



Educational Leadership and Cultural Heritage: A Study of Kitab Kuning Preservation at Pesantren Al-Khoirot Malang

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Abstract

This study explores the strategic role of educational leadership in preserving the *Kitab Kuning* (classical Islamic texts) tradition amidst the pressures of modern education at Pesantren Al-Khoirot Malang. Using a qualitative descriptive-analytical case study approach, the research investigates how traditional authority navigates the demands of formal schooling without compromising classical literacy. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation, then analyzed using the Miles and Huberman interactive model. The results reveal that Pesantren Al-Khoirot employs a "Preservative-Adaptive Leadership" model, which strategically positions *Kitab Kuning* as a non-negotiable core identity through rigorous curriculum engineering and strict time management. This leadership successfully reframes classical texts as a source of intellectual prestige for students rather than an archaic burden. The study concludes that the resilience of traditional scholarship in the digital era depends on "Progressive Conservation" a leadership strategy that synchronizes traditional pedagogy with modern institutional management. This research contributes a new theoretical framework for "Hybridized Leadership" in Islamic education, offering a blueprint for institutional resilience in maintaining cultural and intellectual heritage within a globalized world.

Article History

Received :15/08/2025

Revised :15/11/2025

Accepted :07/01/2026

Keywords:

Educational Leadership, Yellow Book, Al-Khoirot Islamic Boarding School, Traditional Preservation, Modernity.

How to Cite:

Fathih, M.A. & Firdaus, Rifqi (2026). Educational Leadership and Cultural Heritage: A Study of Kitab Kuning Preservation at Pesantren Al-Khoirot Malang. *LUX ISLAMICA: Journal of Islamic Studies*, 1(1), 26-41.

INTRODUCTION

The preservation of intellectual heritage is a fundamental pillar for any civilization that seeks to maintain its identity in the midst of the unrelenting flow

of globalization. This research is particularly important because the loss of classical literacy signals a loss of cultural continuity, which can trigger an identity crisis among the younger generation. The reason lies in the fact that educational institutions often prioritize modern pragmatic skills at the expense of traditional wisdom, thus creating a gap between historical roots and contemporary life. Evidence shows that many traditional educational centers struggle to legitimize the relevance of classical texts, such as *the Yellow Book*, to a society increasingly driven by digital disruption and utilitarianism. Therefore, it is crucial to investigate how traditional institutions manage these tensions through strategic leadership. Defending *the Yellow Book* is not just a nostalgic religious endeavor; it is a critical strategy for cultural survival and a moral foundation in an era of rapid social change. Ultimately, the study emphasizes that without strong leadership that focuses on cultural heritage, society risks losing its ethical and intellectual compass.

The main problem facing modern society is the gradual erosion of classical Islamic literacy, which historically served as the foundation of moderate religious understanding. While modern educational reform emphasizes standardized exams and vocational readiness, in-depth and nuanced studies of *the Yellow Book* are often marginalized or considered a relic of the ancient past. This phenomenon is exacerbated by the emergence of "instant" religious knowledge on social media, which often lacks the methodological rigor found in the classical scientific tradition (Tolchah & Arfan Mu'ammam, 2019). Studies show that the disconnect between traditional pedagogy and the needs of modern society has led to a decline in mastery of classical Arabic grammar and jurisprudence among modern students (Dadan Mardani & Isop Syaifei, 2025). In addition, the pressure to formalize the curriculum of pesantren often has an impact on reducing the allocation of time for intensive text learning, which threatens the sustainability of *the isnad* (chain of knowledge) tradition. This social shift created a vacuum in

which religious authority became fragmented and disconnected from its historical-intellectual roots, thus demanding a more in-depth review of the institutions that succeeded in countering this trend.

