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Deconstructing Pesantren Feudalism: Santri Obedience and Religious Authority at Pesantren Langitan, Tuban

Dekonstruksi Feodalisme Pesantren: Kepatuhan Santri dan Otoritas Keagamaan di Pesantren Langitan, Tuban

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Abstract: *This article examines how the label "pesantren feudalism" frames santri obedience and religious authority at Pesantren Langitan, Tuban. Rather than treating obedience as either submission or autonomy, it asks how santri themselves experience, interpret, and negotiate obedience as an ethical and epistemic practice. Using a qualitative case study with a hermeneutic-phenomenological orientation and a deconstructive reading strategy, the study draws on semi-structured interviews with eight participants four active students, two alumni, and two pesantren administrators supported by participant observation and document analysis. Analysis proceeded in three linked stages: reconstruction of lived meanings; thematic interpretation of sanad, adab, embodied practice, authority, and agency; and deconstructive examination of binary oppositions such as obedience/freedom and authority/domination. The findings show that participants commonly described obedience as ethical formation grounded in the chain of scholarly transmission (sanad), adab, and trust in religious knowledge, while also identifying boundaries beyond which authority becomes domination. Six of the eight participants explicitly distinguished respectful obedience from unquestioning submission; two did not articulate this distinction as explicitly. The article proposes "epistemic-ethical obedience" as a bounded concept linking epistemic legitimacy, ethical formation, embodied practice, and reflective agency without denying the possibility of coercion or symbolic domination.*

Keywords: Epistemic-ethical obedience; Pesantren Langitan; Religious authority; Deconstruction; Feudalism.

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Abstrak: *Artikel ini mengkaji bagaimana label "feodalisme pesantren" membingkai ketaatan santri dan otoritas keagamaan di Pondok Pesantren Langitan, Tuban. Penelitian ini tidak menempatkan ketaatan secara biner sebagai ketundukan atau otonomi, melainkan menelaah bagaimana santri mengalami, memaknai, dan menegosiasikan ketaatan sebagai praktik etis sekaligus epistemik. Penelitian menggunakan studi kasus kualitatif dengan orientasi fenomenologi-hermeneutik dan strategi pembacaan dekonstruktif. Data diperoleh melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur terhadap delapan partisipan yang dipilih secara purposif, terdiri atas empat santri aktif, dua alumni, dan dua pengurus pesantren, serta didukung observasi partisipatif terbatas dan analisis dokumen. Analisis dilakukan melalui tiga tahap yang saling berhubungan: merekonstruksi makna pengalaman hidup, menafsirkan tema sanad, adab, praktik tubuh, otoritas, dan agensi, lalu memeriksa oposisi biner seperti ketaatan/kebebasan dan otoritas/dominasi. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa para partisipan umumnya memaknai ketaatan sebagai pembentukan etis yang berakar pada sanad, adab, dan kepercayaan terhadap otoritas keilmuan, sekaligus mengakui batas ketika otoritas menghilangkan ruang dialog dan penalaran kritis. Enam dari delapan partisipan secara eksplisit membedakan ketaatan yang menghormati guru dari ketundukan tanpa pertanyaan. Artikel ini menawarkan konsep "epistemic-ethical obedience" sebagai konsep terbatas yang menghubungkan legitimasi epistemik, pembentukan etis, praktik yang terwujud, dan agensi reflektif.*

Kata Kunci: Ketaatan epistemik-etis; Pesantren Langitan; Otoritas keagamaan; Dekonstruksi; Feodalisme.

Introduction

The relationship between kyai and santri in the Javanese pesantren tradition periodically becomes a public object of criticism, particularly when practices of *khidmah*, *ta'ẓīm*, and obedience are read through a framework that treats individual autonomy as the primary measure of legitimate authority. Recent debates intensified after digital and broadcast representations of pesantren practices circulated beyond their original pedagogical settings.[1] In this article, however, the label "pesantren feudalism" is treated as an object of analysis rather than as an established description of Pesantren Langitan. The central question is what becomes visible, and what is obscured, when culturally embedded practices of respect are translated into the binary language of freedom and submission.[2]

