


AGAINST LIBERAL MUSLIMS: RE-READING BOARDING SCHOOLS' SANAD-IJAZAH AND KYAI-SANTRI THROUGH GADAMER AND LAKATOS' LENS

Muhammad Daffa Syafiq Nashr Ad-Diba'i ^{1*} 

¹Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Gunung Djati, Bandung

*¹Corresponding e-mail: abadi1abda2@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This study critically analyzes the necessity of having a teacher within the Indonesian Islamic boarding school (pesantren) tradition through the lens of classical Islamic epistemology and contemporary philosophy of science. Employing qualitative hermeneutic-analytical approach based on library research and focus group discussion, this investigation examines the epistemological validity of the teacher-student transmission system that has become the target of criticism from modern liberal Muslims such as Guru Gembul. The theoretical framework combines Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics (fusion of horizons) with Imre Lakatos's methodology of scientific research programmes to evaluate the pesantren tradition. Key findings reveal that: (1) The sanad-ijazah tradition in pesantren is not merely intellectual transmission, because it also is a spiritual transmission (*tarbiyah ruhiyyah*) rooted in the Sufi tradition of companionship (*shuhbah*), adab, and ethical formation; (2) the Arab-Islamic oral tradition practiced in pesantren is a sophisticated quality control system that anticipated insights of modern hermeneutics; (3) the sanad-ijazah system instantiates Gadamerian fusion of horizons where knowledge transmission is a dialogical encounter between tradition and context; (4) within Lakatos's, the pesantren tradition demonstrates characteristics of a progressive research programme over centuries, while liberal Muslim critiques exhibit mixed-evaluation; (5) critiques of "intellectual dependence" on teachers reveal a category mistake assuming epistemological autonomy ex-nihilo. This research contributes to contemporary Islamic epistemology discourse by demonstrating the necessity for epistemological justice that acknowledges the complexity of Islamic scholarly traditions often subordinated in modern discourse.

Keywords: Gadamerian hermeneutics; Lakatos research programme; sanad-ijazah; pesantren; Liberal Muslims.

Abstrak

Artikel ini menganalisis secara kritis peringatan "harus punya guru" dalam tradisi pesantren Indonesia melalui lensa epistemologi Islam klasik dan filosofi ilmu kontemporer. Menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif analitis hermeneutis berbasis studi kepustakaan dan focus group discussion, penelitian ini menguji validitas epistemologis sistem transmisi ilmu guru-murid yang menjadi target kritik Muslim liberal modern seperti Guru Gembul. Kerangka teoretis menggabungkan hermeneutika filosofis Hans-Georg Gadamer (khususnya konsep fusion of horizons) dengan metodologi program riset ilmiah Imre Lakatos untuk mengevaluasi tradisi pesantren. Hasil diskursus adalah bahwa: (1) sistem sanad-ijazah bukan hanya menjadi sistem transmisi keilmuan, karena mencakup juga transmisi spiritual (*tarbiyah ruhiyyah*) yang berakar dari tradisi *shuhbah*, adab, dan formasi etika (*akhlak*) Sufistik; (2) tradisi oral Arab-Islam yang dipraktikkan pesantren merupakan sistem kontrol kualitas yang visioner karena mengantisipasi wawasan hermeneutika modern; (3) sistem sanad-ijazah menginstansiasi fusion of horizons Gadamerian ketika transmisi ilmu adalah dialogical encounter antara tradisi dan konteks; (4) dalam framework Lakatos, tradisi pesantren menunjukkan karakteristik progressive research programme selama berabad-abad, sementara kritik Muslim liberal menunjukkan penilaian berimbang; (5) kritik terhadap "ketergantungan intelektual" pada guru justru menjadi kesalahan kategoris mendasar karena mengasumsikan autonomi epistemologis ex nihilo. Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada diskursus epistemologi Islam kontemporer dengan menunjukkan perlunya epistemological justice yang mengakui kompleksitas tradisi keilmuan Islam yang sering disepelkan dalam wacana modern.

Kata kunci: hermeneutika Gadamer; fusion of horizons; research programme Lakatos; tradisi oral; sanad-ijazah; pesantren

Introduction

October 2025 marked a crucial moment in the discourse on Islamic education in Indonesia. The collapse of the Al-Khozini Islamic boarding school mosque in Sidoarjo, which killed dozens of students, followed by Trans7's investigative report on various practices in a number of Islamic boarding schools, sparked an unprecedented wave of public criticism of the traditional Islamic education system. It is in this context that figures such as Guru Gembul (a YouTuber with millions of followers) emerged as representatives of modern liberal Muslim criticism questioning the fundamentals of the pesantren tradition.¹ His criticisms are not only aimed at practical-administrative aspects such as building safety standards or financial transparency. He touches on a much deeper epistemological core: he considers the teacher-student system to be a form of “intellectual dependence” that hinders critical thinking, the tradition of *taqlid* as a manifestation of “intellectual stagnation,” and excessive *ta'zhim* practices such as crouching before teachers as an expression of “feudalism” that has no basis in authentic Islam.²

Guru Gembul's arguments are not actually a completely new phenomenon. Such criticism echoes the voices of liberal Muslims in the 20th century. Fazlur Rahman, in his work *Islam and Modernity* (1982), has long criticized the *taqlid* system in traditional education as a practice that “stifles independent reasoning” and hinders the renewal of Islamic thought.³ The same is true of Charles Kurzman.⁴ In *Liberal Islam: A Sourcebook* (1998), Kurzman advocates “freedom of thought” without restrictions from traditional authorities as a prerequisite for the advancement of Muslims. Similar criticisms have been voiced by a number of progressive Indonesian intellectuals who see the pesantren tradition as a major obstacle to the modernization and democratization of religious knowledge. What makes Guru Gembul's criticism different is its reach and impact in the digital age. This danger has spread to social media platforms, where arguments that were previously limited to academic discourse are now spreading widely and shaping public opinion at a historically unprecedented speed.⁵

However, the response from Nahdlatul Ulama students and intellectuals has been defensive and apologetic, even though there is much more to this public debate than meets the

¹ Hafizh Dzakirul, “10 Kritik Pedas Guru Gembul Untuk Pesantren: Sudah Saatnya Berbenah,” Kompasiana.com, 2025, <https://www.kompasiana.com/hafizhdzakirul1703/68efdf56c925c43b3161aab3/>.

² Reza Fauzi Nazar, “Marahnya Santri: Pesantren, Kuasa, Dan Krisis Representasi,” Diskursus.id, 2025, <https://diskursus.id/marahnya-santri-pesantren-kuasa-dan-krisis-representasi/>; Pergerakan Indonesia Untuk Semua, “Guru Gembul Kritik Tradisi Di Pesantren,” Gerakanpis.id, 2025, <https://gerakanpis.id/guru-gembul-kritik-tradisi-di-pesantren/>.

³ Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (University of Chicago Press, 1982).

⁴ Charles Kurzman, *Liberal Islam: A Sourcebook*, ed. Charles Kurzman (Oxford University Press, 1998).

⁵ Dzakirul, “10 Kritik Pedas Guru Gembul Untuk Pesantren: Sudah Saatnya Berbenah.”

eye. Defenders of the pesantren tradition argue that the criticisms leveled against it are based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the epistemology of the pesantren.⁶ Martin van Bruinessen (1994), a Dutch researcher who has dedicated decades of his career to in-depth studies of pesantren, argues that the teacher-student relationship in pesantren is not a form of feudalism, but a highly sophisticated form of “knowledge transmission ethics” with a strong epistemological justification.⁷ Zamakhsyari Dhofier (2015), in his writing *Tradisi Pesantren: Studi Pandangan Hidup Santri dan Visinya Mengenai Masa Depan Indonesia*, shows that the *sanad-ijazah* system represents an epistemological continuity that connects today's Santri with the Islamic scholarly tradition that has developed over centuries, creating an intellectual network that transcends the boundaries of space and time.⁸ Various contemporary Muslim scholars such as Syed Naquib al-Attas (1993) criticize liberalism, arguing that this phenomenon is actually a symptom of a more fundamental problem: the desacralization of knowledge and the loss of the concept of *adab* in modern education, which has reduced knowledge to mere technical information divorced from its ethical and spiritual dimensions.⁹

This debate actually reveals a significant theoretical gap in contemporary pesantren studies. Although there is a wealth of literature discussing pesantren from sociological, historical, and anthropological perspectives, there is a scarcity of studies analyzing pesantren traditions from a comparative epistemological perspective that bridges these gaps. Important works such as the research of Dhofier (2015), Bruinessen (2015), and of Fajaruddin (2024) provide in-depth descriptions of the social structure, value systems, and role of Islamic boarding schools in Indonesian society.¹⁰ but fundamental epistemological questions such as “why the oral-personal transmission system is maintained, what its epistemological superiority is, and how it relates to contemporary knowledge theory” have not been comprehensively answered. In particular, there has been no research that uses Hans-Georg Gadamer (2013) philosophical hermeneutics to interpret the practice of knowledge transmission in Islamic boarding schools as a fusion of

⁶ Ferry Kisihandi, “Membaca Kembali Pesantren: Antara Tradisi, Liberalisme, Dan Krisis Pengetahuan Modern,” *Republika.co.id*, 2025, <https://rejabar.republika.co.id/berita/t4b2ds472/>.

