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## Negotiation of Religious Authority: The Dynamics of Nyai's Charismatic Communication in the Public Space of Islamic Boarding Schools

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### Abstract

*This study examines the negotiation of religious authority through the dynamics of charismatic communication practiced by nyai (female Islamic leaders) within the public space of Islamic boarding schools (pesantren). It responds to the persistent dominance of male-centered religious authority structures and the limited scholarly attention to women's communicative roles in constructing religious legitimacy. Employing a qualitative case study approach, this research involved 12–15 informants, including a nyai, religious teachers, students, and members of the surrounding community. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and document analysis, and were analyzed using thematic analysis.*

*The findings reveal that the religious authority of nyai is not solely derived from formal or structural positions, but is socially constructed through ongoing practices of charismatic communication embedded in everyday interactions. Religious knowledge serves as the foundation of legitimacy, which is further strengthened through contextual, persuasive, and relational communication strategies. In addition, symbolic representation and moral exemplarity function as key elements in fostering emotional engagement and trust within the community. The pesantren itself operates as a religious public sphere where authority is continuously negotiated through communicative practices and social participation. The study also finds that gender negotiation plays a crucial role, as nyai navigate and transform patriarchal structures through adaptive and performative communication.*

*Theoretically, this study contributes to the literature by positioning charismatic communication as a central mechanism in the construction of women's religious authority. It also advances interdisciplinary scholarship at the intersection of religion, gender, and communication, particularly within the context of contemporary Muslim societies.*

**Keywords:** Charismatic Communication, Religious Authority Nyai, Pesantren, Gender

## INTRODUCTION

Traditional Islamic educational institutions play an important role in the formation of religious authority in various Muslim societies. In Indonesia, *pesantren* is one of the institutions that has a great influence on the production of Islamic knowledge, the formation of religious leadership, and the moral development of the community. Historically, the structure of religious authority in Islamic boarding schools tended to center on the figure of kyai as the main spiritual and intellectual leader in the Islamic boarding school community. This structure is often supported by a patriarchal social construct, in which religious leadership is predominantly male, while women are placed in domestic positions or as supporters in religious leadership structures.

Nevertheless, the social development and transformation of Islamic education in recent decades shows that muslim women are increasingly active in establishing their religious authority in various religious public spaces. In the context of

Islamic boarding schools, *the nyai* figure not only plays the role of a kyai companion or caregiver of female students, but is also involved in the process of education, da'wah, and the formation of a socio-religious network in the community. This role shows that women in *pesantren* have the potential to build religious legitimacy through their social practices and religious communication.

In the perspective of the sociology of religion, religious authority is determined not only by structural positions within religious institutions, but also by the ability of individuals to establish social legitimacy through interaction and communication with their communities. Research on women scholars shows that religious authority can be formed through various public spaces such as mosques, educational classes, and da'wah forums that allow women to convey religious knowledge and build social influence in religious communities (Hasanuddin, 2020).



Along with the development of gender and religious studies, a number of studies show that Muslim women are increasingly active in building religious authority through various communication mediums. For example, research on women scholars in the digital space shows that women can produce religious authority through communication strategies that combine the interpretation of religious texts with contextual approaches to contemporary social issues (Uyuni & Adnan, 2021). Other research also shows that women scholars are able to expand their da'wah influence through social activities, education, and economic empowerment in Muslim society (Zain et al., 2023).

In addition, studies on women scholars in Indonesia also show that women's religious authority can develop through their contributions in the field of Islamic education and the development of religious institutions. Research on the leadership of women figures such as NyaiKhairiyah Hasyim shows that women can play an important role in Islamic education and even have a significant influence on changing public perceptions of women's roles in religious public spaces (Kholida, 2024).

In the last five years, the study of women and religious authority has also developed significantly in the international literature. Research on women scholars in various countries shows that women can negotiate their religious authority through the reinterpretation of religious texts as well as involvement in public discourse on social issues and Islamic law. For example, research on women scholars in Indonesia shows that women can build religious legitimacy through the reinterpretation of the Qur'an in Islamic family law issues, which ultimately encourages the transformation of religious understanding in society (Zainuddin, 2024).