This does not mean that all critics of pesantren share a single liberal position. The argument is narrower: some contemporary representations evaluate hierarchical religious practices primarily through autonomy, equality, or anti-domination categories while giving insufficient attention to the ethical and epistemic meanings attached to those practices by participants. Such representations need to be distinguished from critical approaches that take both religious agency and power

structures seriously. In this study, the target is therefore a particular discursive tendency, not liberalism, democracy, or religious freedom as such.[3]

A more adequate analysis must also hold two possibilities together. On one side, Javanese pesantren have historically linked the transmission of knowledge to adab, moral discipline, and recognition of scholarly authority; authority may therefore be experienced as legitimate rather than merely coercive. On the other side, hierarchical relations can become sites of abuse, including practices that constrain, punish, or silence students. The analytical task is to distinguish ethical recognition of authority from domination rather than presuming that either hierarchy is inherently oppressive or tradition is inherently benign.[4]

This distinction also requires a more nuanced reading of Geertz. His account of Javanese Islam remains important for identifying the cultural and social organization of religious authority, but the authority of a kyai cannot be reduced to charisma alone.[5] Authority may also draw on scholarly genealogy, social recognition, economic and institutional resources, family networks, and symbolic capital.[6] The present study therefore treats *sanad* as one source of epistemic legitimacy within a wider field of authority, not as an exclusive explanation of why students recognize a kyai.[7]

Recent studies have increasingly examined the epistemic and ethical dimensions of pesantren authority. Van Bruinessen's work remains useful for locating pesantren within chains of scholarly transmission, while later studies emphasize the continuing reproduction and renegotiation of *sanad* in contemporary settings. *Sanad* is used here in the narrower sense of a chain of scholarly transmission that contributes to epistemic credibility and ethical recognition. It is not treated as automatic evidence that a particular exercise of authority is legitimate.[8]

Talal Asad and Saba Mahmood are used in different but related ways: Asad helps situate ethical conduct within historically formed Islamic traditions of discipline, while Mahmood makes it possible to analyze agency through embodied ethical practice rather than equating agency exclusively with resistance.[9] Pierre Bourdieu then helps identify how repeated practices become dispositions and how symbolic hierarchies may be naturalized through doxa, misrecognition, and symbolic power.[10] Derrida serves a different function: deconstruction is used to examine the binary oppositions through which "feudalism" becomes intelligible, and to trace the instability within those oppositions rather than simply reversing them.[11]

The resonance of this thought is evident in recent studies on Indonesian Islam, which place obedience as a practice of ethical subject formation. This study demonstrates that in the context of Islamic boarding schools, obedience functions as a medium for internalizing moral discipline, moderation, and reflective awareness, rather than merely reproducing power relations.[12] In the contemporary Indonesian context, several studies in the past five years have confirmed that the authority of the

kyai rests on moral legitimacy and community recognition. Even amidst the digitalization of religion, Islamic boarding schools continue to maintain *sanad* (traditional rites) and adab (traditional customs) as the basis of authority, despite having to negotiate with the new logic of online popularity and authority. This situation demonstrates that the authority of Islamic boarding schools is dynamic and continuously reproduced in the tension between tradition and change.[13]

The literature nevertheless leaves an analytical gap. Studies of pesantren authority often concentrate on normative legitimacy or institutional continuity, while studies of "feudalism" may begin from a ready-made category of domination. What remains less developed is an analysis that first reconstructs how obedience is lived by santri and then examines how that lived practice is translated into the public language of feudalism. Rather than claiming a historical genealogy of the term "pesantren feudalism," which would require a longitudinal corpus that this study does not possess, the article examines the modern assumptions through which the label operates in the material and narratives available to the study.[14]

Accordingly, the study asks two questions: (1) how do participants at Pesantren Langitan experience and interpret obedience as a practice involving knowledge, ethics, and self-formation; and (2) how does the label "pesantren feudalism" organize that experience through binaries such as obedience/freedom, authority/agency, and tradition/modernity? The analytical sequence is explicit. Hermeneutic phenomenology is used first to reconstruct participants' lived meanings; thematic interpretation then identifies patterns in *sanad*, adab, habitus, authority, and agency; deconstructive reading is applied afterwards to examine what is privileged, marginalized, or rendered invisible by the public discourse of feudalism. The contribution lies in specifying the bounded concept of "epistemic-ethical obedience" and showing its limits; it describes obedience that is grounded in recognized knowledge, ethical formation, embodiment, and reflective negotiation, but it does not deny coercion, symbolic domination, or the possibility that authority can cross into abuse.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative case-study design with a hermeneutic-phenomenological orientation and a deconstructive reading strategy.[15] The combination is sequential rather than additive. The phenomenological orientation is used to reconstruct how participants experience and give meaning to obedience in everyday pesantren life; hermeneutic interpretation situates those accounts within the scholarly and ethical traditions of pesantren; and deconstruction is then used to examine how public descriptions of those practices depend on binary oppositions such as obedience/freedom, authority/domination, and tradition/modernity. Deconstruction is therefore not treated as an independent coding system and is not used to prove in advance