⁷ Martin van Bruinessen, *Kitab Kuning, Pesantren, Dan Tarekat: Tradisi-Tradisi Islam Di Indonesia*, Rev. (Gading Publishing, 2015).

⁸ Zamakhsyari Dhofier, *Tradisi Pesantren: Studi Pandangan Hidup Kyai Dan Visinya Mengenai Masa Depan Indonesia*, Rev. (LP3ES, 2015).

⁹ Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, 2nd ed. (International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC), 1993).

¹⁰ Dhofier, *Tradisi Pesantren: Studi Pandangan Hidup Kyai Dan Visinya Mengenai Masa Depan Indonesia*; Bruinessen, *Kitab Kuning, Pesantren, Dan Tarekat: Tradisi-Tradisi Islam Di Indonesia*; Akhmad Afnan Fajarudin, “Pesantren: A Potrait of Education and Islamic Social History,” *Journal of Islamic Education Research* 5, no. 2 (June 12, 2024): 91–108, <https://doi.org/10.35719/jier.v5i2.406>.

horizons between classical tradition and contemporary context,¹¹ or that applies Imre Lakatos (1970) scientific research programme methodology framework to evaluate the tradition of Islamic boarding schools and compare it with liberal Muslim criticism from a progressive perspective against degenerative problemshift.¹²

Sure, there has been no in-depth study analyzing the epistemological superiority of the Arab-Islamic oral tradition in the context of the sanad and ijazah systems by contextualizing the works of classical hadith scholars such as al-Khathib al-Baghdadi in *al-Kifayah fi 'Ilm al-Riwayah* (1071/2001)¹³ and al-Suyuthi in *Tadrib al-Rawi* (1489/2005)¹⁴ with contemporary studies by Western scholars such as Gregor Schoeler's *The Oral and the Written in Early Islam* (2006) and Jonathan Brown (2008, 2015, 2017, 2019, 2021) in his various works on hadith authentication.¹⁵ In fact, this kind of synthesis is very important to debunk what can be called the textualization fallacy, an illusion that meaning can be reduced entirely to text without the personal mediation of a teacher. There has also been no systematic attempt to unravel the hidden epistemological assumptions in liberal Muslim criticism, particularly with regard to the myth of autonomous reason and the irony that those who most vocally claim "freedom of thought" are precisely those who are least critical in adopting the Orientalist and Western liberal paradigms.¹⁶

This study attempts to fill this theoretical gap by developing what can be called a bridging epistemology, an approach that connects classical Islamic traditions with contemporary philosophy of science to show that the pesantren tradition is not a "premodern relic" that needs to be modernized. This epistemological system is sophisticated and has anticipated several important insights from hermeneutics and twentieth-century philosophy of science.¹⁷ Gadamer's

¹¹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G Marshall, 2nd rev. (Bloomsbury Academic, 2013).

¹² Imre Lakatos, "Falsification and the Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes," in *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge*, ed. Imre Lakatos and Alan Musgrave (Cambridge University Press, 1970), 91–196.

¹³ Al-Khathib al-Baghdādi, *Al-Kifāyah Fi 'Ilm Al-Riwayah* (Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 2001).

¹⁴ J Al-Suyūthi, *Tadrib Al-Rāwi Fi Shardh Taqrib Al-Navāwi* (Dār al-'Āshimah, 2005).

¹⁵ This is a field that is worthy of its own study. However, Liberal Indonesian Muslims seem to be "mal-informed" to these works, instead. See Jonathan A C Brown, "How We Know Early Hadith Critics Did Matn Criticism and Why It's So Hard to Find," *Islamic Law and Society* 15, no. 2 (2008): 143–84, <https://doi.org/10.1163/156851908X290538>; Jonathan A C Brown, *Misquoting Muhammad: The Challenge and Choices of Interpreting the Prophet's Legacy* (Oneworld Publications, 2015); Jonathan A C Brown, *Hadith: Muhammad's Legacy in the Medieval and Modern World*, 2nd ed. (Oneworld Publications, 2017); Jonathan A C Brown, *Blind Spots: The Origins of the Western Method of Critiquing Hadith* (Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research, 2019), <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/read/paper/blind-spots-the-origins-of-the-western-method-of-critiquing-hadith>; Jonathan A C Brown, *Authenticating Hadith and the History of Hadith Criticism*, *Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research* (Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research, 2021), <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/read/paper/authenticating-hadith-and-the-history-of-hadith-criticism>.

¹⁶ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (University of Chicago Press, 1988); Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (University of Chicago Press, 2013).

¹⁷ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. David E Linge (University of California Press, 1976); Iñaki Xavier Larrauri Pertierra, "On Gadamerian Hermeneutics: Fusions of Horizons, Dialogue, and Evolution(s) within Culture as Dynamic System of Meaning," *Eidos: A Journal for Philosophy of Culture* 4, no. 4 (2020): 45–62,

concept of *Horizontverschmelzung*, which emphasizes that true understanding occurs not through subjective mastery of the text but through the dialogical fusion of the reader's horizon and the text's horizon, provides a very appropriate theoretical framework for understanding the practices of *mudzakarah* (collective deliberation) and *bahtsul masail* (discussion of legal issues) in pesantren.¹⁸ In these practices, Santri do not merely passively accept the Santri's interpretation of the classical texts, but are also involved in a dialogue in which various opinions of the madhhab are discussed, compared, and applied to contemporary cases, a process that precisely instantiates Gadamerian fusion of horizons.

Meanwhile, Lakatos' scientific research program methodology offers a rigorous analytical instrument for evaluating whether the pesantren tradition is a progressive or degenerative research program. In Lakatos' framework, a research program consists of a hard core (fundamental principles that are protected from falsification) and a protective belt (auxiliary hypotheses that can be modified to accommodate anomalies). A program is considered progressive if it produces confirmed novel predictions and expands explanatory power, while a degenerative program only makes ad hoc adjustments without offering new insights.¹⁹ If we apply this framework to the pesantren tradition, we can identify the principles of *sanad-ijazah* and teacher authority as the hard core, and specific teaching methods (*sorogan*, *bandongan*, *wetonan*) as the protective belt that has evolved throughout history. The critical question is, "Does the pesantren tradition demonstrate progressive problem-solving capacity, or is it merely defensive self-preservation? More importantly, how can liberal Muslim criticism itself be evaluated as a research program? Does it offer positive heuristics with concrete alternatives, or is it merely negative heuristics without a proven effective replacement system?"

A third dimension that is crucial but often overlooked is an in-depth analysis of the Arab-Islamic oral tradition and its epistemological superiority in certain contexts. Contemporary studies by Gregor Schoeler (2006), Jonathan Brown (2015), and Görke & Schoeler (2005, 2024) have debunked the classical Orientalist assumption that oral transmission is inferior to textual transmission. Schoeler successfully argues that the isnād system in Islamic tradition creates a multi-layered quality control mechanism: biographical evaluation of narrators (*rijāl al-hadīth*),

<https://doi.org/10.14394/eidos.jpc.2020.0040>; Didier Pollefeyt, "Religious Education as Opening the Hermeneutical Space," *Journal of Religious Education* 68, no. 2 (July 2020): 115, <https://doi.org/10.1007/S40839-020-00105-7>.