In addition to the Indonesian context, the phenomenon of women's religious authority is also developing in various Muslim communities around the world. In some Muslim countries and diaspora communities, women are increasingly active in Islamic education, community leadership, and the spread of da'wah through various communication media. A study of women's scholarly organizations in Indonesia shows that the women's ulema movement is able to present a new perspective on women's religious authority in Islamic legal discourse, which was previously dominated by men (Mun'im Z, 2024).

Other research has also shown that women scholars have an important influence on religious decision-making in local communities, especially through da'wah activities and religious teaching in the community. This role shows that women's religious authority can be formed through social interaction and public trust in women's religious capacity as religious figures (Rusli&Mardiyah, 2022).

Although the literature on women and religious authority continues to grow, most research still focuses on women's social roles or leadership in religious institutions, while studies of how women's religious authority is negotiated through communication practices in religious public spaces are relatively limited. Many studies also place more emphasis

on the historical or biographical aspects of women figures in Islam, without deeply analyzing the communication processes that shape women's religious legitimacy in religious communities.

In the context of Islamic boarding schools, studies of *nyai* also tend to focus on their contribution to the education or upbringing of female students, while analysis of the dynamics of charismatic communication as a mechanism for the formation of women's religious authority is still rare. In fact, communication has an important role in building religious legitimacy because through communication a religious figure can build charisma, convey religious values, and form social relations with his community.

Based on these gaps, this study aims to examine the negotiation of religious authority through the dynamics of charismatic communication in the public space of Islamic boarding schools. This study views *nyai* not only as a social actor in the *pesantren*'s structure, but also as a communication agent who actively builds religious legitimacy through communication practices, religious symbolism, and social interaction with various actors in the *pesantren* community.

Academically, this research offers novelty by integrating religious, gender, and communication perspectives in the analysis of women's religious authority in traditional Islamic educational institutions. This approach provides a new perspective in understanding how women's religious authority is constructed through the practice of communication and social interaction within religious communities.

In addition, this research also has international relevance because the phenomenon of Muslim women negotiating their religious authority occurs not only in Indonesia, but also in various Muslim communities around the world. Therefore, the study of *nyai*'s charismatic communication in *pesantren* can make an important contribution to the international literature on female religious authority in Islam, as well as enrich the study of the relationship between religion, gender, and communication in contemporary Muslim society.

## Research Methods

This study uses a qualitative approach with case studies to understand the dynamics of charismatic communication of *nyai* figures in negotiating religious authority in the public space of Islamic boarding schools. The research was carried out through several stages, namely the preparation stage, field data collection, and data analysis.

In the preparation stage, the researcher conducted a preliminary study to determine the location of the research, namely Islamic boarding schools that have *nyai* figures with an active role in educational activities, da'wah, and social interaction with the community. Access to research was obtained through initial communication with *pesantren* managers and gatekeepers who helped introduce researchers to key informants.

The selection of informants was carried out using purposive sampling techniques with the following criteria: (1) having

direct involvement in *pesantren* activities, (2) having experience interacting with *nyai*, and (3) being able to provide information relevant to the focus of the research. To enrich the data, the snowball sampling technique was also used by asking for recommendations from additional informants from the initial informants. The number of informants in this study ranges from 12-15 people, with the following composition: (1) *nyai*as the main informant as many as 1 person, has a leadership role, is active in recitation activities, and is recognized as an authority by *the pesantren* community;

(2) *ustadz* or *ustadzah* as many as 4–5 people, with an age range of 25–50 years, who are involved in educational activities and have intense interaction with *nyai*;

(3) 5-6 students, with an age range of 15–23 years, who were selected from various levels of education (new to senior students) to gain diverse perspectives; (4) the community around the *pesantren* as many as 2-3 people, with an age range of 30-60 years, who actively participate in recitation or *da'wah* activities led by *Nyai*.

