

The Pesantren Kitchen as a Site of Character Formation: Collective Work, Simplicity, Responsibility, and Sharing in Islamic Boarding School Life

Shifa Laelatul Khusnia

Madrasah Aliyah Mamba'ul Ulum Tunjungmuli, Purbalingga, Indonesia
Universitas Islam Negeri Profesor Kiai Haji Saifuddin Zuhri Purwokerto

* Corresponding Author: shifakhusnia8@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the sociological role of the pesantren kitchen as a central space for santri character formation. Rather than functioning merely as a place for preparing food, the kitchen is understood as a social arena where values such as cooperation, simplicity, responsibility, discipline, and sharing are practiced in everyday life. Using a qualitative approach, the research was conducted at Pondok Pesantren Fathul Muin in Purwokerto, Central Java. Data were collected through participatory observation, in-depth interviews with santri and pesantren caregivers, and analysis of relevant institutional documents. The findings show that daily kitchen routines, including cooking schedules, food distribution, communal eating, and hygiene maintenance, play an important role in shaping santri behavior. Task rotation fosters discipline and accountability, communal meals strengthen solidarity and equality, and anti-food waste practices cultivate simplicity and moral awareness. The study concludes that the pesantren kitchen contributes significantly to character education by transforming ordinary domestic routines into meaningful social learning, producing santri who are collaborative, humble, responsible, and socially conscious.

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1. Introduction

Pesantren is the oldest Islamic educational institution in Indonesia, which has historically produced numerous influential Islamic scholars and figures. As stated by Prof. Dr. Mukti Ali, no Islamic scholar has ever emerged from an institution other than the pesantren. The term “pesantren” derives from the Javanese word pe-santri-an, where “santri” means student, while “pondok” is adapted from the Arabic word funduq, meaning lodging. The uniqueness of the pesantren educational system lies in its holistic approach, in which every aspect of santri life serves as an integrated medium for character learning that combines the internalization of religious values with daily practices within a unified and organic educational environment (Syafe'i, 2017). (Hanif, 2013; Pohl, 2006)

According to Rahiem (2001) as cited by Supriatna (2021), pesantren education is characterized by holistic mastery learning that forms the santri's personality comprehensively through habituation, exemplary conduct, and collective

activities—rather than mere knowledge transfer. In this context, the pesantren kitchen emerges as a strategic informal space, functioning as a laboratory for the internalization of Islamic values such as cooperation (*ta'awun*), simplicity (*qana'ah*), trustworthiness (*amanah*), and sharing (*sadaqah*) through daily practices. Pierre Bourdieu's theory provides an analytical framework through the concepts of habitus, capital, and field, which are applied in this study to the pesantren kitchen as a vital informal field where habitus of *qana'ah* and *ta'awun* are naturally internalized through daily routines (Habibi & Sholikha, 2025).

Despite the growing body of literature on pesantren character education, studies that specifically examine the sociological dimensions of the pesantren kitchen as a space for character formation remain scarce. Most existing research has focused on the tradition of *ro'an* (communal work), the study of classical Islamic texts (*kitab kuning*), and the role of kyai leadership, while the kitchen's function as a site for value internalization has received disproportionately little scholarly attention (Dora & Arif, 2024). This study fills that gap by analyzing the role of daily kitchen routines at Pondok Pesantren Fathul Muin Purwokerto—including cooking duty rotation, communal eating, food distribution, and hygiene maintenance—in shaping santri character. The study aims to generate innovative perspectives for non-formal character education development and practical recommendations for advancing Indonesia's pesantren educational system (Fauzi & Hanif, 2025).

2. Methods

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach aimed at tracing the experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of participants regarding daily kitchen activities as a space for character formation. Creswell (2014) affirms that qualitative methods are well-suited for revealing social phenomena in their natural environment. Data were collected through three techniques: (1) participant observation conducted over one week, May 7–15, 2026, at Pondok Pesantren Fathul Muin in Purwokerto, Central Java, using a 15-item kitchen activity checklist; (2) in-depth interviews with three informants (pesantren caretaker, kitchen administrator, and santri) selected through purposive sampling, each lasting approximately one hour and recorded with participants' consent; and (3) document review covering duty schedules, dining rules, and activity photographs. Primary data were obtained from observations and interviews; secondary data from documents. Data analysis involved data reduction (thematic coding), data presentation (narrative and Table 1), and conclusion verification. Data validity was established through source and method triangulation and member checking (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014).