¹⁸ Muhammad Yusuf Salam et al., "Tradisi Keilmuan Pesantren Melalui Integrasi Sorogan Dan Bandongan Dalam Pembelajaran Kitab Kuning Di Sumatera Barat," *Jurnal Pendidikan Agama Islam* 16, no. 2 (2019): 145–68.

¹⁹ Though there are several critics made by Larry et al., we have tried to do some patchworks based on it. Readers can compare both texts in: Lakatos, "Falsification and the Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes" Larry E Wada, Ejike E Aroh, and Paul C Wagozie, "Imre Lakatos's Scientific Research Programme: A Critical Evaluation," *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science* 7, no. 9 (2023): 117–29, <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2023.70912>.

verification through reliable attestation (*mutāba'āt* and *shawāhid*), and face-to-face verification through *sama'* (audition) and *qirā'ah* (recitation).²⁰ Brown even states that this system “functions as a form of peer review that is more rigorous than anything found in modern academia.” Michael Polanyi's concept of tacit knowledge (2013) that “we know more than we can say” also explains why the teacher-student system remains important, even though written texts are available: there is a dimension of knowledge (methodology, spiritual *hāl*, *adab*) that cannot be fully textualized and requires personal transmission.²¹

The significance of this research lies in several interrelated dimensions. The theoretical aspect of this research develops a bridging epistemology that shows that classical Islamic tradition not only “fits in” with contemporary theories of knowledge, but in some aspects has anticipated insights that were “rediscovered” by twentieth-century Western philosophy.²² This research offers a new model in the study of Islam in the methodological realm, namely a combination of philosophical hermeneutics and philosophy of science to analyze religious traditions, avoiding both defensive apologetics and uncritical adoption of Western frameworks. And the practical aspect in the context of the polarization of the discourse on Islamic education in Indonesia offers a third way: neither defensive apologetics that rejects all criticism, nor the unfiltered adoption of liberal criticism, but visionary critical engagement that acknowledges real problems in certain pesantren practices while exposing category mistakes and hidden assumptions in liberal criticism.²³

This research also has social implications that must be taken into account. Amidst the crisis of public trust in Islamic boarding schools following the Sidoarjo tragedy, what is needed is not merely an emotional or defensive response, but rather a clear intellectual articulation of why the tradition of Islamic boarding schools should be preserved (not because of romanticism about the past) due to its epistemological superiority, which can be demonstrated through rigorous philosophical analysis, which is of high urgency.²⁴ This article offers a framework for developing regulations that respect epistemological diversity without falling into relativism for policy makers,

²⁰ Gregor Schoeler, *The Oral and the Written in Early Islam*, ed. James E Montgomery, trans. Uwe Vagelpohl (Routledge, 2006); Brown, *Misquoting Muhammad: The Challenge and Choices of Interpreting the Prophet's Legacy*; Andreas Görke and Gregor Schoeler, “Reconstructing the Earliest Sira Texts: The Hīgra in the Corpus of Urwa b. Al-Zubayr,” *Der Islam* 82, no. 2 (2005): 209–20, <https://doi.org/10.1515/islam.2005.82.2.209>; Andreas Görke and Gregor Schoeler, *The Earliest Writings on the Life of Muḥammad: The 'Urwa Corpus and the Non-Muslim Sources* (Berlin: Gerlach Press, 2024).

²¹ Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*; Abū Hāmid Muḥammad Al-Ghazālī, *Ihya 'Ulm Ad-Din* (Dār al-Ma'rīfah, 1998).

²² Ahmad Chuvav Ibriy, “Kritik Pesantren: Antara Ilusi Kebangkitan Kiri Dan Bayangan Ekstrem Kanan,” *Alif.id*, 2025, <https://alif.id/tradisi/kritik-pesantren-antara-ilusi-kebangkitan-kiri-dan-bayangan-ekstrem-kanan>.

²³ Basri Asyibli et al., “Epistemological Dimensions in Islamic Educational Philosophy: A Critical Analysis,” *Journal of Islamic Education Research* 6, no. 1 (February 11, 2025), <https://doi.org/10.35719/jier.v6i1.464>.

²⁴ Nazar, “Marahnya Santri: Pesantren, Kuasa, Dan Krisis Representasi.”

by distinguishing between the hard core that needs to be protected (the principles of *sanad-ijazah*, oral-personal transmission) and the protective belt that can and must be modernized (safety standards, transparency, accountability) For Islamic boarding schools themselves, this research provides a conceptual language to articulate their epistemology in modern public discourse, no longer as an “inexplicable tradition”.²⁵ Islamic boarding schools have a system of knowledge that is intellectually accountable.

Research Methods

This study uses an interpretive paradigm with a qualitative hermeneutic analytical approach, a choice based on the nature of the object of study (scientific tradition and epistemology) which requires in-depth interpretation rather than mere empirical description or quantitative measurement. As Gadamer emphasized in *Truth and Method* (1960/2013), understanding intellectual traditions cannot be done with an “objective-neutral” attitude à la natural science. Hermeneutic involvement is required, in which the researcher himself becomes part of the fusion of horizons.²⁶ This study combines library research, which focuses on the analysis of primary and secondary texts without field data collection, and focus group discussions with three students from a *Salaf* Islamic boarding school who meet the ideal criteria in the transmission of sanad, considering that the research questions are epistemological-philosophical in nature, requiring in-depth textual analysis rather than ethnographic observation and confirmation of the results with participants directly involved in the pedagogical process in question.²⁷ The use of this Western framework stems from an effort to respond to criticism originating from the Western paradigm, thereby facilitating dialogue due to a “common language”.²⁸ Primary data sources include classical Islamic texts such as *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din* of Al-Ghazālī (1097/1998), *al-Muqaddimah* of Ibn Khaldūn (1377/2015), *al-Kifāyah fī 'Ilm al-Riwāyah* of al-Khathīb al-Baghdādī (1071/2001), and *Ta'lim Muta'allim* Imam al-Zarnuji as well as Gadamer's philosophical works such as *Truth and Method* (1960/2013) and Lakatos' "Falsification and the Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes" (1970). Secondary sources include contemporary ethnographic studies of Islamic boarding schools by Dhofier (2015), Bruinessen (2015), Salam (2025), Arifin (2015), Ridha et al. (2025), Munir (2016), Hakim (2019), and studies of Islamic oral traditions by Schoeler (2006) and Brown (2015), as well as at least thirty articles

²⁵ Wada, Aroh, and Wagozie, “Imre Lakatos’s Scientific Research Programme: A Critical Evaluation.”

²⁶ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*.

²⁷ Niaz Ahmed Khan and Shireen Abedin, “Focus Group Discussion,” *Principles of Social Research Methodology*, January 1, 2022, 377–87, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-5441-2_26.

²⁸ Kevin A. Bartley and Jeffrey J. Brooks, “Fusion of Horizons: Realizing a Meaningful Understanding in Qualitative Research,” *Sage Journals Qualitative Research* 23, no. 4 (August 1, 2023): 940–61, <https://doi.org/10.1177/146879412111065164>.

from SCOPUS Q1-Q3 or SINTA 1-4 indexed journals published in the last ten years to ensure that the analysis is based on the highest academic standards. The discussion participants came from the al-Mardiyah and Nurul Huda Islamic boarding schools and Cipasung alumni on October 29 in Bandung with questions related to *sanad-ijazah*, relationships with teachers, manners, and scientific testing in their respective fields, done as an attempt to verify textual findings.

The data analysis techniques in this study use three complementary approaches to produce a comprehensive and holistic understanding. First, Gadamerian hermeneutic analysis uses the hermeneutic circle to identify the horizon of the text (worldview and assumptions embedded in classical texts and modern criticism), the horizon of the interpreter (pre-understanding and position of the researcher), and engages in dialogical engagement to achieve a fusion of horizons that produces new interpretations.²⁹ When analyzing the criticism that the teacher-student system creates “intellectual dependence,” in addition to analyzing whether this claim is factually true, it will also explore the epistemological horizon from which this criticism arises: “what are the underlying assumptions about autonomy, authority, and knowledge, and how does this horizon differ from the pesantren horizon that understands *adab* as situated praxis.” Second, a Lakatosian evaluation that identifies the hard core and protective belt of the pesantren tradition and liberal Muslim criticism, then evaluates the problem-solving capacity of each to determine whether they exhibit progressive or degenerative problemshift characteristics.³⁰ Third, the deconstruction of epistemological fiat that identifies assumptions taken for granted in liberal criticism, tracing the genealogy of these assumptions to reveal the influence of Orientalism and Enlightenment rationalism, illuminating internal contradictions, and proposing a more equitable alternative framework for the complexity of the pesantren tradition.³¹

To ensure the validity of data and the reliability of qualitative research, several strategies were used in accordance with the criteria of Lincoln and Guba (1985) as noted by Enworo (2023).³² Credibility was ensured through triangulation of sources using classical texts, contemporary journals, and textual case studies of Islamic boarding schools from various

²⁹ Chukwuemeka C Onyenekwe, “Gadamer’s Fusion of Horizon,” *Philosophy and Praxis* 10, no. 1 (2020): 71–85.

