



Print Media and Cultural Identity of *Santri*: Responses of the Pesantren's Young Leaders in Indonesia

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Abstract

The development of Islamic print media that targets youth as readers has challenged pesantren for selecting appropriate reading materials for students according to its values and tradition. This paper aims to examine the dynamics life of pesantren as “fortress for the defense of the Islamic community” in dealing with influences coming from outside of pesantren. Analyzing the responses of young leaders of pesantren to print media (books, novels, and magazines) containing Islamic values and symbols, and targeting Muslim teenagers as their readers and consumers, with focusing on how these media might influence the establishment of the cultural identity of *santri*. My paper will answer two main questions: how do the young pesantren leaders respond on the emergence of many novels and magazines that come into the pesantren? What are the rules and regulations they introduce to preserve the cultural identity of *santri*? In dealing with the challenge of print media, most of the pesantren where these young pesantren leaders live have an “exception” regarding book materials as an attempt to form and protect the cultural identity of *santri*.

Keywords:

Print media, pesantren, and cultural identity of *santri*

Introduction

In 1993 when I was at the pesantren (Islamic boarding school) Al-Fathimiyyah-Jombang, East Java, Indonesia, my friend showed me a magazine with a colorful cover, well-known *Annida*. The magazine compiled Islamic short-stories and other articles that discussed the social

world of Muslim youth in urban areas. I was very interested to find it due to many magazines I read during semester break were mostly secular magazines, mainly both *Anita Cemerlang* and *Aneka*. Meanwhile, *Annida* offered topics related to a daily activity of how being a good Muslim, such as keeping dignity as Muslim and implementing Islamic principles, especially calling for the right way and preventing the bad things (*amar ma'ruf nabi munkar*).

My friends and I liked to read *Annida's* short stories, and I noticed that the stories had influenced the way we wrote for our pesantren's bulletin. For instance, in terms of story themes, previously we wrote short stories about love and secular youth lives, but later we wrote about Muslim urban sociability, student religious organization such as ROHIS, Islamic conversion, *Da'wah*, and Muslim piety. My experience has shown that *santri* read magazines, books, and other print media containing different messages, and there is a possibility of transferring knowledge and values through the readings.

Print media is a cultural production which is, according to Bourdieu (2007, 92) emerged from an exacting social context. Print media does not emerge from empty sphere, but it represents and signifies a certain values and culture in society. Parekh (2008, 10) points out that beliefs and values become significant bases to define and identify personal identity. Identity then can be represented in different markers and forms according to different beliefs and values. However, knowledge and values brought by print media may not correspond with the knowledge and values that have been introduced and taught in the pesantren. The values may also change the cultural identity of *santri* that has been maintaining by kiai and pesantren's board members.

Some studies of Muslim youth and print media in Indonesia have discussed about youth from the urban setting, such as the organization of *Forum Lingkar Pena* (FLP: the Circle Pen Forum) that engage mostly urban young Muslim writers in *da'wah* through writing (Latifah 2005; Kailani

2012), the literary work of FLP (Widodo 2008; Arnez 2009) and Indonesian Islamic Chick Lit (Dewi 2011), and the influence of books and movies in shaping the hybrid identity of Indonesian Muslim youth (Hariyadi 2010). Yet my paper attempts to look at the experience of a particular Muslim community called *pesantren* in dealing with print media. This paper will focus on the response of young leaders (the sons and daughters of *kiai*) to print media (books, novels, and magazines) that contain Islamic values and symbols and may influence the establishment of the cultural identity of *santri*. This paper will answer two main questions: (1) how do the young *pesantren* leaders respond on the emergence of many novels and magazines that come into the *pesantren*? (2) What are the rules and regulations they introduce to preserve the cultural identity of *santri*?

This paper is significant for the field of Southeast Asian Studies as an attempt to provide a balance description about *pesantren* education system in Indonesia, the country with the largest Muslim population in the world. After the bombing attack in Jakarta in 2009, it is found out that a few *pesantren* is associated with terrorist groups, such as *pesantren Al-Mukmin Ngruki, Solo*, that is linked to *Jama'ah Islamiyah (JI)* (Woodward 2010, 30; Munir 2003; Bruinessen 2004). As a result, there is a fear of Islamic radicalism and terrorism and false understanding about *pesantren*. However, I argue that through print media selection, *pesantren* make an effort to preserve the cultural identity of *santri* according to their values and traditions, which are *tasamuh* (tolerance), *tawazun* (balance), *ta'adul* (justice), and *tawasuth* (moderation). This effort also means that *pesantren* make an attempt to maintain their role as “fortress for the defense of the Islamic community” (Dhofier 1999, xxiv).