that the label "feudalism" is wrong. Its task is to test the stability and consequences of the oppositions through which that label acquires meaning. The study does not use Husserlian "phenomenological reduction" as a technical procedure; instead, it adopts a reflexive hermeneutic stance in which the researcher's pre-understandings are made explicit and critically revisited.[16]

The research was conducted at Pesantren Langitan, Tuban, selected because it provides a focused case of a Salafiyah pesantren in which *sanad*-based knowledge transmission, the kyai–santri relationship, and established practices of adab remain significant while the institution is also exposed to formal education and contemporary digital culture. The case is therefore analytically useful for examining how religious authority is reproduced and negotiated within a changing social environment. The study makes no claim that Langitan is representative of all Indonesian pesantren.

Eight participants were selected purposively on the basis of direct experience with pesantren life: four active students, two alumni, and two pesantren administrators. The available field record documents variation in length of stay and role, including senior students who had spent more than five years in the pesantren and newer students with active engagement in digital religious discourse. Age and gender were not systematically recorded in the field notes available for this revision and are therefore not inferred. Participants are identified in the revised manuscript as S1–S8 to reduce unnecessary identifiability while preserving analytic distinction among voices. The small, single-site sample is intended for contextual depth rather than statistical generalization.

Table 1. Anonymized participant profile (variables not systematically recorded are not inferred).

Code	Role	Documented variation relevant to analysis
S1	Active student	Newer participant; active engagement with digital religious discourse
S2	Active student	Participant with experience of pesantren routines and public discourse
S3	Alumnus	Alumnus; emphasized *sanad*, knowledge, authority, and ethical limits
S4	Active student	Experienced in *khidmah* and teacher recognition
S5	Active student	Reflected on obedience, blessing, and legitimacy of knowledge
S6	Alumnus	Reinterpreted obedience after leaving pesantren
S7	Ustadz (Teacher in Pesantren)	Questioned excessively absolute obedience while affirming adab
S8	Administrator	Institutional perspective on pesantren authority and practice

Data were collected over approximately four months through semi-structured face-to-face interviews, limited participant observation, and document analysis.

Interviews lasted approximately 60–90 minutes and addressed *khidmah*, respect for the kyai, the meaning of *sanad* and adab, experiences of discomfort or disagreement, perceived boundaries of legitimate authority, and reactions to public representations of pesantren. Interview excerpts were transcribed from the Indonesian-language recordings and translated into English without substantive alteration to their meaning. Observation covered religious study, dormitory routines, service activities, and informal interactions. Documents included pesantren regulations, selected kyai lectures, and public representations encountered in relation to the debate over pesantren feudalism. The October 2025 Trans7 controversy is treated in this article as a contextual prompt shaping participants' reflections, not as an independently coded social-media corpus. Published studies of the controversy are used only to contextualize the case.

Analysis proceeded in three linked stages. First, interview and observation materials were read to reconstruct lived meanings of obedience, including experiences of respect, discipline, blessing, discomfort, disagreement, and self-formation. Second, thematic coding grouped recurring material under epistemic trust, *sanad*, adab, embodied practice, habitus, authority, agency, dialogue, refusal, and possible domination. Third, deconstructive reading examined each relevant binary by asking: which term is privileged; what account is subordinated; where does the distinction become unstable; and what aspect of the practice disappears when the binary is treated as complete? Two kinds of evidence were deliberately retained: accounts that support obedience as ethical formation and accounts that question excessive or absolute obedience. This procedure prevents the concept of "epistemic-ethical obedience" from functioning as a predetermined defense of authority.