³⁰ Alan Musgrave and Charles Pigden, “Imre Lakatos,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N Zalta, Spring 2016 (Stanford University, 2016), <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/lakatos/>; Wada, Aroh, and Wagozie, “Imre Lakatos’s Scientific Research Programme: A Critical Evaluation.”

³¹ Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition*; Douglas H Garrison, “Ibn Khaldun and the Modern Social Sciences: A Comparative Theoretical Inquiry into Society, the State, and Revolution” (University of Denver, 2012), <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/etd/231>; Wael B Hallaq, *Restating Orientalism: A Critique of Modern Knowledge* (Columbia University Press, 2018).

³² Oko Chima Enworo, “Application of Guba and Lincoln’s Parallel Criteria to Assess Trustworthiness of Qualitative Research on Indigenous Social Protection Systems,” *Qualitative Research Journal* 23, no. 4 (April 24, 2023): 372–84, <https://doi.org/10.1108/QRJ-08-2022-0116>.

researchers, as well as member checking with Ma'had Dalailul Qur'an and Pesantren Cipasung to ensure that interpretations are not based on a single perspective, along with peer debriefing with fellow researchers to challenge interpretations and identify potential biases, as well as confirmation with discussion participants (Severin & Chataway, 2020). Transferability is achieved through thick description of the context with explicit acknowledgment that the analysis of "pesantren" refers to ideal-typical *salaf* (traditional) pesantren and cannot automatically be applied to all pesantren (given the enormous variation).³³ Reliability is maintained through an audit trail that records the positionality, bias, and evolution of the researcher's understanding throughout the research process. Confirmability is also ensured by the principle that every claim must be supported by evidence from the text with a minimum of three citations per paragraph to build academic credibility, as well as a commitment to intellectual integrity that does not cherry-pick data, not falling into strawman arguments, and acknowledging contradictory evidence while continuing to engage in dialogue with the strongest versions of opposing arguments that focus on epistemic issues.³⁴ The researcher's own positionality is that of a pesantren alumnus, which ensures transparency and integrity. This library research-FGD continues to pay attention to ethics, especially those related to epistemological justice (not using one tradition to judge another tradition with unfair standards), acknowledging the legitimacy of different epistemologies while continuing to interact critically, then requesting permission to collect data from discussion participants and avoiding misrepresentation of both the pesantren tradition and its liberal criticism.³⁵

Results and Discussion

Pesantren as an Instantiation of Fusion of Horizons: A Gadamerian Analysis of the Practice of Knowledge Transmission

The practices of *muzakarah*³⁶, *munadzarah*³⁷, *mutbaharah*³⁸ (collective deliberation) and *bahtsul masail* as the final evaluation on three methods prior to it in Islamic boarding schools precisely represent Gadamer's conceptualized dialogical structure of understanding, which is the core of his philosophical hermeneutics.³⁹ In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer (1960/2013)

³³ Fajarudin, "Pesantren: A Potrait of Education and Islamic Social History."

³⁴ Lawrence Leung, "Validity, Reliability, and Generalizability in Qualitative Research," *Journal of Family Medicine and Primary Care* 4, no. 3 (2015): 324, <https://doi.org/10.4103/2249-4863.161306>.

³⁵ Aspasia Togia and Afrodite Malliari, "Research Methods in Library and Information Science," in *Qualitative versus Quantitative Research* (InTech, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.5772/intechopen.68749>.

³⁶ Al-Zarnuji, *Ta'lim Muta'allim (Akhlak Santri)* (Al-Maktub al-Badami, 1981).

³⁷ Al-Zarnuji; Al-Ghazāli, *Ihya 'Ulm Ad-Din*.

³⁸ Al-Ghazāli, *Ihya 'Ulm Ad-Din*; Al-Zarnuji, *Ta'lim Muta'allim (Akhlak Santri)*.

³⁹ Bruinessen, *Kitab Kuning, Pesantren, Dan Tarekat: Tradisi-Tradisi Islam Di Indonesia*; Dian Mohammad Hakim, "Transformasi Kurikulum Pesantren Melalui Metode Pembelajaran Kitab Kuning Dalam Mengembangkan

emphasizes that true understanding does not occur through the monologue of an interpreter who attempts to “master” the text objectively. He argues that dialogue is a field in which interpreters and texts question each other and are questioned. Ethnographic studies by Salam (2025) Hidayatulloh (2018), Husnawadi (2025), and Kholilah (2019) on the document that in the bahtsul masail forum of Lirboyo and al-Muhibbin Islamic boarding schools, students do not simply “accept” the Santri's interpretation of the classical texts passively. but are also involved in collective deliberations in discussing various opinions of the madhhab, the strength of their arguments, and their application to contemporary cases that were never encountered by classical scholars.⁴⁰ This does not fall under *taqlid buta* (blind following without understanding). The practice of *ittiba'*, which has been discussed extensively by Ibn 'Taymiyyah in *al-Radd 'alá al-Manthiqiyyin*, is often overlooked by outsiders, namely following an opinion after understanding the arguments and reasoning behind the law.⁴¹ This deliberative process instantiates a fusion of horizons in three intertwined layers: the horizon of classical texts such as Ibn Qudāmah's al-Mughnī on thirteenth-century economic transactions, the horizon of Santri (religious teachers) who have been shaped by tradition and long experience in studying texts, and the horizon of Santri (students) with contemporary problems such as the legal status of financial technology or crypto transactions, for which there are no precedents in classical fiqh literature.

This Gadamerian analysis is crucial because the three horizons do not swallow or dominate each other but rather fuse to produce a new interpretation that is neither entirely classical nor modern, but rather a productive synthesis that carries on tradition while responding to context. “Understanding is not a matter of forgetting our own horizon; rather it is a fusion of horizons.”⁴² Pesantren do not “forget” the contemporary context for the sake of blind loyalty to classical texts, as is often alleged by liberal critics, nor do they “forget” classical texts for the sake of shallow modernity. They engage in creative fusion by bringing tradition into dialogue with today's reality. Taufikin (2018) elaborates that the transformation of Islamic boarding schools from the salaf model to the modern model is not a total replacement but rather an evolution

Pesantren : Studi Kasus Di Pondok Pesantren Al-Hikam Malang,” *Andragogi : Jurnal Ilmiah Pendidikan Agama Islam* 1, no. 2 (January 10, 2019): 39–49, <https://doi.org/10.33474/JA.V1I2.4975>.

⁴⁰ Salam et al., “Tradisi Keilmuan Pesantren Melalui Integrasi Sorogan Dan Bandongan Dalam Pembelajaran Kitab Kuning Di Sumatera Barat”; M. Syarif Hidayatulloh, “Pembelajaran Kontekstual Dalam Kegiatan Bahtsul Masail Santri Di Pondok Pesantren Al-Muhibbin Bahrul Ulum Tambakberas Jombang,” *Nazhruna: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 1, no. 2 (August 19, 2018): 177–200, <https://doi.org/10.31538/NZH.V1I2.50>; Husnawadi Husnawadi, “A Correlational Study of the Bahtsul Masail Method, Learning Motivation, and Students' Understanding of Islamic Law,” *AS-SABIQUN* 7, no. 3 (May 1, 2025): 509–21, <https://doi.org/10.36088/ASSABIQUN.V7I3.5692>; Iis Kholilah, “HERMENEUTICS OF NATIONALITY FIQH: STUDY OF BAHTSUL MASAIL OF LIRBOYO ALUMNI ASSOCIATION,” *Khazanah: Jurnal Studi Islam Dan Humaniora* 17, no. 1 (July 29, 2019): 83–106, <https://doi.org/10.18592/KHAZANAH.V17I1.2884>.

