to the rural community as a whole. *Second*, the research data were primarily obtained from actors directly involved in mosque life, so the perspectives of groups outside the mosque structure or more critical groups may not have been fully explored. *Third*, this study did not develop a more in-depth analysis of other external factors, such as changes in the village economy, youth mobility, or the influence of larger formal religious organizations on shaping the authority of village kyais. Therefore, further research could utilize cross-community comparative studies, expand the diversity of kyai leadership characteristics, and examine in more detail how digital platforms shape the younger generation's religious reference patterns and their relationship with traditional authorities.

CONCLUSION

This research demonstrates that the authority of village kyais in rural communities can no longer be maintained solely through personal charisma but must be supported by social legitimacy that is continuously built and negotiated. Key findings reveal that the transformation from charisma to social legitimacy occurs through five mechanisms: social presence, institutional recognition within mosque structures, rational legitimacy that adapts to generational change, conflict mediation, and adaptation to digital authority spaces. Thus, the authority of the village kyais is not automatic but requires demonstrating consistent leadership in daily life.

Furthermore, this research found that the sustainability of religious authority across generations is maintained through adaptive leadership strategies, namely dialogic communication with younger generations, bridging the gap between older and younger generations, consistent social services, regeneration through structural engagement with younger generations, and digital engagement. These strategies demonstrate that village kyai play a role not only as ritual leaders but also as social actors who maintain community stability, build public trust, and ensure leadership continuity amid social change.

The primary contribution of this research lies in developing a more systematic understanding of the legitimacy formation process of village kyais outside the context of Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*). Theoretically, this research extends Weberian studies

of authority by demonstrating that the charisma of village kyais is subject to institutionalization and rationalization, influenced by mosque structures, generational change, and digital competition for authority. In practice, these findings guide mosque administrators and rural communities: strengthening kyai leadership should be supported by concrete social engagement, participatory communication spaces, and an inclusive regeneration system to ensure authority remains relevant and accepted across generations.

The novelty of this research lies in mapping two layers of the dynamics of village kyai authority: (1) the mechanisms through which charisma transforms into social legitimacy, and (2) strategies for maintaining authority across generations in the context of rural modernity. These findings also have global relevance because they demonstrate that local religious leaders in various religious communities face similar challenges, particularly in responding to the rationalization of authority, generational change, and competition for digital religious figures. This research has limitations stemming from its case-study design, which makes the findings contextual. Further research is recommended to conduct comparative studies across rural communities, broaden the diversity of kyai leadership characteristics, and examine more deeply how digital media shapes the religious reference patterns of younger generations and their impact on the stability of local religious authority. Overall, this study confirms that the sustainability of village kyai leadership is not simply a legacy of traditional charisma, but rather the result of adaptive social strategies to maintain legitimacy, community harmony, and the continuity of Islamic traditions across generations.

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