

Transformative Education through Sufism based Character Education in Indonesian Pesantren

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Abstract

Pesantren (Islamic boarding school) is the oldest model of Islamic education institution in Indonesia. However, frequently, pesantren is considered as secondary option as it is traditional institution, focusses only in religious study and does not play a pivotal role in this modern time. This study aims at challenging this stereotyping and providing evidence that boarding school, that, in fact, plays a significant role in the society and contributes to transformation of young Muslim generation. This idea is in-line with the spirit of sustainable innovation. This is to proof that the Pesantren can still be relevant to the modern era. This research focuses on understanding the experience of religious teachers and students. Specifically, this research analyses the implementation of Sufism based character education model in Indonesian Pesantren. This is a qualitative study that employed ethnography approach. The data collection was started in July 2018 to January of 2019 and the analyzed in the lights of Transformative Education theory which was developed by Paulo Freire. This study discovers that Sufi daily ritual as unique model of character education among religious teachers and students was based on strong Sufi brotherhood. This kind of Islamic based character education has generated transformative education among the religious students (*santri*). This study is an evidence that Pesantren plays a pivotal role in terms of implementation of character education for transformative education in Indonesia.

Keywords: Character Education, Transformative Education, Sufism, Pesantren.

Introduction

Pesantren has been acknowledged as the oldest Islamic education institution in the Indonesian context. The history of Pesantren can be traced back into the early century of the development of Islam. Although it has been said to receive some characteristics from the Indian type of religious education, Pesantren has been able to poof its existence as the most notable Islamic education institution in Indonesia. It provides the place for young Indonesian Muslim to learn and practice their faith in a special situation with supervision of authoritative *Sheikh* and *ustadz*.

In modern times, Pesantren has received a challenge to maintain its very existence in a formal model of education. Therefore, been developed from its very basic and simple form of school into a modern institution. The modern pesantren has developed to responses to this challenge: the needs of Islamic education modernization. Modern pesantren has distinguished itself from the *Salaf* model by providing modern curriculum agreed by the Ministry of Religious Affairs and employs a modern method such as the classical model in terms of transfer of knowledge. The activities are measured and assessed by the Ministry of Religious Affairs who provide a special directory, the Directory of Pesantren and Basic Religious Education.

Taking the above into account, some still question the value and role of the contemporary pesantren, particularly when it comes to the graduates who still prioritize the formal certificate from the madrasah rather than the Pesantren certificate (ijazah) itself for finding jobs and best opportunity to seek a better life. Pesantren is still seen as secondary and complementary option rather than the primary one. The pesantren education seen as inadequate to answer the current demand of the global world and digital modern world.

This research is an attempt to provide evidence that Pesantren indeed plays a pivotal role for the society by transforming young generation through religious education, and opportunities surround it. Not only that the student of Pesantren is enabled to find new better identity and goal of life through pesantren based education, the alumni also benefit from the ijazah (certificate) and network established from the pesantren and Islamic environment. This is also the evidence that Pesantren based education is still responding to the spirit of sustainable innovation in the digital era in terms of the globalized world as the pesantren continue to enhance reflective innovation toward the transformation of its *santri* and alumni. This transformation of the students and the alumni of the pesantren will be analyzed in the light of transformation education theory.

Transformative education theory was developed by Paulo Freire (Freire, Park, & Freire, 2016; Pilkington & Melling, 2018). Freire is known for the idea of critical pedagogy, which is another version of transformative education. The very important point of his idea is that the ultimate goal of the education is a liberation. By liberation, he means that people who seek education needs to liberate themselves from any kind of oppression and taking the humanity as the goal. So, it is not as simple as finishing the school (Freire et al., 2016). Another scholar of transformative learning is Jack Mezirow (1991) who introduced ten perspectives or stages of transformative learning process as follows: "Disorienting dilemma, Self-examination, Sense of alienation, Relating discontent to others, Explaining options of new behavior, Building confidence in new ways, Planning a course of action, Knowledge to implement plans, Experimenting with new roles, and Reintegration" (Kitchenham, 2008). This idea of transformative education and learning will be used as analytical tools to understand the transformation of *santri* (religious students) through the character education in the pesantren.