In the specific context of the Al-Khoirot Islamic Boarding School in Malang, there is an interesting phenomenon where *the traditional salaf* curriculum remains the core identity even though the institution is in geographical and social proximity to the bustling modern urban center. At a time when many neighboring institutions have shifted massively towards purely formal schooling, Al-Khoirot maintains a strict focus on the *Yellow Book* as the main vision of his academic success. The phenomenon in the field shows that the students are still deeply involved in *the sorogan* and *bandongan methods*, even when they are in the demands of the digital era. There is a real commitment from the leadership to ensure that every student is balanced in mastering general science and religious science through the deepening of the yellow book, even students who are in formal school are also required to pass the MADIN level (a school that delves into classical book literature). This persistence is not merely a rejection of change, but a calculated institutional position that places *the Yellow Book* as a superior intellectual framework for answering modern problems. This unique atmosphere in Al-Khoirot provides a living laboratory to learn how traditional leadership manages to maintain the quality of religious knowledge through the deepening of classical books to keep them alive and relevant in the midst of a modern metropolitan environment.

Previous research has extensively documented the evolution of pesantren from various perspectives, but specific gaps remain regarding the intersection between leadership and the preservation of cultural heritage. Early scholars such as provide fundamental insights into the sociological structure of Islamic boarding schools and the traditional authority of Kyai (Dhofier, 1985; Mastuhu, 2003). Recent studies show that it has shifted towards modernizing pesantren

management and integrating the national curriculum (Hanif et al., 2024; Laila et al., 2025). For example, research by (Lukens-Bull, 2001; Raihani, 2014) explores how pesantren leadership navigates the demands of modern education and multiculturalism. Meanwhile, such scholars (Aslan & Shiong Pong, 2023; Meriza et al., 2022) have focused on the pedagogical aspects of *the Yellow Book* in the digital age, noting the transition from physical books to digital applications. However, most of these studies tend to treat *the Yellow Book* as a static variable or focus only on its instructional methods without linking it to the broader framework of "Cultural Heritage Leadership" in a specific local context such as in Malang.

Despite the wealth of existing literature, there is a significant research gap on how specific leadership models at the micro level such as those practiced at the Al-Khoirot Islamic Boarding School in Malang explicitly prioritize the "sacredness" of classical texts as an institutional survival strategy. Current research often ignores the psychological and strategic nuances of how a Kyai balances the preservation of *turath* (tradition) with the pressure of state-mandated education standardization (Hefner & Zaman, 2010; Tan, 2011). Many studies have focused on the "what" and "how" of teaching but have failed to answer the "why" behind the long-term institutional resilience of classical literacy in the modern environment (Niyozov & Memon, 2011; Pohl, 2006). This research positions itself to fill this gap by analyzing the synergy between visionary leadership and cultural heritage. In contrast to previous studies that often-viewed tradition and modernity as binary opposites, this study contributes by showing how the two can coexist through adaptive leadership. The weakness of previous research lies in its generalist approach, which often misses specific institutional mechanisms that allow *salaf* Islamic boarding schools to thrive amid the high-tech demands of today's younger generation.

The novelty of this research lies in the exploration of "Heritage Leadership" in the pesantren ecosystem, a concept that is rarely applied in the context of

Indonesian Islamic education. While cutting-edge studies in educational leadership often focus on transformational or instructional leadership for the sake of academic achievement, these studies introduce a preservative (preservation) dimension of leadership. This study investigates how the leadership at Al-Khoirot Islamic Boarding School acts as well as a filter as well as a bridge, ensuring that *the Yellow Book* does not become an obsolete artifact but remains a breathable living guide for contemporary life. This research is important to complete because it offers a new model for traditional institutions around the world of how to maintain their intellectual spirit without being left behind by the advancement of the times. By focusing on Al-Khoirot, the study provides a specific blueprint for institutional resilience that challenges the common narrative that classical traditions are bound to fade in the face of modern secular education. It is a critical addition to the discourse on global education sustainability and cultural diversity.