Data collection was carried out for approximately 2–3 months through three main techniques. First, in-depth interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner with a duration of 45–90 minutes per informant to explore their experiences, perceptions, and meanings of the *religious authority*. Second, participatory observation is carried out by participating in *pesantren* activities such as recitations, learning processes, and social interactions between *nyai*, students, and the community in order to directly observe the practice of charismatic communication. Third, document analysis was carried out on lecture materials, records of *pesantren* activities, and social media content used in *nyaida'wah* activities.

Data analysis is carried out simultaneously with the data collection process using thematic analysis techniques, which include the stages of data reduction, coding, theme categorization, and interpretation. This process aims to identify patterns of charismatic communication, forms of symbolic interaction, and negotiation mechanisms of religious authorities in the *pesantren* community.

To ensure the validity of the data, this study applies triangulation of sources and methods, which is comparing data from various informants and data collection techniques. In addition, member checking is carried out by confirming the results of the interview with the informant to ensure the suitability between the data and the researcher's interpretation.

## Results and Discussion

The results of the study show that *the religious authority of nyai* in *pesantren* is the result of complex social processes, which are not only determined by structural positions within the institution, but are also formed through the practice of charismatic communication that takes place continuously in daily interactions. The authority is dynamic, contextual, and negotiated through social relations between *nyai* and students in the *pesantren* environment.

## 1. Production of Authority through Religious Knowledge and Communication

The production of *religious* authority in *pesantren* shows that religious legitimacy does not solely come from structural positions, but is built through a process of communication that connects religious knowledge with the social experience of the community. Religious knowledge becomes the main foundation of authority, but it does not automatically produce legitimacy in the absence of effective communicative skills. In this context, *nyai* not only plays the role of the owner of scientific authority, but also as a communication agent who transforms knowledge into social influence through *da'wah* practices, teaching, and daily interactions. These findings are in line with studies of contemporary religious authorities that emphasize the importance of social interaction in establishing legitimacy (Kloos & Turner, 2019).

*Nyai's ability* to contextualize Islamic teachings is an important factor in strengthening this legitimacy. The delivery of religious materials that are relevant to the lives of students and the community shows that authority is not only determined by the mastery of the text, but also by interpretive abilities that are adaptive to social realities. This corroborates the findings of research on women scholars which show that women's religious authority is built through interpretive and communication practices that are responsive to social issues (Bano, 2021; Nisa, 2023).

In the perspective of the charismatic authority of Max Weber, the legitimacy of leadership arises from the recognition of personal qualities that are considered exceptional (Weber, 1978). However, this study shows that *nyai's* charisma does not only come from individual qualities, but is also constructed through communicative interactions that allow for social recognition. Thus, charisma is not inherent, but is produced and reproduced through repeated practices of religious communication in the community.

Furthermore, the religious communication carried out by *nyai* is not only informative, but also persuasive and relational. In the process of religious recitation and guidance, *nyai* builds emotional closeness with students and the community, thus creating trust-based relationships. This relationship became a social capital that strengthened *the position of nyai* as a religious authority. This is in line with research that shows that communication is the main means of expanding the influence of women's religious authority in the Muslim community (Bano & Kalmbach, 2020).

Thus, the production of women's religious authority in *pesantren* cannot be understood only through a structural approach, but needs to be seen as a dynamic communicative process. *Nyai* religious authority is formed through the interaction between knowledge, communication, and social recognition that simultaneously build legitimacy in the *pesantren* community. These findings confirm that religious communication has a central role in the production of

women's religious authority in the context of contemporary Islam.

## 2. Charismatic Communication as a Symbolic and Emotional Practice

Charismatic communication *in pesantren* not only serves as a means of conveying religious teachings, but also as a symbolic and emotional practice that shapes and strengthens religious authority. The results of the study show that *nyai's* charisma is not solely sourced from rhetorical skills, but is built through the integration of religious language, symbolic expression, and emotional interaction with students and the community. In this context, communication is the main medium in transforming religious values into meaningful social experiences.