⁴¹ Mufti Ali, “How Did Al-Suyuthi Abridge Ibn 'Taymiyya's Nashihat Akl Al-Iman Fi Al-Radd 'ala Mantiq Al-Yunan,” *Al-Jami'ah* 46, no. 2 (2008): 279–302.

⁴² Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*.

through a fusion of horizons.⁴³ However, his analysis does not touch on the specific mechanisms of how this fusion occurs in everyday pedagogical practices. This study complements Taufikin's analysis by showing that *muzakarah*, *munadzarah*, *muthabarah*, and *babtsul masail* are concrete loci for the fusion of horizons: when students bring questions about sharia insurance or digital banking, and the Santri guides them to explore the fundamental principles (*ushūl*) from classical texts to then be applied to new contexts (*furū'*), what occurs is creative interpretation that requires a deep understanding of both tradition and context.⁴⁴

Gadamer's most radical contribution, which is highly relevant in defending the Santri-Santri system in Islamic boarding schools, is his rehabilitation of the concept of *Vorurteil* (prejudice or pre-judgment). Unlike the Enlightenment tradition, which views prejudice as an obstacle to objectivity and something that must be eliminated in the interest of pure knowledge, Gadamer sees prejudice as a condition of possibility for understanding (a condition that enables us to "question" the text). We always have pre-understandings that shape our horizons, and this is not a deficiency but a fundamental structure of being-in-the-world.⁴⁵ The application of this concept to liberal Muslim criticism is particularly striking when Guru Gembul and similar critics see the "necessity of having a teacher" as a form of "intellectual dependence" that hinders critical reasoning; they are actually making a fundamental categorical error. No thinker is truly "autonomous" in the sense of being totally free from tradition or prejudice. Even the most "independent" philosophers, such as Descartes, Kant, or Popper, were all shaped by their respective intellectual traditions (Greco-Roman, Enlightenment, Critical Rationalism).⁴⁶ Alasdair MacIntyre in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (1988) challenges this myth with "All reasoning takes place within the context of some traditional mode of thought."⁴⁷ What distinguishes us is the conscious versus unconscious relationship with the traditions that shape us, not questioning their existence.

The results of discussions with participants agreed that the presence of teachers was not accepted fanatically. They became parental figures who encouraged the development of students' uniqueness, provided that there was a close relationship between teachers and students to facilitate observation of students, accompanied by warnings. Teachers carefully assess their

⁴³ Taufikin, "Hermeneutic of Pesantren with the 'Fusion of Horizons'" Gadamer's Theory," *Southeast Asian Journal of Islamic Education* 1, no. 1 (2018): 36–58, <https://doi.org/10.21093/sajie.v1i1.1335>.

⁴⁴ Ahmad Nurkhin, Abdul Rohman, and Tri Jatmiko Wahyu Prabowo, "Accountability of Pondok Pesantren; a Systematic Literature Review," *Cogent Business & Management* 11, no. 1 (December 31, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311975.2024.2332503>.

⁴⁵ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*.

⁴⁶ Jeffrey Stevenson Murer, "THE MYTH OF AUTONOMY: SUBJECTIVITY, HETERONOMY AND THE VIOLENCE OF LIBERALISM INDIVIDUALISM," in *Polish Political Science*, vol. 39 (Sciendo, 2010), 126–48.

⁴⁷ MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*

capacity, then give their “blessing” to manage or continue in a particular field that requires responsibility. This is also based on guarantees and consultation by teachers, as well as the autonomy of students in making final decisions, because it is felt that they have reached a horizon and *wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein* that is commensurate with the symbol of the sanad-ijazah contract. This is also in line with research conducted by Munir (2016) in his dialogue with Islamic boarding school alumni in South Sumatra regarding networking with teachers' advice.⁴⁸ On the other hand, the cases of students who reactively respond to the “challenges” of various media depend on the level of *horizontverstellung*: those that are sufficiently reflected in mature reactions, and those that are lacking in ad-hoc mass reactions.

It would be beneficial for Guru Gembul and other liberal critics to consider adopting the Orientalist idea of “traditional Islam as stagnation” developed by Goldziher and Schacht, the Enlightenment rationalist paradigm of “authority as irrational,” and liberal individualism's idea of “autonomy as the highest value” in their arguments. Hallaq (2018) in *Restating Orientalism* diagnoses this phenomenon as internalized colonialism.⁴⁹ Through the Gadamerian lens, liberal critics must be wary of the unconsciousness of historical consciousness (*wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein*), which is the awareness that we cannot escape the historical effects of the traditions that shape us.⁵⁰ The claim to a neutral and universal position is actually a position that is highly conditioned in the tradition of modern Western liberalism, which has its own specific assumptions about individualism, secularism, and autonomy.⁵¹ What we need is not the illusion of autonomy from tradition, which is too grandiose philosophically. What is needed instead is conscious interaction with tradition, the ability to acknowledge that we are always already within tradition while still being able to engage in reflexive internal criticism.

The sanad-ijazah system in Islamic boarding schools, when viewed through the lens of Gadamer's *Wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein* concept, is not a bureaucratic formality, but rather a materialization of an awareness of the historical effects of tradition. When a Santri receives an ijazah from his kiai, he does not only receive a “certificate” that he has completed reading a certain book or memorized certain hadiths, but he also receives a lineage (an intellectual lineage that connects him to a line of scholars going back to the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ).⁵² This creates

⁴⁸ Munir Munir, “The Continuity and Change of Pesantren Tradition: Study Network Main Pesantren and Alumni Pesantren in Kabupaten OKU Timur, South Sumatra,” *Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 5, no. 2 (December 16, 2016): 347–64, <https://doi.org/10.14421/JPI.2016.52.347-364>.

⁴⁹ Hallaq, *Restating Orientalism: A Critique of Modern Knowledge*.

⁵⁰ Pertierra, “On Gadamerian Hermeneutics: Fusions of Horizons, Dialogue, and Evolution(s) within Culture as Dynamic System of Meaning.”

⁵¹ Kurzman, *Liberal Islam: A Sourcebook*.

⁵² Mohamad Redha Bin Mohamad, Muhammad Zaid Bin Shamsul Kamar, and Shaharuddin Bin Saad, “KEPENTINGAN SANAD DALAM MENJAGA KEASLIAN AL-QURAN,” in *Proceeding of The International*

a living connection with tradition, not just knowledge about tradition but being within tradition, becoming an organic part of the transmission of knowledge that has been going on for fourteen centuries. Brown (2015) shows that in the science of hadith, the teacher-student relationship ensures that what is transmitted is not only text but also methodology, critical sensibility, and ethical formation, all dimensions that cannot be reduced to propositional knowledge.⁵³ This is entirely consistent with Polanyi's (2013) concept of tacit knowledge: "We know more than we can tell." There is a dimension of knowledge that cannot be fully verbalized or textualized and requires personal transmission.⁵⁴ In contrast to the textuality advocated by liberal Muslims who "go directly to the Qur'an and hadith without a teacher," this approach ignores the warning that texts do not interpret themselves. Interpretation always requires pre-understanding shaped by tradition, and without a Santri/teacher, Santri become vulnerable to eisegesis (reading their own biases into the text) rather than exegesis (understanding the text within its own horizon), or in the words of the pesantren, "taught by Satan" and "learning with lust." Evidence of the phenomenon of radicalization shows that many extremist groups such as ISIS and Al-Qaeda emerged in part from a textualist reading without a clear basis in traditional institutions.⁵⁵ They read verses and hadiths without understanding the context, methodology of interpretation, and wisdom of traditions that have been developed over centuries.