The central research problem raised here is: how does the educational leadership at the Al-Khoirot Islamic Boarding School in Malang strategically preserve the tradition of the *Yellow Book* in the midst of the pressures of the modern era? The study argues that Al-Khoirot's success lies in the "Balanced Leadership" model, which treats *the Yellow Book* not just as a curriculum, but as an essential non-negotiable cultural identity. The provisional answer to this problem shows that by integrating classical pedagogy with a modern institutional mindset, leadership creates an environment where students see *turath* as a source of prestige rather than a burden. This research contributes to the field of science by providing empirical evidence that traditionalism, if managed with visionary leadership, can be a form of "progressive conservation" that strengthens rather than weakens the position of an institution in the modern world. Ultimately, this study serves as a critical argument for the continued relevance of classical Islamic scholarship as a fundamental element of global intellectual

heritage, offering insights that can be applied to other cultural contexts facing similar challenges.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive-analytical case study design. The selection of this design is based on the need to explore the phenomenon of leadership in depth in the context of a bounded system, in order to answer the question of "how" and "why" a cultural heritage preservation strategy is maintained in the midst of the currents of modernity (Creswell, 2014). The location of the research was determined at the Al-Khoirot Islamic Boarding School in Malang, East Java. The reason for choosing this location is because of its unique position as a bastion of the salaf tradition that remains consistent in maintaining a high-level yellow book curriculum amid the pressure of urbanization and the formalization of education in the Malang area. Al-Khoirot Islamic Boarding School is a crucial representation of the "progressive conservation" model, in which Islamic boarding school leadership is able to balance traditional values with modern institutional management, thus providing rich data for the study of educational leadership.

The data collection technique was carried out through in-depth interviews with caregivers (Kyai) and the ranks of curriculum managers, participatory observation on yellow book recitation (turast) activities, and documentation studies related to pesantren academic policies. Data analysis follows an interactive model (Miles et al., 2014) that includes four main stages: data condensation (selecting and simplifying raw data), data display (presenting data in narrative or matrix form), and verification and drawing conclusions to test the validity of arguments about *Balanced Leadership* (Miles et al., 2014). To ensure the validity of the data, this study applies the triangulation technique of sources and techniques, namely by comparing the results of interviews between informants

and matching them with the practical reality observed in the field and official documents of the institution. This ensures that research findings have high credibility, dependability, and confirmability according to qualitative research standards (Miles et al., 2014).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

Educational leadership at the Al-Khoirot Islamic Boarding School in the context of the preservation of the Yellow Book is defined operationally as **Strategic Preservative Leadership**. This is not just ordinary managerial leadership, but the ability of the Islamic boarding school authorities to position classical literacy as a "non-negotiable core curriculum" in the midst of the expansion of formal education. In the field, this manifests itself in the form of strict control over the allocation of students' time, where mastery of classical texts remains the main indicator of academic success, while the general curriculum is positioned as a support. This strategy ensures that even though pesantren adopts elements of modernity, its intellectual "spirit" remains rooted in a strong turath tradition.

In an in-depth interview, the caretaker of the Al-Khoirot Islamic Boarding School stated: "For us, the Yellow Book (turast) is a very core Islamic heritage. Modernity is just a packaging or tool, but the content must remain original from the salaf scholars. If we abandon the yellow book in order to pursue a formal diploma alone, then Al-Khoirot will lose its identity as a pesantren." The researcher's interpretation shows that the leadership here uses an **Ideological Guarding** approach. Leaders act as ideological goalkeepers who ensure that traditional values are not eroded by the pragmatism of modern education that often only pursues formal degrees without the depth of religious literacy.

The second informant, as the Head of Madrasah Diniyah, explained: "We designed a very precise schedule. In the morning, students learn the national

curriculum, but Day to Night is a 'sacred hour' for the Yellow Book. We do not allow general extracurricular activities to interfere with the prayer time." The researcher interprets this data as **Structural Adaptation Leadership**. Leadership is technically able to engineer the organizational structure and schedule in such a way that there is a symbiosis between formal schools and madrasah diniyah without sacrificing the quality of mastery of standard books such as Fathul Qarib or Alfiah Ibn Malik.