Symbolically, *nyai* represents Islamic values through lifestyle, appearance, and daily actions that reflect piety, simplicity, and social concern. This practice shows that charismatic communication is not only verbal, but is also manifested in a consistent form of nonverbal communication. The symbols serve as markers of religious authority that can be recognized and accepted by the community. This is in line with Max Weber's view that charisma is related to the perception of the extraordinary qualities of a leader, but in this context the perception is constructed through repetitive symbolic practices (Weber, 1978).

In addition to the symbolic dimension, *nyai's* charismatic communication also has a strong emotional dimension. In the interaction of religious recitation and guidance, *nyai* not only conveys messages cognitively, but also builds affective closeness with the audience. An empathetic communication approach, the use of persuasive language, and the ability to understand the social conditions of students and society create trust-based relationships. This emotional relationship is an important factor in strengthening religious legitimacy, as authority is not only rationally accepted, but also emotionally felt by followers. These findings are in line with research on religious leadership that emphasizes the importance of the affective dimension in the formation of authority (Bano&Kalmbach, 2020).

Further, charismatic communication can be understood as a performative practice that is constantly produced in social interactions. In the perperitentiousness perspective of Judith Butler, identity and authority are formed through practices that are repeated consistently in social contexts (Butler, 1990). In this case, *nyai's* charisma is not static, but continues to be constructed through communication practices involving symbols, emotions, and social interactions. This is also supported by contemporary studies that show that women's religious authority is increasingly dependent on their ability to manage public communication and build emotional connections with communities (Nisa, 2023).

Thus, *nyai* charismatic communication can be understood as a multidimensional practice that combines symbolic and emotional aspects in building religious legitimacy. Authority is generated not only through the imparting of knowledge, but

also through the representation of religious values and the formation of emotional connections with the community. These findings confirm that the symbolic and affective dimensions of communication have a central role in the production of women's religious authority, as well as enriching the study of religious communication in the context of contemporary Muslim society.

## 3. Pesantren as a Religious Public Space and Arena for Authority Negotiation

*Pesantren* in this study function not only as traditional Islamic educational institutions, but also as religious public spaces where religious authority is produced, negotiated, and maintained through the practice of communication and social interaction. The results of the study show that the interaction between *nyai*, students, and the community in various activities such as recitations, religious discussions, and social activities creates a space for communication that allows the formation of religious legitimacy collectively. Thus, religious authorities are not static, but continue to undergo a negotiation process in the social dynamics of the *pesantren* community.

In the perspective of public space put forward by Jurgen Habermas, social legitimacy is formed through the process of communication and exchange of ideas in public space (Habermas, 1989). Although this concept was originally developed in the context of modern Western society, the findings of this study suggest that *pesantren* can be understood as a form of religious public space that has cultural and spiritual characteristics. The communication process in *pesantren* does not always take place formally or deliberately, but also through daily interactions that are informal, symbolic, and based on religious values.

Furthermore, *pesantren* as a religious public space allows *nyai* to actively participate in the production of religious discourse. Through recitation and da'wah activities, *nyai* not only conveys religious teachings, but also engages in the process of interpretation and social dialogue that shapes the community's religious understanding. This is in line with studies of contemporary religious authority that suggest that legitimacy is no longer entirely determined by formal structures, but also by engagement in public spaces and the ability to build communication with audiences (Kloos&Turner, 2019).

In addition, *pesantren* is also an arena where various social actors including students, ustaz/ustazah, and the community contribute to the process of forming religious authority. This interaction creates a mechanism of social recognition that is the basis for the legitimacy of *the authority*. In this context, authority is not only top-down, but is also formed through a participatory process involving the community. These findings reinforce the argument that religious authority is relational and depends on the social networks that support it (Bano&Kalmbach, 2020).

Furthermore, the dynamics of the public space of Islamic boarding schools also show that there is a negotiation process

influenced by social, cultural, and gender contexts. *Nyai* used this space to expand their role in religious leadership, despite being in a structure that was historically dominated by men. Thus, *pesantren* not only become a space for the reproduction of traditions, but also a space of transformation where women can establish and negotiate their religious authority. This is in line with the findings of research on Muslim women which show that involvement in religious public spaces is key in expanding women's authority in Islamic communities (Nisa, 2023).