The study of pesantren was in a modern Indonesian literature was initiated by Zamakhsari Dhofier (1999). The work of Dhofier illustrates the description of a pesantren which normally consisted of *Pondok* (boarding), Masjid (mosque), Classical Islamic traditional books (*kitab kuning*), *Santri*, and Kyai (Dhofier, 1980). This work is a foundation of the Pesantren study. In addition to that Abdul Ghoffir Muhaimin illustrates the development of Pesantren in Indonesia by figuring out the types of pesantren (A.G. Muhaimin, 1995; A. G. Muhaimin & Wahid, 2001). This kind of work is later taking its culmination in the annual survey of pesantren by the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MORA) who administrated the number and development of pesantren in Indonesia. Having said that, however, the current development and innovation of the *pesantren* are understudied. There are works covering Islamic Education and the Public Sphere written by (Pohl, 2009). In his work, Florian Pohl presents examples in which Islamic educational institutions actively further progressive politics and strengthen the public sphere of contemporary Indonesian society through educational programs that address issues such as anti-violence, interfaith and interethnic tolerance, pluralism, human rights, gender equality, democracy, and political and social justice. Another work by Dindin Solahudin focuses on the study of morality and pesantren in which the pesantren is lead by popular Kiyai AA Gym (Solahudin, 2008). Nabelia Naily took a different perspective with her work, *Leadership and Gender Construction: Perspective of Nyai in Pesantren Community in Indonesia*. This is more on the study of Gender within the Islamic educational institution (Naily, 2010). While the other work by Prof Raihani report on the multiculturalism within the pesantren (Raihani, 2012). Those are very important studies on pesantren. However, they do not cover the transformative educational perspective within the arguably oldest Islamic educational institution in Indonesia. While one of the goals of education— including the Islamic ones— are to transform the student into a better person of the future.

Therefore, this mini ethnographic study of current innovation and development of Pesantren would like to add information to fill up the gap of the above study. It aims at investigating the role of Sufi brotherhood in terms of character education, which synthesizes such a religious connection that implemented in terms of Islamic education that later supports the transformation of the *santri* and alumni of pesantren in Indonesia. This study will also add the typology by Abdul Ghoffir Muhaimin (A.G. Muhaimin, 1995) by addition new type of pesantren that is a transnational management pesantren that enhanced the role of the pesantren in Indonesian Islam. In a specific manner, this study asks the question on how Sufism based character education can be a tool for transformative education. In a details way, this study aims to understand what is the Sufism based character education? How is the Sufism based character education is practiced in the pesantren? How the Sufism character-based education can be a tool of transformative education? and in what way the transformation of the education takes place in the pesantren? Overall, this study of the transformative education through Sufism based character education will provide a more comprehensive picture of character education within the oldest form of Islamic education institution in Indonesia.

Method

My research on at the Pesantren Suleymaniyah was designed as an ethnographic case study. This approach is in line with the study aim which is to understand the current religious community providing Islamic education in a real-life context. A case study provides a detailed and intensive analysis of a single case, and the Pesantren Suleymaniyah is the case study for this research. The global Suleymaniyah network is too huge to be studied and therefore, a case study as a sample is chosen. In the perspective of anthropology, the ethnographic case study method was developed to study of a particular community. However, it does not necessarily the result cannot be extended. As noted by Alan Bryman (2008, pp. 52-53) a case study can be extended to study larger social units. In addition to that, Stake (1995, p. xi) and Yin (Yin, 2002, pp. 13-14) also suggests that this kind of particular study just like a case study is beneficial to assist us in understanding an activity, such as educational activity, in a specific situation. Later, a case study could also be generalized to a similar phenomenon.

This research was carried out at the Pesantren Tahfidz Suleymaniyah. The pesantren is part of the global Suleymaniyah Naqshbandiya Sufi transnational brotherhood (Milani, Possamai, & Wajdi, 2017). Initially, the Suleymaniyah was started in Tukey and then developed and spread out across the globe (Wajdi, 2015, 2018). In 2005, Suleymaniyah has reached Indonesia and established pesantren across the country. The branch of Rawamangun was particularly selected for this research as it is the central branch of the Pesantren Suleymaniyah in Indonesia. My interaction with the *santri* and *ustadz* of the Pesantren Suleymaniyah has started since 2010 as one of my former students at the University where I teach is the *santri* and then the graduate of the Pesantren Suleymaniyah. This observation and interview have been continuing afterward in many occasions. The main interest was about their Sufi activities, which considered as the model of character education within the Pesantren. Observation was made to understand the transformation of the *santri* when they become the alumni of the pesantren. The main interest of the observation was the transformation through the Islamic education system.