Pesantren as a Progressive Research Program: A Lakatosian Evaluation of Problem-Solving Capacity

Within the framework of Imre Lakatos' scientific research program methodology, a research program consists of a hard core and a protective belt. What is very important to understand in Lakatos' framework is that evaluation is not carried out on a single theory but on the entire program based on whether it shows progressive or degenerative problemshift. Progressive programs produce novel predictions that are corroborated and expand explanatory power, while degenerative programs only make ad-hoc adjustments to save the hard core without producing new insights.⁵⁶ The application of this framework to the pesantren tradition reinforces a highly complex epistemological structure: the hard core of the pesantren includes the principle

Conference On Contemporary Issues In Al-Quran And Hadith 2018 (THIQAH 2018) (Selangor, 2018), 978–967; Martin van Bruinessen, "Pesantren and Kitab Kuning: Continuity and Change in a Tradition of Religious Learning," in *Texts from the Islands: Oral and Written Traditions of Indonesia and the Malay World*, ed. Wolfgang Marschall (University of Berne, 1994), 121–46.

⁵³ Brown, *Misquoting Muhammad: The Challenge and Choices of Interpreting the Prophet's Legacy*.

⁵⁴ Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*.

⁵⁵ Mostafa Soueid and Rita Merhej, "Understanding Islamic Extremism Away from the Dominant Normative Paradigm," *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies* 11, no. 1 (January 11, 2024): 183–209, <https://doi.org/10.29333/EJECES/1664>.

⁵⁶ Lakatos, "Falsification and the Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes"; Musgrave and Pigden, "Imre Lakatos."

of sanad-ijazah as a mechanism for controlling the quality of knowledge transmission, the authority of the teacher as the epistemic authority that controls tradition, and oral-personal transmission as an ideal that is complemented (not replaced) by text. Evidence from classical sources clearly states this: Al-Ghazāli in *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* asserts that (paraphrased) “knowledge is not only content (*ma'lūm*) but also method (*tharīq*), and method can only be transmitted through direct interaction with the teacher (*ustād*).”⁵⁷ Ibn Khaldūn in *al-Muqaddimah* is even more explicit, explaining that “Teaching is a craft (*shinā'ah*), and crafts are only learned through practice and apprenticeship (*mumārasah*).”⁵⁸

While this hard core has been maintained, the protective belt of pesantren has shown remarkable flexibility and adaptability throughout history. Teaching methods such as *sorogan* (individual learning), *bandongan* (collective learning), and *wetonan* (scheduled learning) have evolved and adapted to the context.⁵⁹ The curriculum has expanded from an exclusive focus on classical Islamic texts to include modern science and foreign languages in many pesantren, the organizational structure has transformed from a fully traditional model to a combination with the formal madrasah system, and interaction with technology has evolved from initial rejection to selective adoption (Anam et al., 2025; Salam, 2025). Dhofier (2015), Bruinessen (2015), and Ridha et al. (2025) documented pesantren as underwent significant transformation within the protective belt while maintaining the hard core as a key characteristic of a progressive research program capable of adapting without losing its identity.⁶⁰ The question that arises in Lakatosian evaluation is “do Islamic boarding schools demonstrate genuine problem-solving capacity, or are they merely engaging in apologetics?” Other historical evidence confirms that Islamic boarding schools have successfully solved a complex problem: how to maintain the authenticity of the transmission of Islamic knowledge across generations for more than a thousand years in various changing geographical and political contexts? The solution is the sanad-ijazah system with built-in quality control through biographical evaluation of narrators (*rijāl al-hadīth*), verification through multiple attestations (*mutāba'āt* and *shawāhid*), and face-to-face verification through *samā'* and

⁵⁷ Al-Ghazāli, *Ihyā' 'Ulūm Ad-Dīn*.

⁵⁸ Ibn Khaldūn, *Al-Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, ed. N J Dawood, trans. Franz Rosenthal (Princeton University Press, 2015).

⁵⁹ Al-Zarnuji, *Ta'lim Muta'allim (Aklak Santri)*.

⁶⁰ Syaiful Anam, Moh Alpa Hosim, and Ainol Yaqin, “TRANSFORMATION OF PESANTREN ECONOMIC MANAGEMENT TOWARD SELF-RELIANCE BASED ON LOCAL WISDOM,” *Jurnal Kajian Ekonomi Dan Perbankan Syariah* 9, no. 1 (2025): 72–80, <https://doi.org/10.33650/profit.v9i1.11108>; Salam et al., “Tradisi Keilmuan Pesantren Melalui Integrasi Sorogan Dan Bandongan Dalam Pembelajaran Kitab Kuning Di Sumatera Barat”; Dhofier, *Tradisi Pesantren: Studi Pandangan Hidup Kyai Dan Visinya Mengenai Masa Depan Indonesia*; Bruinessen, *Kitab Kuning, Pesantren, Dan Tarekat: Tradisi-Tradisi Islam Di Indonesia*; Muhammad Ridha et al., “Teacher Student Relationship in Pesantren Tradition: A Comparative Study of Pesantren MTI Canduang Agam and Pesantren Darunnahdlatain Pancor Lombok,” *El -Hekam* 10, no. 1 (June 25, 2025): 1–13, <https://doi.org/10.31958/JEH.V10I1.14134>.

qirā'ah, which have proven to be very effective, as confirmed by comparative manuscript studies showing that classical Islamic texts have been preserved with a high degree of accuracy (Al-Attas, 1980; Brown, 2008, 2019, 2021; Bruinessen, 2015; Schoeler, 2006; Ware, 2014).⁶¹ Alas, empirical research with discussion participants proved their ability to effectively retell the transmission of knowledge according to the indicators set by the epistemology of hadith science.

Islamic boarding schools have factually produced novel insights that even anticipate some modern epistemological insights: the concept of *adab* as an epistemological precondition developed by Al-Attas esponds to *Vorurteil* in showing that ethical-spiritual formation is a condition that accommodates true knowledge, rather than being an obstacle.⁶² The classical distinction between *taqlid* (following without understanding) and *ittiba'* (following based on understanding) discussed by Ibn Taymiyyah is in line with Polanyi's distinction between tacit and explicit knowledge, acknowledging that there is a dimension of knowledge that cannot be fully articulated but can still be transmitted through *ijazah*. The adaptability of *pesantren* also demonstrates their problem-solving capacity in facing modern challenges: integrating the national curriculum without sacrificing identity, adopting digital technology to improve efficiency while maintaining personal interaction, and even responding to criticism with intellectual articulation that is more responsive than merely defensive. Now, a striking contrast emerges when we evaluate liberal Muslim criticism using the same Lakatosian framework. What are their hard core and protective belt, and more importantly, what is their problem-solving capacity? Researcher confidently state that liberal criticism is both negative heuristic (“why have teachers?”, “*taqlid*”, “feudal”) and positive heuristic.⁶³ Where is the concrete system proposed to replace *sanad-ijazah*? How can the quality of knowledge be maintained without teachers? What is the empirical basis that “self-learning” produces superior products? These epistemic questions are generally unanswered in liberal criticism, demonstrating the characteristics of degenerative problemshift according to Lakatos: reactive, defensive, not offering constructive alternatives as already explained. However, researchers also recognize that critiques focused on structural domains, the

⁶¹ Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, *The Concept of Education in Islam: A Framework for an Islamic Philosophy of Education* (International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC), 1980); Brown, *Authenticating Hadith and the History of Hadith Criticism*; Schoeler, *The Oral and the Written in Early Islam*; Rudolph T. I I I Ware, *The Walking Qur'an: Islamic Education, Embodied Knowledge, and History in West Africa* (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5149/9781469614328_ware.

⁶² Mishbah Khoiruddin Zuhri and Mundhir Mundhir, “Transcending Paradigm: Bridging Spirituality and Modern Science in the Thoughts of Nasr, Al-Attas, and Al-Faruqi,” *Jurnal Theologia* 34, no. 2 (January 24, 2023): 221–44, <https://doi.org/10.21580/TEO.2023.34.2.18692>.

⁶³ Dzakirul, “10 Kritik Pedas Guru Gembul Untuk Pesantren: Sudah Saatnya Berbenah”; Kisihandi, “Membaca Kembali Pesantren: Antara Tradisi, Liberalisme, Dan Krisis Pengetahuan Modern”; Pergerakan Indonesia Untuk Semua, “Guru Gembul Kritik Tradisi Di Pesantren.”

economic system, and transparency are worthy of consideration as part of a progressive program.⁶⁴

Pesantren have survived for more than five hundred years in Indonesia, producing great scholars who have contributed not only to religion but also to nation-building (the role of NU in independence, founding fathers from pesantren circles), and remain adaptive to changes from agrarian to urban societies, from the oral to the digital era, without losing their identity.⁶⁵ Lakatos emphasizes that a program should not be evaluated based on a single falsification. Its value emerges from its long-term problem-solving capacity. The historical resilience of Islamic boarding schools over centuries, their ability to adapt while maintaining their hard-core identity, and their contribution to the preservation of Islamic intellectual tradition as well as the development of Indonesia, all demonstrate the characteristics of a progressive research program in the precise Lakatosian sense. The Lakatosian verdict is thus very clear.