3. Literature Review

Research on pesantren character education has predominantly focused on the tradition of *ro'an* (communal work), the study of classical texts (*kitab kuning*), and kyai leadership, while the kitchen's role as a space for value internalization has received disproportionately little attention. Studies on pesantren character education have recognized the significance of collective activities in shaping santri

behavior (Dora & Arif, 2024; Jaelani & Suhartini, 2021). However, specific sociological analysis of the pesantren kitchen remains limited. This study fills that gap by applying Bourdieu's framework to the kitchen as a holistic character laboratory (Habibi & Sholikha, 2025). (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004; Hanif, 2025)

According to Emile Durkheim's concept of social solidarity, collective habits performed continuously can build social bonds and shared awareness within a group. The pesantren kitchen is understood as a space for value habituation where social norms are instilled through everyday life practices. Traditional pesantren education has long placed daily activities as an integral part of character education (Syafe'i, 2017). (Halstead, 2007; Hanif, Dewi, et al., 2023)

Bourdieu's concept of habitus, capital, and field provides an analytical lens applied here to the pesantren kitchen as a vital informal field. Habitus of qana'ah and ta'awun are naturally internalized through daily routines, santri social capital grows through cooperation, and the kyai-santri hierarchy in the kitchen reinforces dynamics that shape amanah and sadaqah. This theoretical framework has been contextualized in prior pesantren character formation research (Habibi & Sholikha, 2025).

This study bridges the gap in existing research by analyzing the role of daily kitchen routines at Pondok Pesantren Fathul Muin Purwokerto—including cooking duties, communal eating, food distribution, and hygiene maintenance—in shaping santri character. The study aims to produce innovative perspectives for non-formal character education development and practical recommendations for advancing Indonesia's pesantren system (Fauzi & Hanif, 2025; Alhidayah & Hanif, 2024).

4. Results and Discussion

The findings confirm that the kitchen of Pondok Pesantren Fathul Muin functions not merely as a food provision facility, but as a social space playing a significant role in character formation. Observation results show 12 out of 15 indicators fulfilled. The kitchen is orderly, duty rotation is systematic, and santri are actively involved in all activities from food preparation to post-meal cleaning. Food distribution is coordinated through the santri communication group, with each room collecting its portion according to schedule, reflecting task division, coordination, and shared responsibility (Supriatna, 2021).

Table 1. Recapitulation of Kitchen Activity Checklist Observation Results

No	Observed Aspects	Yes	No	Field Notes
1	Santri are involved in cooking activities	✓		Santri actively participate in cooking activities
2	Santri carry out kitchen duty on a rotating schedule	✓		Santri take turns once a week for kitchen duty
3	Santri assist in food distribution	✓		Santri prepare ingredients, season, cook, and serve food

4	Santri maintain the cleanliness of the dining area	✓	Santri clean dining tables, wash dishes, and tidy the kitchen
5	A formal kitchen duty schedule exists	✓	Santri duty schedules are formally arranged on a weekly basis
6	Santri queue in an orderly manner when collecting food	✓	Food collection is represented per room; no individual queuing system
7	Communal eating is practiced regularly	✓	Communal eating is not routine as many santri have varying university schedules
8	The food menu reflects the value of simplicity	✓	The menu is simple yet sufficient to meet santri nutritional needs
9	No selective eating behavior is observed	✓	Santri are ready to eat whatever food has been prepared
10	Santri share food with one another	✓	Santri distribute food fairly; leftover rice is stored to avoid waste
11	Administrators remind santri to avoid food waste	✓	Food distribution is carried out fairly and equally
12	Administrators cultivate a culture of solidarity	✓	Administrators encourage mutual assistance among santri in kitchen activities
13	Dining rules and regulations are in place	✓	Santri collect food after group announcements; food must be fully consumed
14	Santri clean their own eating utensils	✓	Santri wash dishes according to the assigned duty schedule
15	The communal dining atmosphere is warm and egalitarian	✓	Santri feel satisfied and consider food distribution to be fair

