
Ethnographic Study Of The Tradition Of Balagh Kitab Mukhtar Al Ahadits In Fostering The Value Of Mahabbah Santri At The Sirojuth Tholibin Islamic Boarding School Brabo Tanggunharjo Grobogan

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the role of the *balagh* tradition of the *Mukhtār al-Aḥādīth* text in fostering the value of *maḥabbah* among students (*santri*) at Sirojuth Tholibin Islamic Boarding School, Brabo, as well as to identify the factors influencing its sustainability. The research employs an ethnographic approach using participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation studies involving *kyai*, *santri*, and pesantren administrators. Data analysis was conducted through domain analysis, taxonomic analysis, and componential analysis to map cultural patterns and the meanings of *maḥabbah* values within the practice of *balagh* kitab. The findings indicate that the *balagh* tradition functions as an effective medium for value transmission, in which *maḥabbah* is internalized through the exemplary conduct of the *kyai*, communal interactions among *santri*, and the moral-oriented interpretation of hadith. The value of *maḥabbah* develops in the form of affection for teachers, knowledge, and fellow *santri*. The continuity of this tradition is supported by the commitment of the *kyai* and the pesantren's curriculum structure, although it faces challenges related to the adaptation of new students and the impact of digital disruption. This study implies the importance of strengthening local pesantren scholarly traditions as a model of ethnopedagogy in Islamic value-based character education.

Keywords

Balagh Kitab tradition, Ethnography, Mukhtar al Ahadits, Mahabbah values, Santri



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INTRODUCTION

Character education from the perspective of Islamic education is not solely oriented toward cognitive achievement, but rather emphasizes the formation of values and attitudes that are internalized in everyday life. *Pesantren*, as the oldest Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia, possess a distinctive advantage in transmitting values through living and sustainable scholarly

traditions (Harahap, 2021). These traditions enable Islamic values to move beyond the normative level and to manifest as cultural practices that are directly experienced by *santri*. One of the fundamental values in Islamic education is *maḥabbah*, which refers to love and compassion encompassing the relationship between humans and Allah, the Prophet, teachers, knowledge, and fellow human beings (Qodir & Ulfiah, 2023). *Maḥabbah* is regarded as the foundation for the formation of moral character (*akhlāq*), obedience, and social harmony within the pesantren community. Several studies emphasize that this value plays a crucial role in shaping the personality of *santri* oriented toward ethics, spirituality, and a sense of togetherness.¹

Numerous previous studies have examined pesantren traditions and the learning of *kitab kuning* as means of shaping the character of *santri*.² These studies emphasize the importance of the *kyai*'s exemplary leadership, students' discipline, and patterns of interaction within the pesantren educational process. However, existing research has generally remained pedagogically descriptive and has not specifically explored how a scholarly tradition is interpreted and experienced by *santri* as a process of cultivating the value of *maḥabbah*. On the other hand, research on the value of *maḥabbah* has predominantly been discussed within the framework of Sufism and normative Islamic studies (Harahap, 2021), and thus has paid limited attention to concrete cultural practices in pesantren education. Consequently, a research gap exists, namely the absence of in-depth ethnographic studies that reveal the *balagh* kitab tradition as a medium for instilling *maḥabbah* values among *santri*, particularly through analyses of meaning, social interaction, and the accompanying cultural patterns.

Based on this research gap, the present study focuses on the *balagh* tradition of the *Mukhtār al-Aḥādīth* text at Sirojuth Tholibin Islamic Boarding School, Brabo, as a pesantren cultural practice with the potential to foster the value of *maḥabbah*. The selection of an ethnographic approach is grounded in the need to understand *maḥabbah* as the lived experience of *santri* (*lived values*), rather than merely as a normative concept.³ This study is therefore significant in enriching the discourse on Islamic education grounded in pesantren traditions and in providing both theoretical and practical contributions to the strengthening of Islamic character education.