Visually, the flow of the leadership strategy at Al-Khoirot can be described as follows:

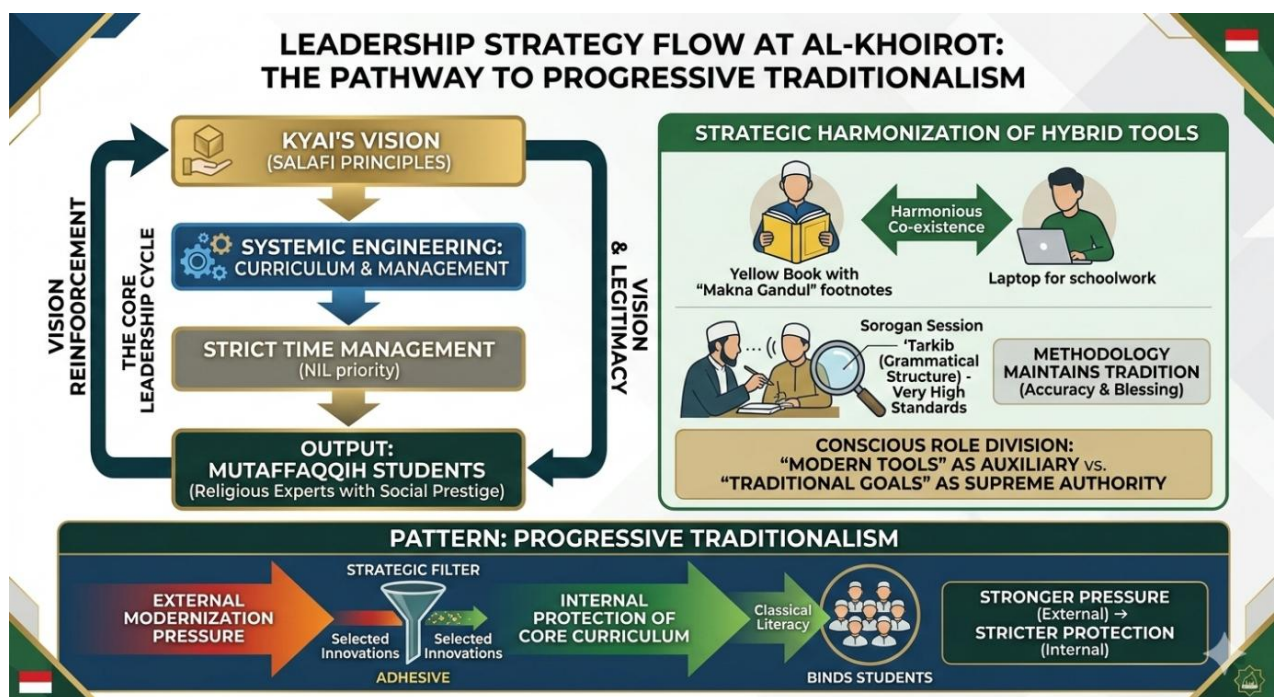


Figure 1. Leadership Strategy Flow at Al-Khoirot: The Pathway to Progressive Traditionalism

This flow shows a closed cycle in which the vision of leadership does not stop at the level of rhetoric, but is relegated to systemic engineering. The end result is not just students who graduate from school, but students who have social prestige because of their ability to read "bald" books, which then reinforces the initial vision of leadership.

The results of observations in the field showed a contrasting but

harmonious scene: the students brought a laptop for schoolwork, but next to it lay a yellow book full of notes "makna gandul" (traditional footnotes). In the sorogan session, Kyai listened to the students' readings very carefully, correcting tarkib (grammatical structure) with a very high standard. The researcher's interpretation is the occurrence of **Hybridity of Tools**. Al-Khoirot's leadership succeeded in creating a culture in which modern technology was accepted as an auxiliary, yet the methodology of knowledge transmission maintained a traditional way of emphasizing the blessing and accuracy of the text.