Thus, *pesantren* as a religious public space plays an important role in the process of production and negotiation of religious authority. *Nyai* authority is not only formed through individual capacity, but also through social interactions that take place in the public space of Islamic boarding schools. These findings confirm that communication and participation in public spaces are key factors in understanding the dynamics of women's religious authority in the context of contemporary Islam.

#### 4. Gender Negotiation and the Transformation of Women's Religious Authority

Gender negotiation in the context of *pesantren* shows that women's religious authority is not formed linearly, but rather through social processes that involve adaptation, resistance, and transformation to entrenched patriarchal structures. The results of this study show that *nyai* is able to build and maintain religious authority through adaptive communication strategies, active participation in religious public spaces, and the ability to build social legitimacy in the *pesantren* community. Thus, women's religious authority is not only the result of structural change, but also of constantly negotiated social practices.

In Judith Butler's gender performativity perspective, gender identity is not fixed, but rather is formed through repeated practices in a particular social context (Butler, 1990). The findings of this study show that *nyai* builds religious authority through consistent communication practices, such as recitation, religious guidance, and social interaction, which gradually results in recognition from the community. This process confirms that women's authority is not something that is formally given, but is constructed through repetitive and socially accepted performativeness.

Furthermore, gender negotiations conducted by *nyai* are not always confrontational with patriarchal structures, but often take place culturally and symbolically. *Nyai* uses religious values such as piety, motherhood, and moral exemplarity as a strategy to gain legitimacy in the religious public space. This approach allows women to build authority without directly challenging existing norms, but by reinterpreting and adapting them in social practice. This is in line with Masooda Bano's research which shows that Muslim women can gain religious authority through education, da'wah, and sustainable social engagement (Bano, 2021).

In addition, the transformation of women's religious authority is also influenced by the expansion of communication spaces,

both in offline and digital contexts. Studies on Muslim women in Indonesia show that involvement in public communication allows women to expand their religious influence and build a wider social network (Nisa, 2023). In the context of Islamic boarding schools, although the digital space has not yet become the main focus, the practice of interpersonal and community communication remains an important means in strengthening *nyai*'s position as an actor of religious authority.

These findings also suggest that women's religious authority is relational, that is, dependent on community recognition built through social interaction. In this case, legitimacy comes not only from the capacity of the individual, but also from the ability to build trust and strong social relationships. This reinforces the argument that the transformation of women's religious authority is part of a broader shift in Muslim society, where women increasingly have room to participate in the production and distribution of religious knowledge (Bano & Kalmbach, 2020).

Thus, gender negotiation in Islamic boarding schools not only results in the strengthening of women's roles, but also encourages transformation in the concept of religious authority itself. Religious authority is no longer understood as the exclusive domain of men, but as the result of inclusive and dynamic social practices. This research confirms that communication plays a key role in the process, by enabling women to establish legitimacy, expand influence, and transform their positions within religious structures. These findings make an important contribution to the interdisciplinary study of gender, religion, and communication, particularly in understanding the dynamics of women's religious authority in the context of contemporary Islam.

#### 5. Theoretical Contributions and Implications

This research makes a significant theoretical contribution to the study of religious authority by placing charismatic communication as the main mechanism in the production and reproduction of religious legitimacy, especially in the context of women's leadership in Islamic boarding schools. So far, studies of religious authority tend to focus on structural aspects, such as institutional positions and scientific capacity, while the dimension of communication as a social process that forms legitimacy has received relatively little attention. The findings of this study show that the religious authority of *nyai* is not only determined by the mastery of religious knowledge, but also by their ability to communicate religious values effectively, contextually, and relationally in daily interactions.

In the perspective of charismatic authority put forward by Max Weber, the legitimacy of leadership arises from the recognition of personal qualities that are considered extraordinary (Weber, 1978). However, this study expands on the concept by showing that charisma is not inherent, but rather constructed through repetitive and socially recognized communication practices. Thus, communication serves not only as a means of conveying messages, but also as a

performative process that constitutes authority itself. These findings are in line with contemporary studies that emphasize that religious authority is increasingly shifting from a structural basis to a communicative and interactive process within the community (Kloos & Turner, 2019).