Pesantren is a progressive research program that has demonstrated problem-solving capacity for centuries and continues to produce novel predictions. Even liberal Muslim criticism shows two sides of the program that must be able to see its own context and where the criticism is directed. Both must be able to engage in constructive dialogue in the development of the Islamic world in accordance with its worldview. Therefore, this section concludes that it is beneficial for Islamic boarding schools to appoint experts in specific fields (contemporary pedagogy, sociology, economics, etc.) as advisors in order to respond to paradigm dynamics.

The Epistemological Superiority of Oral Tradition: Debunking the Textualization Fallacy and the Myth of Autonomous Reason

A highly provocative but strongly supported thesis is that the sanad-ijazah system is a quality control mechanism that is in some respects more rigorous than the modern academic peer review system. This statement may be surprising to those accustomed to assumptions of the superiority of modernity, but comparative analysis shows solid justification. The sanad system in the hadith tradition involves multiple layers of verification: first, biographical evaluation (*rijāl al-hadīth*) in which Al-Khathib al-Baghdādi in *al-Kifāyah fī 'Ilm al-Riwāyah* details sixty-five categories of narrator assessment covering *'adālah* (moral integrity), *ḍabṭh* (precision in transmission), *ittishāl*

⁶⁴ Giorgi Koberidze, “The Crisis of Secular Democracy in Turkey: Historical Dynamics and the Rise of Political Islam,” *Journal of Politics and Democratization* 5 (2024): 1–16; Ouael Sarsour, “Why Did the Arab Spring Fail? Was It a Revolution?,” *International Journal of Humanities, Social Sciences and Education* 8, no. 6 (2021): 56–60, <https://doi.org/10.20431/2349-0381.0806008>.

⁶⁵ Amin Farih, “NAHDLATUL ULAMA (NU) DAN KONTRIBUSINYA DALAM MEMPERJUANGKAN KEMERDEKAAN DAN MEMPERTAHANKAN NEGARA KESATUAN REPUBLIK INDONESIA (NKRI),” *Jurnal Penelitian Sosial Keagamaan* 24, no. 2 (2016): 251–84, <https://doi.org/10.21580/ws.2016.24.2.969>; NU Online, “NU Online Raih Penghargaan Inovasi Produk Dan Teknologi Terbaik Dalam AMSI Awards 2025,” nu.or.id, 2024, <https://nu.or.id/nasional/nu-online-raih-penghargaan-inovasi-produk-dan-teknologi-terbaik-dalam-amsi-awards-2025-LqEbl>.

al-sanad (continuity of the chain), and the absence of *syādẓdẓ* (irregularities) and *'illah* (hidden defects).⁶⁶ Hadith scholars created biographical dictionaries (*ḥatib al-rijāl*) that documented musnids in detail that went beyond modern academic curricula vitae, assessing not only intellectual credentials but also personal character, daily habits, and even anecdotes that revealed integrity or mistakes. Second, double formal evidence through *mutāba'āt* and *shawāhid*, hadiths are not accepted from just one sanad and must be confirmed by another independent sanad, creating a network of authenticity that is stricter than modern peer review, where two or three reviewers are often considered sufficient. Third, face-to-face verification through *samā'* (listening) and *qirā'ah* (repetition) resulted in three layers of verification: visual (seeing the teacher), auditory (hearing the correct pronunciation), and kinesthetic (writing notes), in contrast to anonymous peer review, which is text-based and lacks personal accountability.⁶⁷

A systematic comparison between sanad-ijazah and modern peer review reveals another irony: the system often labeled “primitive” by modern critics actually has extraordinary epistemological advantages in certain aspects. In sanad, accountability is personal; the name of the musnid is recorded and his reputation is at stake, while modern peer review is often anonymous with no personal risk whatsoever. In sanad, the chain of transmission can be clearly traced back to the source, while peer review is often vague: “Who are the reviewers, what are their affiliations, where is the transparency?” Sanad has been tested for over fourteen hundred years, while modern peer review has only developed over the last three hundred years since the Royal Society. The most significant difference is that layered verification in the sanad system is very difficult to falsify because it involves multiple witnesses and biographical confirmers, while falsification in peer review has been well documented in what is called the “retraction crisis” when many papers that passed peer review were found to contain data manipulation or plagiarism.⁶⁸ Görke and Schoeler’s arguments seem to agree that the *isnād* system functions as a form of peer review that is more rigorous than what exists in modern academia.⁶⁹ Brown (2008) shows that early hadith critics performed *matn* criticism, checking both the sanad and the content

⁶⁶ Al-Khathib al-Baghdādi, *Al-Kifāyah Fi 'Ilm Al-Riwayah*; Arwansyah bin Kirin et al., “An Analytical Study of the Tahqiq Methodology of ‘Abd Al-Fattah Abu Ghuddah in His Work Al-Raf‘u Wa Al-Takmil Fi Al-Jarh Wa Al-Ta’dil,” *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science* IX, no. VII (2025): 5079–91, <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.907000410>.

⁶⁷ Ronald Lee Zigler, “Tacit Knowledge and Spiritual Pedagogy,” *Journal of Beliefs and Values* 20, no. 2 (1999): 162–72, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1361767990200206>; Peter Baumgartner and Ingrid Grundschober, “Is Tacit Knowledge Communicable?,” in *Proceedings of the International Conference on Cognition and Exploratory Learning in Digital Age*, 2017, 11–20.

⁶⁸ Balazs Aczel et al., “The Present and Future of Peer Review: Ideas, Interventions, and Evidence,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 122, no. 5 (2025): 1–9, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.240123212>; Fred M. Kusumoto et al., “Challenges and Controversies in Peer Review: JACC Review Topic of the Week,” *Journal of the American College of Cardiology* (Elsevier Inc., November 21, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jacc.2023.08.056>.

⁶⁹ Görke and Schoeler, *The Earliest Writings on the Life of Muḥammad: The ‘Urwa Corpus and the Non-Muslim Sources*.

for internal consistency and compatibility with common knowledge.⁷⁰ Blecher (2018) also argues that the tradition of hadith commentary demonstrates cumulative critical engagement across millennia that mutually improves.⁷¹

Ironically, criticism of “dependence on teachers” itself is insufficiently grounded from Orientalist scholars such as Goldziher and Schacht without critical evaluation, which actually serves as a direct example of the “intellectual dependence” they accuse Islamic boarding schools of.⁷² They adopt Orientalist skepticism about the authenticity of hadith without reading contemporary research by Schoeler, Brown, and Görke, which has repeatedly revised classical Orientalist views. This is a manifestation of what Hallaq calls internalized Orientalism.

The second very important dimension is what can be called the textualization fallacy (the illusion that meaning can be reduced entirely to text without personal mediation). Michael Polanyi's framework on tacit knowledge provides insight. Much knowledge, especially skills and practical wisdom, has a tacit dimension that cannot be perfectly textualized.⁷³ In the context of Islamic science, this tacit dimension is very rich, ranging from tajwid, which cannot be learned solely from written descriptions of *makhārij al-burūf* (articulation of letters) (one must hear and practice with a good teacher), to the *ijazah* Al-Qur'an, which requires recitation to a teacher with a sanad aside memorization.⁷⁴ Fiqh also has a tacit dimension that Ibn Khaldūn identified as *shinā'ah*, knowing the how of deriving laws rather than just the what, an intuitive method that develops through immersion in tradition. Imam Al-Ghazālī and al-Baghdadi again conveyed that teachers transmit a way of being in addition to content, a dimension that cannot be learned through books without *ṣuḥbah* with a teacher.⁷⁵ This kind of pedagogical method emphasized spiritual transmission (*tarbiyah ruḥiyyah*) that heavily rooted in Sufi tradition to construct a disciple's adab and reforming one's ethical values, in concern that both scholars are considered authoritative in said tradition, which, often neglected within this contemporary society.⁷⁶

⁷⁰ Brown, “How We Know Early Hadith Critics Did Matn Criticism and Why It's So Hard to Find.”