The above data shows that the preservation of the Yellow Book in Al-Khoirot did not happen by chance, but rather as the result of strategic management that placed tradition as the supreme authority. Islamic boarding school leaders consciously divide roles between "modern tools" and "traditional goals."

The pattern that formed was **"Progressive Traditionalism."** The pattern shows that the stronger the pressure of modernization from outside, the stricter the internal protection of the core curriculum. Leadership functions as a filter that filters out external influences and as an adhesive that binds students to classical literacy.

Here is a table summarizing how the idealized influence of leadership works in Al-Khoirot:

Table 1. Table Title Should Be Placed at The Top

Informant Position	Interview Excerpts	Ideal Influence Indicators
Caregiver (Kyai)	<i>"Example is the best method. If Scarlett is still alive, she won't be able to get away with it."</i>	Charismatic Modeling (Direct Example)
Madin Head	"The decision of the pesantren to require the yellow book is a form of protection for the future of students."	Altruistic Vision (Vision for the Good of Santri)
Ustadz Senior	"Here, the highest achievement of students is when they pass the final level of the Yellow Book exam, not just passing the national exam."	Value Alignment

The table above shows that the ideal influence of leadership in Al-Khoirot works through **a consistent top-down system**. The first paragraph of interpretation emphasizes the Charismatic Modeling aspect. When caregivers position themselves as direct perpetrators in the recitation of the yellow book, this creates high moral standards among students and teachers. This influence is not based on coercion, but respect (ta'zim) that makes all elements of the pesantren feel proud to maintain the tradition as a common identity.

The second paragraph of the interpretation highlights Value Alignment. It is clear that the pattern that leadership has succeeded in shifting the standard of "success" in the eyes of students. In the midst of a trend of society that deifies formal diplomas, Al-Khoirot's leadership has instead instilled a new indicator of success: proficiency in classical literacy. This pattern creates consistency of behavior at all levels of the position, from Kyai to asatidz, all of which move in one frequency to ensure that the Yellow Book remains the prima donna in the modern era.

Discussion

The findings of the research at the Al-Khoirot Islamic Boarding School in Malang show that the educational leadership applied is a form of "preservative-adaptive leadership" that consciously positions the Yellow Book as a core identity that cannot be negotiated. This is in line with the traditional authority theory of (Dhofier, 1985) the one updated by (Fauzi, 2012), in which Kyai acts not only as a religious figure but also as a strategic manager who is able to balance the demands of modernity without sacrificing the orthodoxy of classical literature. The compatibility of these findings with research (Hanif et al., 2024; Laila et al., 2025) strengthens the argument that the sustainability of *turath* in the era of disruption is highly dependent on the ability of leaders to carry out curriculum engineering that provides priority space for mastery of classical texts over formal

curriculum. However, there is a significant difference with studies from (Yaqin & Jazilurrahman, 2025) those that tend to see urban pesantren starting to marginalize the yellow book for the sake of national integration; on the contrary, Al-Khoirot actually strengthened the specialization of the yellow book as its institutional competitive advantage.

The theoretical implications of these findings provide a new contribution to the concept of "Hybridized Leadership" in Islamic education, where traditionalism is no longer seen as an obstacle to progress but as a foundation of identity stability. The pattern found in Al-Khoirot supports the thesis (Lukens - Bull, 2001) that pesantren is the most successful institution in negotiating modernity in Indonesia because of its ability to conduct "value selection." Theoretically, this study shifts the paradigm from pure transformational leadership towards conservation-progressive leadership, proving that the preservation of cultural heritage through *the sorogan* and *bandongan methods* can remain relevant if supported by professional organizational management. This enriches the literature on the sociology of Islamic education, especially in understanding how religious authorities in rural and urban areas maintain their intellectual hegemony through mastery of primary texts.