¹ Fahrizal Hakim and Eko Sumadi, "Islamic Values as Social Glue: Pesantren Strategies in Shaping the Character of Multicultural Students at the Al Hidayah Kudus Islamic Boarding School," *Tafkir: Interdisciplinary Journal of Islamic Education* 7, no. 2 (2026): 634–47; Irja Putra Pratama, "Symbolic Meanings in the Social Interaction of Santri in the Pesantren Environment," *Al-Hayat: Journal of Islamic Education* 8, no. 3 (2024): 1086–1102.

² Muhammad Najib, Maskuri Maskuri, and M Mas' ud Sa'id, "Curriculum Management and Power Relations: Strategies for Multicultural Character Development of Santri in Traditional Pesantren," *Munaddhomah: Jurnal Manajemen Pendidikan Islam* 7, no. 1 (2026): 109–24; Mubarak Mubarak et al., "Pesantren Strategies in Maintaining Islamic Education Traditions and Shaping Santri Social Identity in the Midst of Social Change," *Tafkir: Interdisciplinary Journal of Islamic Education* 7, no. 2 (2026): 565–79.

³ Khoirul Basyar et al., "Ecosufism as a Critical Lens on the Disconnection Between Islamic Spirituality and Ecological Responsibility," *Al-Jadwa: Jurnal Studi Islam* 5, no. 2 (2026): 197–217.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach with an ethnographic design to gain an in-depth understanding of the cultural practices of the *balagh* kitab tradition and the process of cultivating *maḥabbah* values at Sirojuth Tholibin Islamic Boarding School, Grobogan Regency, Central Java. The research was conducted over a three-month period, from February to April 2025, in order to obtain a comprehensive contextual understanding of *balagh* kitab activities, patterns of *santri* interaction, and the dynamics of pesantren life. Research informants were selected purposively and further developed through snowball sampling techniques, including the *kyai* (pesantren leader), senior *santri*, new *santri*, and pesantren administrators. The number of informants was determined based on the principle of data saturation.

The researcher assumed the role of a *participant-as-observer*, meaning that they were involved to a limited extent in pesantren activities without taking on any structural role. This position enabled the researcher to gain an *emic* understanding of the perspectives of both *santri* and *kyai*, while simultaneously maintaining an *etic* perspective as a researcher (Spradley, 1997). Data were collected through participant observation of the *balagh* tradition of the *Mukhtār al-Aḥādīth* text, in-depth interviews to explore the meanings attributed to the value of *maḥabbah*, and documentation studies in the form of pesantren records and instructional materials used in the learning process.

Data analysis was conducted in a sequential manner following Spradley's ethnographic procedures. The process began with domain analysis to identify general categories of *balagh* kitab practices and *maḥabbah* values. The subsequent stage involved taxonomic analysis to map the internal structure of each domain, particularly the forms of *maḥabbah* that develop within pesantren interactions. Componential analysis was then employed to compare roles, relationships, and value meanings across different contexts. These analytical stages were ultimately synthesized through cultural theme analysis to formulate the principal patterns of the *balagh* kitab tradition as a medium for cultivating *maḥabbah*. Data validity was ensured through the application of trustworthiness criteria, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was strengthened through member checking and triangulation of data sources and collection techniques. Transferability was achieved by providing a detailed description of the research context, while dependability was maintained through procedural consistency and systematic documentation of the research process. Confirmability was addressed by ensuring data traceability and researcher reflexivity to minimize subjective bias.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RESULTS

The findings indicate that the *balagh* tradition of the *Mukhtār al-Aḥādīth* text at Sirojuth Tholibin Islamic Boarding School, Brabo, constitutes a structured cultural practice that is carried out regularly in the daily lives of the *santri*. The *balagh* sessions are conducted at specific times that have become part of the pesantren's collective rhythm and are attended by *santri* from various levels, who sit in circular or linear arrangements facing the *kyai*. This pattern reflects both hierarchical and communal structures that are characteristic of pesantren culture.⁴ Field observations reveal that during the *balagh* process, *santri* demonstrate an attitude of *khidmah* (reverent devotion), such as maintaining silence, taking notes on the meanings of the text, and kissing the *kyai*'s hand before and after the learning session. These practices are interpreted by the *santri* as expressions of respect and affection toward the teacher. One senior *santri* stated, "We are taught not only to understand the content of the hadith, but also how to respect the *kyai* as the mediator of knowledge. From this process, love for the teacher naturally grows" (Interview with Senior *Santri*, 2025).