Researcher reflexivity was treated as part of the analytical method because the researcher is an alumnus of Pesantren Langitan. This position provides emic familiarity but also creates the risk of normalizing institutional practices that are personally familiar. The researcher therefore distinguished personal memory from participant testimony, compared interview narratives with observation and documents, and repeatedly examined whether interpretations were being supported by the data or by prior assumptions. The goal was not to claim complete neutrality but to make the interpretive position accountable and methodologically visible.

To strengthen trustworthiness, the study used source triangulation across students, alumni, and administrators and method triangulation across interviews, observation, and documents. Divergent accounts were not removed as inconsistencies; they were retained as analytically relevant differences. For example, accounts emphasizing *sanad* and blessing were read alongside statements that set limits on obedience where dialogue or critical reasoning was suppressed. The analysis therefore distinguishes three levels that should not be collapsed: participants'

subjective meanings, the social mechanisms through which authority is reproduced, and the researcher's normative interpretation of whether a particular practice constitutes domination. No claim of statistical generalization is made.

Deconstructing the Modern Discursive Assumptions of "Pesantren Feudalism"

The term "feudalism" requires conceptual caution. In its historical sense, feudalism refers to particular political and socioeconomic arrangements associated with medieval Europe. In contemporary discussion of religion, however, the term is often used more loosely as a shorthand for hierarchy, patronage, personalism, or unequal access to authority. It can also function polemically to condemn practices judged incompatible with equality or individual autonomy.[17] This study analyzes the third and, to some extent, the second usage, the public label "pesantren feudalism," rather than claiming that Pesantren Langitan is a feudal institution in the historical sense. To make domination analytically testable, the study looks for indicators such as unconditional compliance, sanctions for refusal, systematic closure of criticism, or the conversion of institutional authority into personal privilege. The available eight-person case does not establish systematic coercion across the institution; instead, it allows examination of how participants describe and delimit legitimate authority.[18]

From a deconstructive perspective, the label gains force through a series of binary oppositions. "Feudalism" becomes intelligible when positioned against modernity, obedience against freedom, authority against agency, and tradition against rationality.[19] The problem is not that these distinctions have no analytical value, but that they become unstable when treated as mutually exclusive. A participant can obey and still exercise judgment; a respected teacher can remain an authority without being beyond criticism; and a traditional practice can contain both ethical formation and the possibility of hierarchical reproduction. Derrida's value here is precisely methodological: the analysis follows the tension inside the opposition rather than replacing one privileged term with its inverse.[20]

The findings provide an empirical point at which the binary breaks down. S3 described *sanad* as a basis for recognizing the continuity and legitimacy of knowledge, while S7 stated that obedience that becomes too absolute and leaves no room for dialogue is increasingly questioned. These accounts do not demonstrate that authority at Langitan is free from domination. They show instead that the same field of practice contains both recognition of authority and criteria for limiting it. The public category "feudalism" becomes analytically insufficient when it turns all forms of obedience into the same kind of relationship. At the same time, a counter-romantic claim that all obedience is ethical would be equally reductive.

This is why the article does not interpret deconstruction as a defense of tradition. Deconstruction asks what a binary makes difficult to see. When obedience is read only as subordination, the epistemic and ethical meanings attached to *sanad*, adab, and *khidmah* disappear. When obedience is read only as ethical formation, however, the possibility of symbolic domination also disappears. The analytical result is therefore not "tradition over modernity," but a more differentiated field in which legitimacy, discipline, agency, and domination have to be examined together. This also corrects an overly uniform picture of kyai authority by recognizing its multiple resources, including scholarly genealogy, social recognition, institutional position, economic resources, and symbolic capital.[21]

The case also demonstrates why participants' subjective meanings cannot by themselves settle the question of domination. A student may experience *khidmah* as sincere service and still inhabit a structure in which refusal is difficult. Conversely, the presence of hierarchy does not establish domination unless there is evidence that the relationship systematically eliminates meaningful agency or uses sanctions to secure compliance.[22] The study therefore separates lived experience from the structural interpretation of authority. Where participants described respect as meaningful, that statement is treated as evidence of their lived horizon; where they articulated limits on authority, those limits are treated as evidence of negotiated agency. The two levels are held together rather than collapsed.[23]

The digital context makes this distinction more visible. Public debates often extract a visible gesture—such as hand-kissing, service, or deference—from the pedagogical setting in which it occurs and attach a ready-made moral category to it.[24] The present study does not claim to have coded all social-media representations. Instead, the digital sphere is treated as the public context against which participants interpreted the controversy around pesantren authority. Existing research on the Trans7 episode and subsequent TikTok discussion provides independent evidence that the controversy became an object of online framing and counter-discourse.[25]