Practically, these findings provide a real model for other Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia on how to integrate formal schools without losing their *salaf identity*. Al-Khoirot's strategy in establishing a "sacred hour" for the study of the yellow book is a practical implication that can be adopted by Islamic education policymakers to prevent excessive de-traditionalization in modern Islamic boarding schools. This is in line with the recommendations (Taher, 2020) that emphasize the importance of standardizing the competence of yellow book literacy as a filter against digital radicalism. Al-Khoirot's success proves that when leaders are able to instill intellectual prestige in the ability to read classical books, students will have cultural immunity to the instant religious narratives that are rife

on social media (Tolchah & Arfan Mu'ammam, 2019).

Furthermore, the integration between digital media and the preservation of the yellow book in Al-Khoirot shows the existence of a controlled "Digital Piety", in line with the idea (Latip et al., 2025) of using technology to strengthen traditional authority. The leadership at Al-Khoirot ensured that technology only functioned as a means of distribution, not a substitute for face-to-face methodologies that contained *the values of barakah* and *isnad*. These findings correct concerns (Campbell, 2012) about the threat of technology to religious authorities; in Al-Khoirot, technology has become a means to expand the reach of *turath literacy* to a wider digital audience. The practical implication is that the management of the pesantren in the future must focus on increasing the digital capacity of staff without reducing the flight hours of students in interacting directly with the main reference books.

As a conclusion of this discussion, the leadership pattern at the Al-Khoirot Islamic Boarding School in Malang emphasizes that the preservation of the Yellow Book is the result of careful strategic design, not just the inertia of tradition. The consistency of these findings with theories of cultural stability suggests (Tan, 2011; Tursina, 2023) that effective educational leadership in the modern era is one that is able to act as a "bridge of time/visionary" connecting the intellectual depth of the past with the demands of future competencies. The broad implication of this study is the need for government recognition of this cultural heritage-based education model as a national strategic asset in maintaining religious moderation and the intellectual stability of the nation in the midst of globalization (Pohl, 2006).

CONCLUSION

The study concluded that the preservation of *the Yellow Book (turast)* at the Al-Khoirot Islamic Boarding School is not the result of cultural isolation, but a **measurable "Preservative-Adaptive Leadership"** strategy. The main lesson is

that tradition and modernity can coexist harmoniously through curriculum engineering that places *turath* as the core identity and formal education as a support. Al-Khoirot proves that the determination to maintain the intellectual "spirit" is able to change the perception of students towards classical books; from a burden to a source of moral-intellectual prestige in the digital era.

This paper makes a theoretical contribution to the concept of **"Hybridized Leadership"** through the introduction of the term **"Progressive Conservation."** The study dissects the often-overlooked micro-leadership mechanisms in mainstream education management and serves as the antithesis to the assumption that *salaf pesantren* will be eroded by national standardization. This contribution emphasizes that the sustainability of classical Islamic scholarship depends on cultural filtering and management synchronization without compromising traditional standards (*isnad*).

This research is limited to one locus (a single case study), so the generalization requires adjustments for the context of the pesantren that are geographically and organizationally different. In addition, the focus of research is still limited to a managerial perspective. Future research is suggested to explore aspects of **students' cognitive psychology** in internalizing the value of *turath* in the midst of popular culture, as well as conduct **a comparative study** between urban and rural pesantren to map the resilience of Islamic literacy in Indonesia more broadly.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The author extends sincere gratitude to the leadership of **Pesantren Al-Khoirot Malang**, particularly the **Kyai and Asatidz**, for their invaluable insights and cooperation during this research. Their commitment to the *Kitab Kuning* tradition provided the essential foundation for this study. Special thanks are also due to the **Santri** for their participation and to the academic mentors whose

feedback refined the theoretical framework. Finally, deep appreciation is expressed to family and colleagues for their unwavering support in the completion of this work.

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