The procedure of the data collection was conducted through a process of a permission requests from the director of the pesantren and then followed by the consent request of the interviews. The data collected during the fieldwork then was analyzed with the theory of transformative learning by Mezirow (1991). To ensure the validity and reliability of the data analysis, the process of triangulation of the data was made with expert opinion and consultation with other academic works. This research overall has suggested a new type of pesantren as it is having strong transnational connection. This study also provides evidence that pesantren play a pivotal and real role in establishing transformation education.

Results and Discussion

This part of the paper discovers the evidence of transformative education within a pesantren in Jakarta. As has been previously explained that the literature part, that large number of studies on Islamic education (pesantren) do not cover the topic of transformative education. Therefore, this study will give evidence of the existing transformative ideas and applications within the pesantren, particularly from the Sufi teachings and rituals, to fill up the gap of the previous studies.

Character Education based on Sufi Ritual of Rabtha and Shobet

The character development has been a focus for pesantren as it is noted as one of the very aims of Islamic education. This is the evidence from the hadith narrated by Imam Al-Bayhaqi on the purpose of sending the Prophet Muhammad PBUH which is "Indeed, I was sent only to perfect moral glory". Therefore, the education to nurture the noble characters is having an important position in the Pesantren tradition.

Character education is also one very basic curriculum of the Pesantren Suleymaniyah and the education take form in the hidden curriculum of the Pesantren. The character education of the Pesantren take forms in the Sufi teachings based on the Naqshbandi Suleymaniyah school of Sufism. Suleyman Hilmi Tunahan is the charismatic Sufi founder of the global Suleymaniyah school networks. He was the 33rd Murshid Kamil of the Naqshbandi Sufi School. All of the students at the Suleymaniyah need to take bond with the Murshid Kamil through the Sufi ritual of *rabtha*. The *rabtha* in its literal meaning is bonding or making connection. It is the pledge of the student to the Sheikh to be a pious Muslim.

The *rabtha* is practices through certain dhikr rituals that both students and teachers of the Suleymaniyah perform every day. Normally, it is practiced in the early morning before the dawn. This dhikr keeps the students and teachers in the connection with their Sheikh, Suleyman Hilmi Tunahan, and it gives the spirit of brotherhood among them within the Naqshbandi Sufi School. This dhikr also gives the students and the teacher meaning of life, which is to carry out the Islamic values and to serve by the name of Islam. This *rabtha* is a closed ritual only for the followers of the Naqshbandiya Suleymaniyah Sufi order. During my ethnographic data collection, I could observe the students who perform the rituals, but I cannot have the list of dhikrs which they recite and perform every day. It says that the dhikr is exclusive to the followers of the Sheikh.

In addition to the daily *rabtha* ritual, there are another Sufi ritual and custom that are performed in the weekly basis which known as *sohbet*. The word *sohbet* is a Turkish word for a sermon. This is a weekly sermon which acts as the moment to strengthen the spirit of the students to be pious Muslim and perform *hizmet* (serving in the name of religion). Unlike the *rabtha*, *sohbet* is open to non-followers of the Sheikh. Everyone is welcome to join the *sohbet*. The *sohbet* is normally started with reciting some dhikrs in the beginning of the *sohbet*. The dhikr are taken from the Qur'anic verses and/or the Hadith. And then after that, it followed by the *sohbet* (sermon). Senior religious teacher normally lead to the sermon. This two Sufi ritual of the Suleymaniyah has been practiced for years during the students stay, and it gives a kind of environment where the good character is nurtured and builds up.

Transformative Education in the form of Tekamul and Hizmet

Pesantren Suleymaniyah provides four levels of the Islamic educational system: *ibtidai*, *izhari*, *tekamul alti*, and *tekamul*. The three of the levels are conducted in Indonesia while the last ultimate *tekamul* class only provided in its country of origin, Turkey in an international class model (Wajdi, 2015). In relation to the character education, the result of the Sufi based character education can be seen among the graduates of the Pesantren Suleymaniyah who completed the *tekamul* level. They

have been seen to have international orientation and experience as well as have a purpose of life in terms of *hizmet*.