In addition to *maḥabbah* toward teachers, the findings indicate the internalization of *maḥabbah* toward knowledge. This is reflected in the students' habits of carefully preserving their books, providing meticulous annotations, and engaging in collective *murāja'ah* (review) sessions after the *balagh*. A newly enrolled *santri* stated, "At first, it was difficult to follow the *balagh*, but over time I began to feel a sense of loss when I did not attend, because there is an inner tranquility when listening to the hadith" (Interview with a New *Santri*, 2025). These findings demonstrate that the *balagh* tradition functions not merely as a means of knowledge transmission, but also as a process that fosters students' emotional attachment to knowledge.

Social interactions among *santri* also reveal strong practices of *maḥabbah*. After the *balagh* sessions, senior *santri* frequently guide new students in understanding the material, reflecting values of compassion and *ukhuwah* (brotherhood). A pesantren administrator explained that this pattern has become a hereditary practice within the pesantren tradition: "*Balagh* is not merely a matter between the *kyai* and the *santri*; it also cultivates solidarity among the *santri* themselves" (Interview with Pesantren Administrator, 2025).

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that the *balagh* tradition of the *Mukhtār al-Aḥādīth* text constitutes a core cultural practice that functions not only as a medium for the transmission of

⁴ Muhaemin Latif, "Pergulatan Pesantren Dengan Modernitas (Bercermin Pada Pondok Pesantren Ddi Mangkoso, Barru)," *Al-Qalam* 25, no. 2 (2019): 379–92.

knowledge, but also as a mechanism for the internalization of *maḥabbah* values in the lives of *santri*. From an ethnographic perspective, *balagh* kitab can be understood as a symbolic arena in which values are taught, experienced, and collectively interpreted through the everyday practices of the pesantren.⁵ The value of *maḥabbah* is not conveyed as an explicit doctrine; rather, it emerges through repeated experiences involving the bodily engagement, emotions, and social relations of the *santri*.

Maḥabbah toward the teacher (*kyai*) is formed through hierarchical relationships rich in symbolic meaning. Field observations indicate that the reverent attitudes demonstrated by *santri* during the *balagh* session—such as sitting in an orderly manner, lowering their gaze, and kissing the *kyai*'s hand—are not merely matters of etiquette, but cultural practices that represent love, respect, and obedience. A senior *santri* stated, “We are taught from the beginning that proper conduct (*adab*) is more important than the amount of knowledge one acquires. When respect for the *kyai* is established, learning enters the heart more easily” (Interview with Senior *Santri*, 2025). This practice reinforces Dhofier's (1985) view that the *kyai* in pesantren serves as a central figure who integrates scholarly authority and moral leadership, thereby becoming the primary object of *maḥabbah* among *santri*.⁶

The exemplary conduct of the *kyai* also plays a significant role in the formation of *maḥabbah*. The *kyai* does not merely recite and explain the hadiths, but also interweaves narratives, advice, and empathetic attitudes that touch the affective dimension of the *santri*. One *kyai* responsible for the *balagh* sessions stated, “*Balagh* is not about finishing the book quickly, but about enabling the *santri* to grasp the spirit of the hadith. Once their hearts are touched, love for knowledge and for others will naturally follow” (Interview with *Kyai*, 2025). This statement indicates that the learning process is deliberately oriented toward the cultivation of inner feeling, in line with Al-Ghazali's (2008) view on the importance of love as the foundation of moral education.