Source: Field observation data, PP Fathul Muin Purwokerto, May 7–15, 2026

The cooking duty system fosters collective work and solidarity. Through the rotation system, each santri is required to participate in meeting communal needs. Duty schedules are arranged considering lecture activities to avoid time conflicts, and if a santri is absent, the schedule is adjusted and the obligation must be fulfilled at another time. This mechanism demonstrates shared responsibility in kitchen management (Alhidayah & Hanif, 2024). Santri expressed: “In kitchen duty, no one can say it is not my job. Everyone must share responsibility, because if not, all friends cannot eat.” This reflects organic solidarity as described by Durkheim—solidarity arising from task division and mutual dependence among group members (Durkheim, 1893; Shofiadi & Perguna, 2024). (Hanif, 2023; Hanif, Suwito, et al., 2024; Lukens-Bull, 2001; Parker & Raihani, 2011; Hanif, Dharin, & Hutauruk,

2023; Hanif, Asdlori, & Efendi, 2024; Hanif, Efendi, et al., 2026; Hanif, Qudsiyyah, & Hanifah, 2025)

The simplicity value is embedded through the habit of avoiding food waste (anti-*israf*). Leftover rice that is still fit for consumption is stored in a rice cooker rather than discarded, and the menu is simple yet sufficient. The pesantren caretaker explained: "In the pesantren, santri are accustomed to living simply, eating sufficiently, and avoiding waste. What matters is enough and remaining grateful for what has been provided." This reflects the internalization of *qana'ah* aligned with Islamic character education (Asmuki & Al Aluf, 2018; Rusmanto & Hanif, 2024). The duty rotation system also forms the character of responsibility (*amanah*). Santri learn to manage food portions, measure ingredients precisely, and practice patience. A santri stated: "From kitchen activities we learn to manage food so it is sufficient for all santri, so it must be measured carefully to avoid waste. We also learn patience and responsibility." Finally, food distribution practices cultivate the value of sharing (*sadaqah*). Food is distributed equally to all santri regardless of social background, strengthening solidarity and social sensitivity (Suparjo et al., 2022; Kusriani & Hanif, 2024). In a broader socialization perspective, the pesantren kitchen functions as an effective medium of secondary socialization through which values of collective work, simplicity, responsibility, and sharing are not merely understood as normative rules but become habitual practices shaping santri social identity (Hanif & Salsabillah, 2024).

Table 2. Recapitulation of Field Documentation

No	Type of Documentation	Available	Not Available	Description
1	Kitchen duty schedule	✓		Weekly santri duty schedules are available in written form
2	Santri dining rules and regulations	✓		Food collection rules are available
3	Daily/weekly menu list		✓	Menu is adjusted based on available ingredients; not formally documented
4	Photographs of cooking activities	✓		[Photo attached]
5	Photographs of communal eating activities	✓		[Photo attached]
6	Photographs of kitchen cleaning activities	✓		[Photo attached]

Source: Field documentation data, PP Fathul Muin Purwokerto, May 7–15, 2026

The following figures illustrate the daily kitchen activities of santri at Pondok Pesantren Fathul Muin Purwokerto, capturing the practices of collective work,

simplicity, and responsibility as observed during fieldwork.



Figure 1. Cooking Activity of Santri at PP Fathul Muin Purwokerto (Research documentation, 2026)



Figure 2. Communal Eating Activity of Santri at PP Fathul Muin Purwokerto (Research documentation, 2026)



Figure 3. Kitchen Cleaning Activity by Duty Santri (Research documentation, 2026)

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the kitchen of Pondok Pesantren Fathul Muin not only fulfills santri consumption needs but also serves as a social space with a significant role in character formation. Through routine activities of cooking duty rotation, communal eating, food distribution, and kitchen cleanliness maintenance, the values of collective work, simplicity, responsibility, and sharing are genuinely internalized in santri daily life. This internalization occurs through repeated and sustained social practices, not merely through advice or theoretical instruction. The pesantren proves capable of making everyday life activities into natural, collective, and continuous value learning media. Future research is recommended to conduct comparative studies on the social function of kitchens across various pesantren types to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the kitchen contribution to

character formation.

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