Two participants directly articulated this contextual gap. S1 criticized the media account for not understanding what was happening in pesantren, [26] while S2 likewise argued that the practice was being described by someone who did not understand pesantren. [27] These statements are not evidence of how all media portray pesantren; they are evidence of how particular participants perceived the external representation. Their analytical importance lies elsewhere: they show a distinction between first-order experience inside the institution and second-order discourse that reclassifies the practice for a wider public. Deconstruction is applied at precisely this point, asking how the reclassification privileges a binary of equality versus hierarchy while obscuring meanings supplied by participants.

The phrase "pesantren feudalism" therefore functions in this article as a contested discursive label rather than a settled empirical conclusion. Its usefulness is limited when it is asked to explain every form of hierarchical conduct. Its critical value increases when it is specified: what conduct is being described, which sanctions are present, whose refusal is possible, and whose interpretation determines legitimacy? This formulation keeps the analysis open to criticism of abuse while avoiding a universal judgment from a single case.

Accordingly, the study does not reproduce the binary by simply replacing "feudalism" with a romantic image of ethical pesantren life. It argues for a double reading. First, practices of obedience may be lived as moral and epistemic formation. Second, the same institutional forms may reproduce hierarchy and become coercive under particular conditions. The empirical question is therefore not whether pesantren is "feudal," but how authority is legitimized, embodied, negotiated, and bounded in practice.

This double reading is also the basis for the next section. Rather than treating public labels as self-evident categories, the analysis turns to the internal meanings of *sanad*, adab, *khidmah*, and habitus and asks how these practices are simultaneously formative and potentially reproductive of hierarchy. The purpose is to make the distinction between ethical obedience and domination empirically visible rather than rhetorically assumed.

Santri Obedience as an Ethical-Epistemic Practice: *Sanad*, Adab, and the Formation of Habitus

In the Langitan case, obedience is best described as an ethical-epistemic practice because participants connect it to both the acquisition of knowledge and the cultivation of conduct. This does not mean that obedience is inherently ethical. It means that, in participants' accounts, authority is recognized partly through a conception of knowledge that includes moral formation. The analytic task is to reconstruct this meaning while remaining attentive to how repeated practice may also stabilize hierarchy.[28] Here *sanad* is understood as a chain of scholarly transmission through which knowledge acquires historical continuity and epistemic credibility. It is important not to overstate the concept: *sanad* does not automatically validate every exercise of personal authority by a teacher. Rather, it provides one reason why students may regard a teacher as a legitimate bearer and transmitter of knowledge.[29]

Participants also described seeking blessing (*ngalap berkah*) as part of the ethical orientation of learning. This interpretation is significant because it shows that obedience can have a meaning that is neither instrumental nor purely coercive. Yet the meaning supplied by participants does not, by itself, rule out structural

asymmetry. The article therefore treats blessing as a feature of lived religious experience, not as proof that domination is absent. S3 explained that *sanad* connects knowledge with authority, blessing, and validity and can therefore ground faith-based obedience.[30] Read phenomenologically, this account shows epistemic trust at work: the student's obedience is directed toward a relationship understood to carry legitimate knowledge. Read sociologically, however, the same recognition can contribute to the reproduction of hierarchy if the chain of legitimacy becomes insulated from criticism. The two readings are analytically compatible rather than mutually exclusive.

The concept of adab likewise requires differentiation. In this article, adab refers to an ethical orientation concerning how knowledge is approached, how teachers are addressed, and how criticism is expressed; it is not treated as a synonym for obedience. This distinction matters because some participants explicitly located a boundary at the point where adab would suppress critical reasoning. Practices such as hand-kissing, respectful language, service, and bodily discipline can function as embodied ethical training because they are repeated in everyday life. They can also contribute to what Bourdieu describes as durable dispositions and the naturalization of social hierarchies. The existence of habitus is therefore analytically ambivalent: repeated practices can produce ethical dispositions while simultaneously making authority appear self-evident.[31]