Having an international degree in Islamic education and receive a certificate of the *tekamul* level is the culmination of the process of the study within the Suleymaniyah pesantren. After completing awarded the authority to teach is very important for the Suleymaniyah followers. The selected students can receive the offer to study in the international class in Turkey, and the candidate should pass number of test and assessment. During my interview, clearly the main assessment is not merely the IQ based, instead it is the character. One of the teachers mentioned that when a student is given the right to the *rabtha* they start the internal journey of being the Suleymaniyah followers. And then they will be observed in terms of the courage of learning the Islamic studies and the noble character as well as the future qualification. If they have a noble character, which was nurtured by the Sufi rituals of the *rabtha* and *sohbet*, then they will have the opportunity to continue the *tekamul* in international of Turkey.

Tekamul is very important, particularly because that is the ultimate level in the Suleymaniyah Islamic educational system. It is not only challenging to graduate as they have to be very performed the Sufi values of the Islamic teachings, it is also challenging in terms of entering it as it is very highly selected. It is the ultimate level, and it gives authority in terms of the religion for those who graduate from it. The class is in international situation where student forms over the world are together learning the Islamic studies. Not only that, they also learn multiple situations to enrich their understanding of the multiculturalism. For example, Indonesian Muslim majority is Shafii school of law, but in the *tekamul*, they also learn and study about other *mazhab* such as Hanafi. They can also exchange opinion from one to another student. So, the international class is very important.

They graduate can work and implement the religious knowledge anywhere, but they will also be given the offer to implement their educational results within the framework of *hizmet* (serving in the name of the religion). It is quite common that the graduates are serving in international situation too. During my ethnography, I witness Indonesian graduates serve in different countries such as in Turkey, Singapore, Fiji, or Australia. This for sure bring pride to them as international delegation serving for their religion. This full fill the existence values and proud to the young Muslim generations.

Transformative Education Process

In the terms of transformative learning process as suggested by Jack Mezirow (1991), the students of Pesantren Suleymaniyah can be said to have gone through the stages of disorienting dilemma. But they continue to progress to achieve the “reintegration” step of being able to be part of international students and graduates. Being part of the international and global community is very important for the students and graduate of the Suleymaniyah. The international and global situation has been made possible for some reasons. This is particularly possible for the following ways: (a) the system which is transnational in a way; where *tekamul* is conducted only for selected students in Turkey with international class. (b) the *hizmet* opportunity for the graduates. The *hizmet* is a particular tool to implement the theory into practice, and this is also carried out internationally; (c) these two have been possible with the Sufi brotherhood.

The system in the pesantren when it backed up with string network can be very powerful to transform students, including the religious students at the pesantren Suleymaniyah, into internationalized students. This takes places with. This result has been similar to the one in the international schools. It's just unique in a way that it has been started and founded with religious institution and values and with very low cost. Unlike the international school which only available for rich people, the pesantren is available for everyone. In fact, this pesantren is also inclusive as it has some cooperation with other Indonesian based pesantren. This model can be copied with the most

majority Islamic organization of Indonesia: the Nahdlatul Ulama and the Muhammadiyah. As both have international networks. The other organization also possible as long as they are willing to establish. Another one in order to use and benefit the Indonesian diaspora of Indonesian overseas such in the US, Europa, or Australia.

Having said that it is also important to note that this model is really international and the Turkish culture in a way to be highlighted. So, the next research would be to question the nationality among the students. At this point, there is no doubt, but, to understand the long-term progress of this development is also important to note.

Conclusions

As the above discussion, this research has elaborated the transformative education through Sufism based character education. The character education based on Sufism in the pesantren Suleymaniyah is the special hidden curriculum to make sure the students nurture good character through *dzahir* of *rabtha* and sermon of *sohbet* which practiced in the daily basis. The Sufi ritual is also a bonding of Sufi brotherhood, which gives meaning to the students as part of the community. The character education leads to and promotes transformation of the students to be a better Muslim. The Muslim who is modern and play a role in the international spectrum through the completion of the *tekamul* level and the opportunity of *hizmet* (service) in overseas.

This good example can be synthesized and copied by the prominent Muslim organization of the Nahdlatul Ulama and the Muhammadiyah as they also operate overseas and can benefit from the Indonesian Diaspora to play a role in the character education for young generation through Islamic education.

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