Beside of collecting secondary data from the literature and documents, the paper is also completed with the primary data collected through interviews to six young leaders of *pesantren*, including sons and daughters of *kiai*, who represent *pesantren* from many areas of Java

and Madura, such as from pesantren Assiddiqiyah, Tangerang-Banten; pesantren Maslakhul Huda Pati-Central Java; pesantren An-Nur Yogyakarta; pesantren Al-Fathimiyyah; pesantren Darussalam, Banyuwangi-East Java; and pesantren An-Nuqayah Madura. The different view of these young leaders taking into consideration from its areas, similarities, and differences rather than generalizing the view of pesantren leaders, and young leaders are considered as representation of the younger generation of pesantren who might determine and influence the formation of the pesantren system in the future. Hereby, this paper started from the socio-historical background of popular culture and the print media industry in Indonesia and their influences on pesantren, which then followed by data analysis.

Print Media Industry and Popular Culture in Indonesia

Explaining the term “popular culture”, Heryanto (2008, 6) writes that it is “a product of an industrialized society where both of the signifying practices and their observable products (i.e., culture) are produced or performed in a great number.” The rise of popular culture in Indonesia was influenced by the reformation era and the development of market industrialization in the 1980s. The reformation era signifies the democratic political system and tightening of the economy. Thus, political change led to new opportunities for the media market, such as the ability to publish without first getting permits and the legalization of cable television (Sen and Hill 2000, 221; Widodo 2008). Through the publication industry, print media has spread out popular culture including literary work, such as novels and compilation of short stories, magazines, and newspaper into the market readers.

Balai Pustaka founded in 1908 by the Dutch colonial government was taken over by Indonesian government after the independence. It was obligated to republish reading material for schools, such as famous novels in order to support the economic weariness of the 1960s. However, it

seemed not to promise future due to the lack of skills in distribution and promotion as well as the decreasing market since 1995, Balai Pustaka became a partial private publisher in 1996 and soon after was left behind compared to other national's profit-making publishing house. Subsequently, in 1970 Gramedia was founded in Jakarta, and it became the biggest publisher in Indonesia by the 1980s with more than thirty book stores spread nationwide. Gramedia published not only daily newspaper *Kompas*, but also novels such as *Karmila* written by Marga T. This novel publication was important in the field of Indonesian authorship as it signified the emergence of the first new-style popular novels with the prospective selling market, and attracted the surfacing of popular authors (Sen and Hill 2000, 22, 23, and 27).

In the 1970s popular magazines that targeted teenagers, such as *Gadis*, *Kawanku*, *Hai*, and *Anita Cemerlang* were published, some by the Gramedia group. Through the magazines, popular culture that is mostly associated with Western culture was introduced to Indonesian teenagers. The content of these magazines included up-to-date fashions, music, movies, celebrity gossip, and printed advertisements, and all of these kinds of contents become trend setters in determining the social world of youth in Indonesia (Handajani 2005 and 2008). In terms of books, a serial novel titled *Lupus*, written by Hilman Hariwijaya, was published for the first time in 1986, and it electrified young readers with its use of *prokem* language (slang) (Sen and Hall 2000, 33). Among the prominent writers, there were Gola Gong and Zara Zettira who also published their *novel remaja* (young adult novel). However, in 1990 the *novel remaja* had to compete with Indonesian private television companies in providing story entertainment; the government created a policy that local drama, *sinetron*, should be prioritized (Salam 2002, 2). Nevertheless, according to the 1996's book list of IKAPI, the books printed and sold were dominated by *fiksi* (fiction) genre together with *fiksi* for school-children. The second category was filled by 'Islam' themes. It is obvious since religious texts

became the main book published in Indonesia and in the 1990s around 10 percent of the member of IKAPI's publishing houses prioritized Islamic books as their primary publication (Sen and Hill 2000, 29).