S3's statement that "adab must not eliminate critical reasoning; if it suppresses freedom of thought, it is domination" is especially important because it supplies an internal criterion for evaluating authority. The statement does not reject adab. It places a limit on how adab can be interpreted. This is one of the clearest empirical sites at which the obedience/freedom binary becomes unstable: respect and criticism are not mutually exclusive, while authority remains legitimate only within an ethical boundary articulated by the participant.[32]

Such evidence also complicates any purely positive account of habitus. The dispositions cultivated through pesantren routines may support humility and discipline, but they may also normalize unequal relations when obedience is treated as beyond question. Bourdieu's concepts of doxa, misrecognition, and symbolic power are useful here because they direct attention to what actors may experience as natural or morally proper even when the practice reproduces hierarchy.[33] The present data do not establish systematic symbolic violence at Langitan; they indicate why its possibility must remain analytically open.

Participants' accounts therefore need to be read alongside the possibility of negative cases. S7's questioning of obedience that becomes too absolute, and the alumni accounts describing greater contextual awareness after leaving pesantren, complicate an image of automatic compliance. At the same time, the two

participants who did not articulate the respectful-obedience/unquestioning-submission distinction as explicitly remind us that reflective negotiation is not uniform. The "six of eight" pattern is therefore descriptive, not proof of a universal santri disposition.[34]

The concept of habitus helps explain continuity, but it should not be confused with determinism. The relevant question is how dispositions become available for reflection and renegotiation under new experiences. Participants who encountered formal education or digital discourse described moments in which inherited practices were reconsidered. These moments show that embodied formation and reflexivity can coexist, while leaving open the possibility that some participants may experience fewer opportunities to contest inherited norms.

From a hermeneutic-phenomenological perspective, obedience is therefore a lived experience whose meaning emerges through the interaction of memory, discipline, knowledge, and current social context. External observers cannot infer coercion solely from visible compliance, but neither can they infer legitimacy solely from participants' reported sincerity. The analytical distinction is crucial: phenomenology reconstructs meaning; it does not settle the sociological question of power. This separation is one reason the study pairs phenomenological interpretation with deconstructive and Bourdieusian analysis.[35]

The practical implication is that freedom should not be defined only as distance from authority. Participants described freedom within a tradition of self-discipline, but they also insisted that authority must leave room for dialogue and critical reasoning. In this bounded sense, agency appears not simply as resistance to tradition but as the capacity to interpret, negotiate, and set ethical limits within a tradition. This formulation is closer to Mahmood's account of embodied agency than to a binary in which obedience and agency exclude one another.

The study nonetheless retains a critical boundary. Where refusal carries sanctions, criticism is institutionally foreclosed, or authority is converted into personal privilege, obedience would cease to fit the proposed concept of epistemic-ethical obedience and would instead warrant analysis as domination. The current field material does not document a systematic pattern of such sanctions across the institution. The concept is therefore deliberately bounded by the evidence available in this single-site case.

Participants' Responses to Public Representations of Pesantren Authority

The digital environment matters here not because this study claims to measure social media as a whole, but because participants encountered public representations that reframed familiar pesantren practices for wider audiences. In such representations, authority may be judged through visible fragments—service, hand-

kissing, deference, or hierarchical language—without the pedagogical context that participants regard as meaningful. The article therefore treats digital mediation as a context of contested interpretation rather than as a separate population or corpus.[36]

The key empirical pattern is not that digital audiences are uniformly hostile to pesantren, but that participants perceived a gap between internal meaning and external representation. Some participants believed that public criticism lacked contextual understanding, while others acknowledged that certain hierarchical practices can become problematic when ethical limits are absent. This ambivalence is analytically important because it prevents the digital discussion from being reduced either to anti-pesantren criticism or to institutional self-defense.[37]

Six of the eight participants explicitly distinguished respectful obedience from unquestioning submission. The two remaining participants did not articulate the distinction as explicitly. The finding therefore indicates a patterned but non-uniform reflexive capacity within the small case. It is better understood as evidence that santri can negotiate inherited norms than as proof that all santri are critical or autonomous. The distinction also creates room to ask what conditions make such reflexivity possible and what happens when those conditions are absent.

Across active students and alumni, the interaction between tradition and contemporary public discourse produced different emphases. Active students tended to speak from within ongoing routines of adab and *khidmah*, whereas alumni more readily described how the meaning of obedience changed after leaving the institution. These differences are not treated as a simple generational divide because the participant pool is too small for such a conclusion. They are instead used to show that authority is interpreted through changing positions in the life course of pesantren membership.