In addition, this research also enriches the perspective of religious public spaces by adapting the concept of Jürgen Habermas, where legitimacy is formed through the process of communication in social spaces (Habermas, 1989). In the context of Islamic boarding schools, public spaces are not only formal and deliberative, but also cultural and based on religious values. This shows that pesantren can be understood as a unique religious public space, where religious authority is produced through social interactions that are symbolic and affective. Thus, this research contributes to expanding the concept of public space into the context of traditional Muslim society.

From a gender perspective, the findings of this study reinforce Judith Butler's argument that gender identity and authority are the result of social constructs negotiated through practice (Butler, 1990). Nyai religious authority shows that women can build legitimacy through consistent communication formivity in religious public spaces. This is also in line with Masooda Bano's research which confirms that Muslim women gain religious authority through education, da'wah, and sustainable social engagement (Bano, 2021), as well as Eva F. Nisa's study which shows that public communication is an important means of expanding women's religious authority in the contemporary era (Nisa, 2023).

Implicitly, this research makes a practical contribution to the development of Islamic communication studies and women's empowerment in religious institutions. These findings confirm that strengthening communication capacity, both in the form of da'wah, education, and social interaction, is a key factor in increasing the role of women as actors of religious authority. In addition, this research also has policy implications, especially in encouraging recognition of the role of women in religious leadership and the development of more inclusive educational programs in Islamic boarding schools.

Thus, this research not only contributes to the development of theories about religious authority, but also opens up space for interdisciplinary studies that connect communication, religion, and gender in the context of contemporary Muslim society. These findings confirm that the transformation of women's religious authority is part of a broader social dynamic, where communication is a key factor in shaping legitimacy, expanding participation, and driving change in religious structures.

Theoretically, this study offers three key contributions. First, it extends the concept of charismatic authority by emphasizing communication as a central mechanism in constructing religious legitimacy. Second, it enriches the literature on gender and Islam by demonstrating how female religious authority is negotiated through everyday communicative practices rather than formal institutional structures. Third, it provides an empirical contribution by situating pesantren as a

unique form of religious public sphere, where authority is continuously produced through social interaction. These findings contribute to the growing body of scholarship on Muslim women's leadership in contemporary Islamic societies.

## Conclusion

This research shows that the religious authority of *nyaiin* pesantren is the result of a dynamic social process, which is formed through the practice of charismatic communication in daily interactions. This authority does not solely come from a structural position in Islamic boarding schools, but is constructed through *the ability of nyaito* to communicate religious knowledge, display moral examples, and build social relations with students and the community. Thus, the religious legitimacy of *nyaiis* is contextual and continues to be negotiated in the public space of the Islamic boarding school.

Theoretically, this research contributes by expanding the concept of charismatic authority put forward by Max Weber by placing communication as the main mechanism in the production and reproduction of religious legitimacy. In addition, this research also enriches Jürgen Habermas's perspective on public space by showing that pesantren can be understood as a religious public space that allows the formation of authority through cultural and communicative social interactions. In the context of gender, these findings reinforce Judith Butler's perspective that women's authority is the result of constantly negotiated social practices, rather than solely determined by formal structures.

This research also has practical implications, especially in the development of the study of Islamic communication and women's leadership in Islamic boarding schools. These findings show that strengthening communication capacity, both in the form of da'wah, education, and social interaction, is an important factor in increasing the role of women as actors of religious authority. In addition, this research provides a basis for the development of women's empowerment policies and programs in religious institutions.

However, this study has limitations in the scope of case studies which are limited to one pesantren context, so the generalization of findings is still contextual. Therefore, further research is recommended to examine the dynamics of women's religious authority in a broader context, including comparisons between Islamic boarding schools, the use of digital media in women's da'wah, as well as cross-border analysis to see the transformation of women's religious authority in a global perspective.

Overall, this study confirms that charismatic communication is key to understanding the dynamics of women's religious authority, as well as opening up space for the development of interdisciplinary studies of communication, religion, and gender in contemporary Muslim society.

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