Responding to the publication of “popular magazines” and “secular” fictions, *Annida* started to appear in 1991 offering “an Islamic alternative for the young Indonesian Muslims”. The production of this Islamic magazine was prompted by the activists of *dakwah* movement, Helvi Tiana Rosa and Dian Yasmina Fajri with their well-known group of young Muslim writers called Forum Lingkar Pena (Kailani 2012, 36). Subsequently, Gramedia started translating Western *chicklit* novels in the 2000s, and this translation led to the publication of Indonesian *chicklit* and *teenlit* novels either from secular or Islamic background (Arimbi 2009; Ismah 2011), including *novel remaja Islami* and *novel pop pesantren*. The first category refers to life stories of urban young Muslims, while the later covers daily stories of *santri* in pesantren (Ismah 2011; 2012). Thus, with many kinds of print media products, teen readers have many more alternatives regarding lifestyles or values that they can learn from the readings.

Reflecting on this massiveness of print media industry, it shows the nature of development and effort in creating a profit market as well as disseminating the messages in the contents of print media, including Islamic values. Weintraub (2011, 3-4) argues that the idea of Muslim popular culture is widely appeal to what the majority of Muslim like, and it has now become part of Islamization. The readers from all over Indonesia are attracted by those books, novels, magazines, and newspapers and they can decide what kind of reading they may have. However, this freedom of choice is not the case for pesantren community and the *santri* who enrolled education in. They have a certain category regarding print media as well as regulation introduced by the leaders within their community members.

Print Media and Pesantren

According to Dhofier (1999, xv, 14), pesantren refers to the “Islamic training centers for advanced studies.” It is considered the oldest education system in Indonesia. From classical Javanese sources, he finds that Islamic studies were provided by pesantren in the early part of the sixteenth century. Since this period, small pesantren existed in the coastal area of Java, where Islam first came to Indonesia. These earlier schools did not support modern system of education (Azra and Afrianty 2007, 174). In pesantren, *kiai* (a founder) becomes the most influential person in determining system and development of pesantren. *Kiai* is like a king with the pesantren as a small kingdom, where he is the only owner of power and authority (Dhofier 1999, 34). In other words, pesantren’s characteristics including regulations, program of study, and the type of pupil, depend on the *kiai*’s thought and decision.

Ismah (2012, 282) argues that “writing and authorship play important roles in spreading Islamic thought and traditions” by citing Van Bruinessen (1994, 14) who suggests that between the tenth and fifteenth centuries, Muslim scholars from pesantren had been working on writing the essential references of Islamic tradition, which is called *kitab kuning*. It is considered as an important element of pesantren. It is classical texts written in the old period and consisted of different Islamic subjects (Bruinessen 1994, 1). To be called *kitab kuning* because of the color of paper used, and it came from the Middle East in the early twentieth century (Bruinessen 1990, 1). *Kitab kuning* are written in Arabic language by Indonesian *ulama* such as Nawawi al-Bantani (1896–1897), Ahmad Khatib (1915), and Kyai Mahfuz Termas (1919–1920) who studied in Mecca and taught in Masjid al-Haram. Through their writings, they influenced and inspired the *ulama* of pesantren in Indonesia (Bruinessen 1994, 20).

The text of *kitab kuning* can be divided into eight categories which are: “(1) *nahwu* (syntax) and *sarf* (morphology)—both are sometimes called *ilmu*

alat, (2) *fiqh*, (3) *usul fiqh*, (4) *hadith*, (5) *tafsir*, (6) *tauhid*, (7) *tasawwuf* and ethics, and (8) miscellaneous texts on *tarikh* (history of Islam) and *balagh* (rhetoric)” (Dhofier 1999, 30). *Kitab kuning* does not relate to popular books because it is not produced in a great number of products. It is mostly displayed in *toko kitab* (bookshops that only provides this kind of religious literature) and in particular places, such as where it is close to the Muslim community in Indonesia. Many *toko kitab* sell Arabic books printed in Egypt and Lebanon, but they have limited collections (Bruinessen 1990, 1).