Administrators provide an additional institutional position, but their voices are less extensively quoted in the available material than those of students and alumni. This unevenness is a limitation rather than something to conceal. It means that the strongest empirical claims in the article concern participants' lived interpretations, while claims about institution-wide governance or sanctions remain deliberately modest. The result is a more defensible distinction between micro-level experience and institutional-level structure.

Bourdieu's framework is useful precisely because symbolic reproduction is not identical to overt repression. Ordinary practices can reproduce authority because they become familiar, legitimate, and difficult to question. This is why participants' positive meanings should not be treated as evidence that hierarchy is harmless. At the same time, the presence of symbolic reproduction is not sufficient to classify the institution as feudal. The relevant question is what kinds of authority are reproduced,

how they are recognized, and whether actors retain meaningful capacity to question or refuse them.

The deconstructive reading of public representation therefore produces a double movement. It destabilizes the assumption that visible deference transparently signifies domination, while simultaneously destabilizing the assumption that traditional deference transparently signifies ethical legitimacy. The meaning of the act depends on the relations, sanctions, expectations, and interpretations surrounding it. This is why the label "feudalism" becomes analytically productive only when it is unpacked into observable features rather than used as a totalizing category.

The case thus supports a more differentiated understanding of religious authority in digital conditions. Pesantren remain sites of embodied tradition, but their authority is increasingly interpreted in public spaces where participants, alumni, journalists, and other audiences can contest meanings. The Langitan case should not be generalized to all pesantren, but it demonstrates how authority can remain institutionally durable while becoming discursively negotiable.

Lived Experience of Obedience and the Concept of Epistemic-Ethical Obedience

The findings support a bounded concept of "epistemic-ethical obedience." The concept refers to obedience that is directed toward a figure recognized as a legitimate bearer and transmitter of knowledge, enacted through embodied ethical practices, and accompanied by some capacity to reflect upon and negotiate inherited norms. It is not synonymous with adab, *ta'ẓīm*, habitus, or ethical subject formation. Adab and *ta'ẓīm* name ethical orientations and practices; habitus names durable dispositions produced through repeated social experience; ethical subject formation is a broader process through which persons become particular kinds of moral subjects. "Epistemic-ethical obedience" specifies the relational configuration in which epistemic legitimacy and ethical formation meet within obedience, while remaining open to reflexive agency.

The four theoretical perspectives have distinct jobs in this synthesis. Asad situates obedience within historically formed Islamic ethical traditions and disciplinary practices. Mahmood clarifies how agency can operate through embodied ethical formation rather than only through resistance. Bourdieu explains how repeated practice becomes habitus and how hierarchy can be naturalized through doxa, misrecognition, and symbolic power. Derrida examines how the language of "feudalism" depends on binary oppositions and how those oppositions become unstable when confronted with lived practice.[38] The theories are therefore sequentially complementary, not four parallel labels for the same phenomenon.

Derrida's contribution is especially visible when the field statements are read against the opposition between obedience and freedom. S3's insistence that adab cannot suppress critical reasoning and S7's questioning of absolute obedience unsettle the assumption that obedience necessarily excludes agency. Yet these statements do not invert the hierarchy by proving that obedience is always liberating. They simply reveal that the opposition is inadequate to capture a practice in which respect, discipline, interpretation, and criticism coexist. This is the precise sense in which deconstruction is used here: to expose the dependence of a conceptual category on an opposition that the empirical material itself complicates.

S4 described serving the teacher as a way of being recognized within a very large student population and as a route toward blessing, approval, and beneficial knowledge. The account illustrates how *khidmah* can operate as an ethical relation rather than as a demand for personal privilege. It does not, however, prove that the relationship is free from structural asymmetry. The analytical conclusion remains at the level supported by the data: the participant assigns the practice a moral and epistemic meaning, while the broader question of institutional coercion requires evidence beyond this statement.[39]

S5 likewise described obedience in terms of sincerity, blessing, and the legitimacy of the scholarly chain. [40] S6, reflecting after leaving the pesantren, explained that obedience became more conscious and contextual rather than simply a matter of following. These two alumni accounts are analytically important because they show reinterpretation across changing social locations. They also prevent the analysis from equating continuity of commitment with static understanding.[41] S1 described discomfort in the process of internalizing adab as part of personal training. Rather than treating discomfort as automatically evidence of discipline or automatically evidence of coercion, the analysis compares it with participants' descriptions of dialogue, criticism, and the possibility of refusing excessive authority. This comparison is necessary because an embodied practice can be formative and constraining at the same time. [42]