Maḥabbah toward knowledge is internalized through the ritual and symbolic practices that accompany the *balagh* of the kitab. *Mukhtār al-Aḥādīth* is treated not merely as a reading material, but as an object imbued with sacred value. The *santri* take care of the kitab attentively, provide detailed marginal annotations, and review the lessons through *murāja'ah*. A new *santri* stated, “After several weeks of attending *balagh*, I feel reluctant to place this kitab carelessly. It feels as though I am safeguarding a trust from the *kyai*” (Interview with New *Santri*, 2025). This experience indicates that *maḥabbah* toward knowledge develops through emotional attachment and a sense of responsibility, rather than through structural coercion.

⁵ Resma Ulfah, Rusi Rusmiati Aliyyah, and R Siti Pupu Fauziyah, “Reward Dan Punishment Dalam Pembentukan Karakter Disiplin Santri,” *Tadbir Muwahhid* 2, no. 2 (2018): 98–110.

⁶ Denys Lombard, “Zamakhsyari Dhofier, Tradisi Pesantren, Studi Tentang Pandangan Hidup Kyai,” *Archipel* 28, no. 1 (1984): 220.

In addition to the vertical relationships with the *kyai* and knowledge, the *balagh* kitab tradition also cultivates *maḥabbah* within horizontal relationships among *santri*. Everyday practices reveal a strong sense of solidarity and care, particularly in assisting new students in understanding the lessons. Senior *santri* assume the role of peer tutors without formal instruction. A pesantren administrator explained, “We do not establish written rules regarding the mentoring of new students. It has become part of the culture. When someone does not yet understand, others feel naturally called to help” (Interview with Administrator, 2025). This pattern indicates that the value of *maḥabbah* has been institutionalized within pesantren culture as a collective habit. Post-*balagh* social interactions, such as small-group discussions and collective *muroja’ah* (review sessions), further strengthen the internalization of these values. Within these informal spaces, *santri* share understandings, experiences, and feelings, allowing the *balagh* tradition to extend beyond formal instructional settings and continue within everyday practices. This finding is consistent with the views of Ifendi (2021) and Shofwan (2021), who argue that pesantren education operates holistically through the integration of formal and informal learning environments.

From an ethnographic perspective, the *balagh* tradition of the *Mukhtār al-Aḥādīth* text can be understood as a form of cultural performance that animates the value of *maḥabbah* through the daily rhythms of pesantren life. Love for Allah, the Prophet, teachers, knowledge, and fellow human beings is not taught as separate elements, but is simultaneously embodied within a single cultural practice. Accordingly, *maḥabbah* emerges as a lived value that is continuously experienced by *santri*, rather than merely a normative concept.

Theoretically, these findings strengthen the argument that character education in pesantren is effective when values are inculcated through consistent scholarly traditions, the exemplary conduct of authoritative figures, and meaningful social relationships. The *balagh* tradition does not merely reproduce Islamic knowledge, but also reproduces a culture of love and compassion as the core of pesantren life. Therefore, the *balagh* tradition holds strategic relevance as a model of ethnopedagogy for strengthening Islamic character education amid the challenges of contemporary social change.

CONCLUSION

The *balagh* tradition of the *Mukhtār al-Aḥādīth* text at Sirojuth Tholibin Islamic Boarding School, Brabo, serves as an effective ethnopedagogical medium for fostering the value of *maḥabbah* among *santri*, encompassing love for teachers, knowledge, and fellow students. This tradition has been successful due to the exemplary leadership of the *kyai* and the strong institutional commitment of the pesantren or islamic boarding school. Implications: These findings reinforce the theoretical argument that character education in pesantren should utilize and preserve local scholarly traditions. Recommendations: Future researchers are encouraged to examine the

effectiveness of other *balagh* traditions in pesantren by focusing on different character values, or to explore models for adapting the *balagh* tradition in the digital era.

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