Another category of book used in pesantren is called *buku putih* (white book) which refers to “the books written in romanized Indonesian.” The theme of this varies including Islamic knowledge and literature. However, some of the authors of this book neglect the classical tradition discussed in *kitab kuning*, and some cases are new interpretation of, the primary sources, the Qur’an and Hadith. This may become the reason why this kind of books is not allowed in pesantren environment (Bruinessen 1990, 1). *Buku putih* are more industrialized than *kitab kuning*. They are available in regular book shops, either in metropolitan cities or in small towns where pesantren mostly are located. Popular novels, books, and magazine are included in this category. However, there is an exception regarding literary works in pesantren. One genre called *sastra pesantren* (pesantren literature) may be accepted because of it represents and obeys Islamic and pesantren values (Munawar 2009).

Jamal D. Rahman, as cited by Ismah (2011, 107; 2012, 283) explains *sastra pesantren* as a literature that is associated with pesantren in terms of its origin and existence, for instance *syair* and *nazham* (poems in Arabic language), its author and its themes or contents. Because of the literature containing knowledge and tradition of pesantren, the authors should have acquaintance, understanding, and familiarity about pesantren (Rahman 2008). Several literary works on pesantren started to appear in the 1960s. For example, the work of Djamil Suherman, Syu’bah Asa, and Fudoli

Zaini, concerned to the religious manifestation and expression of love for God, which was connected with esoteric experiences, human ethics, and the glorification of God's universe (Ismah 2011).

Between these two categories, pesantren decided what kind of print media appropriate to be read and produced within their environments. However, the development of education system and the demand of social culture may influence pesantren in this decision. In Indonesia today, there are two classifications of pesantren: *salafiyah* (traditional) and *kehalafiyah* (modern). *Salafiyah* maintain the study of traditional Islamic texts as its essential teaching, while *kehalafiyah* includes the national system of education, such as formal school and *madrrasah* (USAID, 8). For example, modern pesantren may allow its students to read any print media either *kitab kuning* or *white book*, since its system is more open about new development. In other words, there are consideration and determining factors that may change the acceptance of pesantren regarding print media, both inside and outside of its circumstances.

The emergence of Print Media in the Pesantren

The numbers of pesantren are established all around Indonesia. According to the data from the Ministry of Religious Affairs 2011, there are 11.389 pesantren in Java. From this number, it seems that pesantren has potential to be profitable market for books, novels, and magazines, particularly those that address young Muslim readers.

Responding to the entrance of Islamic teen novels, Rif'an Nashir says that in some aspects he does not agree with the message brought by the novels. Since the novels tell much about love relationship between male and female, he thinks that most of the stories are not congruent with the message of the Shariah-ethic. For example, a courtship between men and women is considered as disobeying the Islamic ethics. Although the courtship is portrayed in the stories in appropriate way, still it is not

accepted by the ethic (Nashir 2012). On the contrary, Tutik Nurul Jannah has different thought regarding the emergence of novels and magazines. She says, “This [the emergence of Islamic teen novels] is not problem, because, the problem in our pesantren is how to urge the students to read” (Jannah 2012). Therefore, according to her, the more books or novels come to pesantren, the more students have opportunity to read it. In similar fashion, Zulfi Adriyani (Adriyani 2012) states that the novels and books bring information within which the *santri* can learn and understand other experiences and knowledge that cannot be found in pesantren. Learning and understanding others will help the *santri* to broaden their minds and eliminate cultural shock. This knowledge may motivate them to study hard in order to prepare their future after graduated from pesantren. Furthermore, Lina agrees with Tutik and Zulfi, but she emphasizes that *santri* should have self-ability to utilize their time properly. “So they will not miss to attending pesantren activities because of enjoying reading,” (Lina 2012).

Among the young leaders of pesantren, there are different responses between accepting and rejecting the coming of new printing media to pesantren. The print media can be negative since it may bring value that is different from what they teach the students, and thus pesantren try to control or even ban the novels and magazines. The pesantren, where Rif’an lives only accepts novels, for example if they are representing pesantren culture, such as the idea of being modest. *Novel pop pesantren* (pesantren popular novel) may be considered to read as it tells about stories of young Moslem who live in pesantren. Regarding the messages, instead of portraying kind of young Muslim piety, *novel pop pesantren* explores the locality of pesantren with moderate value of Islam (Maarif and Ferdhi 2007). This novel was originated and considered as popular form of *sastra pesantren* (Ismah 2011).