S6's post-pesantren reflection further suggests that obedience can be reinterpreted through later experience. Such reinterpretation should not be romanticized as proof of successful pesantren education; it is simply evidence that inherited meanings remain open to revision. Hermeneutically, the horizon of tradition encounters a new horizon of experience, producing a different understanding of the same practice. S7 explicitly questioned obedience that becomes too absolute and leaves little room for dialogue while continuing to affirm etiquette, humility, sincerity, and respect. [43] This is a clear boundary statement. It shows that the participant distinguishes the legitimacy of authority from the legitimacy of every exercise of authority. For the

present study, this distinction is central because it provides an empirical criterion for separating ethical obedience from domination.

S3 similarly defined *ta'ẓīm* as respect for the teacher as a conduit of knowledge and blessing and stated that adab must not eliminate critical reasoning.[44] These statements cannot be generalized to all santri, but they provide a strong illustration of how epistemic legitimacy and ethical boundaries coexist. They also demonstrate why the article does not treat the category of "feudalism" as a complete explanation of the relationship. S3 further argued that pesantren should remain open to criticism while maintaining traditional values and evaluating practices wisely.[45] This position is significant because it places reflexivity inside, rather than outside, the tradition. It supports the argument that continuity and criticism are not inherently incompatible. Yet the evidence remains participant-specific, and the article therefore avoids the stronger claim that Langitan as an institution uniformly endorses such openness.

Across the participant accounts, alumni more explicitly narrated reinterpretation after leaving the pesantren, while active students tended to describe the meaning of obedience through current routines of learning and service. Administrators contributed an institutional perspective, but that perspective is less fully represented in quoted material. The comparison therefore identifies a difference in standpoint rather than a statistically established group effect. It nonetheless strengthens the argument that religious authority is temporally and socially situated.

Overall, the lived experiences in this case indicate that obedience is neither a single form of submission nor a uniformly emancipatory practice. It can function as ethical formation, epistemic trust, embodied habitus, and reflective negotiation at the same time. The proposed concept of epistemic-ethical obedience captures this intersection while retaining a normative boundary: when critical reasoning is suppressed, refusal is punished, or authority is converted into personal privilege, the practice exceeds the concept and requires separate analysis as domination.

Conclusion

This study argues that the label "pesantren feudalism" is analytically insufficient when it is used as a totalizing description of the kyai–santri relationship. In the Langitan case, participants commonly described obedience through recognition of scholarly authority, *sanad*, adab, *khidmah*, and moral self-formation, while several also articulated limits on obedience where dialogue or critical reasoning is suppressed. The findings therefore unsettle the simple opposition between obedience and agency. At the same time, the study does not conclude that hierarchy is harmless or thats all pesantren authority is non-coercive. The empirical record does not establish systematic sanctions or institution-wide domination, so those claims remain outside the scope of the evidence.

Theoretically, "epistemic-ethical obedience" is proposed as a bounded concept linking epistemic legitimacy, ethical formation, embodied practice, and reflective agency. Asad, Mahmood, Bourdieu, and Derrida are used as distinct analytical tools rather than as interchangeable authorities: ethical tradition, embodied agency, habitus and symbolic power, and deconstruction, respectively. The concept applies only where recognition of epistemic authority is accompanied by ethical formation and some capacity for reflective negotiation. Its boundary condition is analytically important: coercive sanctions, closure of criticism, or the conversion of authority into personal privilege would require the relation to be analyzed as domination rather than simply obedience.

The study has three principal limitations. First, it is a single-site case study at Pesantren Langitan with eight participants and therefore cannot be generalized statistically to Indonesian pesantren as a whole. Second, age and gender were not systematically recorded in the field record available for this revision, so these variables are not inferred. Third, the digital controversy is treated as contextual material rather than as an independent social-media corpus; stronger claims about public representation would require a documented, longitudinal media corpus. These limitations are not merely technical constraints; they define the appropriate scale of the article's contribution: a contextual and analytical account of how obedience and authority are interpreted, negotiated, and publicly re-signified in one pesantren setting.

Endnotes

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