However, Tutik, Zulfi, and Lina allowed *santri* to read the print media because there are benefits no matter the values that it brings as they believe in the selfhood of *santri* and acknowledge the liberation of thinking among them. Two other respondents are Muhammad Faizi and Atina Balqiz Izzah, similarly think positively toward the emergence of novels, magazines, and books. Atina (Izzah 2012) even says: “Supporting reading activity for the students is important. From reading they get benefits of having knowledge and releasing stress because activities in pesantren may be monotonous.” Furthermore, Faizi is concerned with the possibility of developing students’ reading interest through providing books, novels, and magazines as much as he can.

The responses of these young generations of pesantren may show the possible changes and development in pesantren regarding the new print media. Pesantren is not restricted to only use *yellow book* as source of knowledge, but also *white book* which is the product of popular culture. Nevertheless, they cannot deny the new values and cultures brought by the media that may influence to the identity of *santri*, and pesantren have responsibilities for controlling this influence.

The Effects of Print Media

Nilsen and Donelson (2009, 26-31) argued that young readers often identify themselves with the characters while reading a novel. Therefore, the main character in teen novels is usually young protagonist who becomes a champion. Bourdieu (2007, 89) also explains that what people read, with whom they interact, what education they enroll will influence the establishment of *habitus*. These two ideas can explain what is happening with Lina’s students. According to her, since her students have opportunity to read books, especially novels, she sees some effects that have influenced them. She says:

“I noticed that the ways they dress up and speak are influenced by what they read. For example, they imitate the way the characters wear trendy *jilbab* and speak with the language that is not polite for students in pesantren” (Lina 2012).

However, in the same time she also finds positive impacts, for instance, these readings provide the students an example how to develop ideas in writing and the stories give them motivational support in study. “Especially, there is a novel titled *Laskar Pelangi* (‘the Rainbow Group’). After reading it, they are motivated to pursue their high dream.” The novel is written by Andrea Hirata (2008), telling about a group of children in Bangka Island. They are from the non-wealthy family and encounter difficulties in their lives, especially in having their primary education. They go to *madrasah* with lack of facilities and it is far away from their homes. Stories emerge from their experiences and effort in dealing with the obstacles. However, because they are persistence and strongly motivated by their dream, their year-long attempts ended in success. This novel sends a message to the reader i. e. “don’t give up”.

Tutik emphasizes what Lina said that television and novels can influence the way of speaking, dressing, thinking, and writing of the *santri*. She gives another example, “After reading *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* (‘the Verses of Love’), polygamy is being spoken by students, and they are interested in going to Egypt for study” (Jannah 2012). This novel is written by Habiburrahman As-Sirazi (2004). In this novel, Fahri, the main character, is a student of Al-Azhar University in Egypt and marries two women, Maria and Aisha. Faizi says that the emergence of *Annida* magazine gives his students idea in collecting their short stories and publishing them into a magazine (Faizi 2012). *Annida* is an Islamic magazine addresses young readers published by Forum Lingkar Pena (the pen circle forum) community in Indonesia. The magazine consists of short stories and articles about youth Muslim sociability. The sons and daughters of *kiai*

I interviewed find the negative impact of print media. However, as long as the impact does not change the essential identity of *santribood* in such negative ways, for example, in the way they dress up and behave, it is acceptable.

Furthermore, Zulfi (Adriyani 2012) states that print media may not influence the identity of *santri* because the *pesantren* regulations are more powerful and determined to the *santribood*. *Santri* have been living within the set of regulation and system run by *pesantren*, and those are more influential than the new influence brought by print media. Moreover, in her *pesantren*, there is one regulation regarding print media which is forbidding the students to read novels during the study hours. Meanwhile, Rif'an argues that print media does not have positive impact. "This influence does not support the effort of *pesantren* in training students to have excellent personalities" (Nashir 2012). Therefore, in Rif'an's *pesantren* reading any novels and magazines are forbidden. Here, positive and negative effects are being negotiated, but the theme that emerges in this discussion is that there are negative influences that can or cannot be tolerated according to the *pesantren* tradition.

Pornography, Islamist, and Radicalism

Returning to the idea that *pesantren* is the fortress for Muslim community (Dhofier 1999, xxiv), *pesantren* has to mitigate some negative influences come from out of their values and traditions. Faizi says that his *pesantren* attempts to eliminate pornography from any print media read by *santri* because it is considered inappropriate and breaking the *pesantren* rules regarding sex and sexuality. Therefore, his *pesantren* forbids secular youth magazines and teen novels that sometimes describe about kissing and hugging, but allow Islamic teen novels and magazines. "Because secular magazines often display pictures of models that do not cover their bodies properly" (Faizi 2012). Similarly, other respondents also share the

same idea that books, magazines, and novels must be checked whether or not they contain pornography.

Another concern regarding reading materials is the idea of radicalism and terrorism which opposite the pesantren values. Mas'ud (2013) cites a study conducted by Nanyang Technical University (NTUS) in 2010 that shows a list of 102 Islamic boarding schools categorized as radical. Although the method of classification is an object for further clarification, it shows the probability of the existence of radical pesantren. Responding to this matter, Tutik shares:

“In my opinion, reading materials that contain the message of fundamentalism and radicalism, such as *Sabili* magazine must be supervised. However, so far pesantren never banned the magazine. Why? I guess, because we have not found any student who read any fundamentalist or radical literature” (Jannah 2012).

Faizi has the same thought that books with radicalism message should be looked suspiciously. According to him, however it is unfair if *santri* are forbidden to read such books because they actually can learn and develop their knowledge from any perspectives. Therefore, in his pesantren there is a short training for new students and those who will graduate about the pesantren values which are *tasamuh* (tolerance), *tawazun* (balance), *ta'adul* (justice), and *tawasuth* (moderation) (Faizi 2012).

Woodward (2001, 31) explains that Islamist groups support “a highly politicized and anti-Western interpretation of Islam.” They are mostly found in university campuses and large urban centers. They are involved with the global Moslem discourse focused on *jihad* and *shariah* law. Like Islamists elsewhere, they concur in their views of global politics, such a belief in Western attempts to annihilate Islam and that the only solution to the problem is establishing nation-states based on *shariah* law and global Islamic collaboration. As'ad (2010) suggests that pesantren can play significant role in countering radicalism, especially traditional pesantren

that are recognized with their moderate thoughts and tradition. Instead of being consumers of media, *santri* should be producers i.e. writers to disseminate the moderate understanding of Islam.

Currently, pesantren are not only protecting their communities from Western influence through popular culture, but also from radical Islam that may be linked to terrorism. Media, such as book, radio and internet, become an effective mean to spread radicalism. In order to prevent these influences, Lina specifically explains that there are values that her pesantren considers in selecting reading material for the students. These are:

“First, religious values which means that the reading materials must be congruent with Islamic values, although the book is not about religion. Second, moral values which refers to good and bad behavior. Third is the benefit of the reading material which means the benefit for *santri*, knowledge development, and brain refreshment. The reading should support the formation of *santri* identity” (Lina 2012).

Tutik also explains that the selection of print media and any program activities implemented in her pesantren considers the objective of pesantren education, which is to produce the *sholeh* (pious) and *akrom* (noble) generation. Therefore, any values or culture that does not support its objective should be mitigated, and this effort is determined by the *kiai* (Jannah 2012). Atina, in the same way, emphasizes that her pesantren are more concerned about pornography, radicalism, and extremism brought by print media. Hence as long as the reading materials do not contain the messages, her pesantren allow the students to read both *yellow* and *white books*.

Conclusion

I have explained the emergence of popular culture and the print media industry in Indonesia that are influenced by the reformation era and the development of market industrialization in 1980s. Print media

companies such as Balai Pustaka and Gramedia play important roles in creating and maintaining a readers' market in Indonesia with fiction as the largest genre that has been produced. Regarding print media circulated in pesantren, there are two types of books, *yellow books* and *white books*. Books that are not written in Arabic on yellow papers and discuss about Islamic classical knowledge are considered *white book*, a type of books that is rejected by past Islamic scholars. However, this rejection is no longer anymore. Some pesantren have accepted the entrance of *white books* with certain consideration.

Based on my interviews, most of the pesantren where these young pesantren leaders live appreciate the freedom of thinking and speaking by allowing the students to read any sources of material of yellow and white books. However, they have an exception regarding books that contain pornography and the idea of Islamic radicalism and extremism. Through this exception, pesantren attempts to form and protect the cultural identity of santri from outside influences. In addition, these responses also show that although they live in the same places called pesantren, each pesantren has its own rules depending on the leader and the circumstances where the pesantren is located.

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