⁷¹ Joel Blecher, *Said the Prophet of God: Hadith Commentary across a Millennium* (University of California Press, 2018).

⁷² Dzakhirul, “10 Kritik Pedas Guru Gembul Untuk Pesantren: Sudah Saatnya Berbenah”; E W Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (Knopf, 1993); Hallaq, *Restating Orientalism: A Critique of Modern Knowledge*; Abdul Qudus Al Faruq, Muhammad Azhar Fuadi, and Mubarak Mubarak, “Pengaruh Historisitas Terhadap Perbedaan Kajian Al-Qur'an Barat Dan Timur,” *PUTIH: Jurnal Pengetahuan Tentang Ilmu Dan Hikmah* 9, no. 2 (September 22, 2024): 39–60, <https://doi.org/10.51498/jq6e2t32>.

⁷³ Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*; Zigler, “Tacit Knowledge and Spiritual Pedagogy”; Baumgartner and Grundschober, “Is Tacit Knowledge Communicable?”

⁷⁴ Bin Mohamad, Bin Shamsul Kamar, and Bin Saad, “KEPENTINGAN SANAD DALAM MENJAGA KEASLIAN AL-QURAN.”

⁷⁵ Al-Khathib al-Baghdādi, *Al-Kifāyah Fi 'Ilm Al-Riwāyah*; Al-Ghazālī, *Ihya 'Ulm Ad-Din*.

⁷⁶ Emad Hamdeh, “Shaykh Google as Ḥāfiẓ Al-‘Aṣr,” *American Journal of Islam and Society* 37, no. 1–2 (May 15, 2020): 67–102, [https://doi.org/10.51498/putih.2025.10\(1\).73-92.v37i1-](https://doi.org/10.35632/ajis.Auliya; Adiba Rahma Firdasari and M. Yunus Abu Bakar, “Pendidikan Islam Perspektif Al-Ghazali: Integrasi Nilai-Nilai Spiritual Dan Akhlak Dalam Pembelajaran,” PUTIH: Jurnal Pengetahuan Tentang Ilmu Dan Hikmah 10, no. 1 (April 8, 2025): 73–92, <a href=)

Therefore, reading books/texts alone is not enough to answer what is needed in the production of *fatwas*.

Clearly, Polanyi's tacit knowledge agrees with the transmission of knowledge that upholds personal relationships and “blending” in tradition. Lave dan Wenger situated learning theory regarding direct participation in learning communities reflects what happens in Islamic boarding schools when students are gradually given greater responsibility, from being mere observers to participants and eventually teachers.⁷⁷ Dreyfus' analysis of expertise is also in line with Al-Zarnuji's *Thul al-zaman*, which states that the journey from beginner to expert requires phronesis (practical wisdom) that grows through experience and guidance, and cannot be skipped by simply reading texts.⁷⁸ Ware writes that in the West African Islamic educational tradition, the ideal teacher is a “walking Qur'an,” a person who lives the Qur'an in every aspect of life, and transmission occurs through holistic imitation of the teacher's way of being.⁷⁹ Indonesian Islamic boarding schools, where students learn by observing how the Santri lives, interacts, and deals with various situations.⁸⁰

The criticism of “going directly to the Qur'an/hadith without a teacher” advocated by liberal Muslims thus contains a textualization fallacy that assumes the text interprets itself, even though Gadamer has shown that this is unreasonable, because the text always requires an interpreter with his or her pre-understanding. The result of this bias is the proliferation of arbitrary interpretations, cherry-picking verses without understanding the context and rules of interpretation, and extremist interpretations that are not grounded in scholarly tradition. The emergence of extremist groups such as ISIS and Al-Qaeda is partly the result of uncontrolled “textualism”; they read the Qur'an and hadith without utilizing 14 centuries of scholarly tradition

2.851; Farhad Muhammad, Amir Maliki Abitolkha, and Limas Dodi, “Dimensions of Sufism Within The Islamic Religious Education Curriculum in Higher Education,” *Nazḥruna: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 7, no. 1 (February 22, 2024): 40–58, <https://doi.org/10.31538/nzh.v7i1.4525>.

⁷⁷ Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511815355>.

⁷⁸ Lucinda J Lyon, “Development of Teaching Expertise Viewed through the Dreyfus Model of Skill Acquisition,” *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, September 15, 2014, 88–105, <https://doi.org/10.14434/josotl.v15i1.12866>; Al-Zarnuji, *Ta'lim Muta'allim (Akhlaq Santri)*.

⁷⁹ Ware, *The Walking Qur'an: Islamic Education, Embodied Knowledge, and History in West Africa*.

⁸⁰ Zainal Arifin, “KEPEMIMPINAN KIAI DALAM IDEOLOGISASI PEMIKIRAN SANTRI DI PESANTREN-PESANTREN SALAFIYAH MLANGI YOGYAKARTA,” *INFERENSI: Jurnal Penelitian Sosial Keagamaan* 9, no. 2 (December 1, 2015): 351–72, <https://doi.org/10.18326/INFSL3.V9I2.351-372>; A Khumaedi Ja'far, “GOOD CORPORATE GOVERNANCE PADA LEMBAGA PENDIDIKAN PESANTREN: STUDI PADA PONDOK PESANTREN UNIVERSITAS ISLAM INDONESIA,” *Akademika: Jurnal Pemikiran Islam* 23, no. 1 (September 19, 2018): 197–216, <https://doi.org/10.32332/AKADEMIKA.V23I1.1216>; Zihniatul Ulya, Mujahidin Abubakar, and Lalu Diraja Hidayatullah, “Peran Pondok Pesantren Dalam Mengentaskan Kenakalan Santri,” *PUTIH: Jurnal Pengetahuan Tentang Ilmu Dan Hikmah* 9, no. 2 (September 15, 2024): 77–98, <https://doi.org/10.51498/mtqswa44>.

that has developed hermeneutical principles as a means of avoiding naive literalism.⁸¹ Many misinterpretations of hadith arise from reading without *isnad* consciousness. Both radical modernism and radical traditionalism need to be controlled through traditions that are accommodative to historical developments.

As for the last argument, debunking the myth of autonomous reason. No thinker is truly “autonomous” in the sense of being completely free from tradition, community, or prejudice. Gadamer, MacIntyre, Kuhn, all show that all understanding departs from context. What distinguishes them is not the presence or absence of tradition. What distinguishes them all is conscious dependence on the unconscious. Pesantren teach this awareness through tradition. Santri know that they are learning from teachers who learned from previous teachers in this *muttasil sanad*, which subdues intellectuality and raises awareness of historically effected consciousness. Conversely, liberal critics claim autonomy while unconsciously being limited, epistemologically speaking, by Western paradigms, demonstrating a reductionistic reading that they accuse pesantren of lacking. What is needed is not autonomy from tradition (which is clearly impossible). It is critical interaction with tradition that is conscious, reflective, and competent that enables internal criticism without falling into complete rejection or alienation.

Conslusion

An epistemological analysis of the pesantren tradition through Gadamer's hermeneutics and Lakatos' research program methodology reveals that the Santri-Santri tradition, often criticized as "intellectual dependence," actually represents a sophisticated epistemological system anticipating modern advances. The practices of *muḥākaraḥ*, *munadẓaraḥ*, *muthabarab*, and *baḥsul masail* instantiate Gadamerian fusion of horizons, while the sanad-ijazah system materializes awareness of historical effects of tradition across fourteen centuries. The pesantren tradition demonstrates characteristics of a progressive research program with a clear hard core in sanad-ijazah principles and a flexible protective belt of evolving methodology, contrasting with liberal Muslim criticism's lack of concrete alternatives. Furthermore, the oral transmission system functions as a quality control mechanism superior in certain respects to modern academic peer review, and Polanyi's concept of tacit knowledge explains why personal transmission through shuhbah remains essential for dimensions of knowledge that cannot be fully textualized. This article further contributes to tasawuf studies by demonstrating that the endurance of pesantren is rooted in a Sufi epistemology that unites knowledge, character, and spiritual refinement. The

⁸¹ Scott Gibbs, “Islam and Islamic Extremism: An Existential Analysis,” *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 45, no. 2 (2005): 156–203, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022167805274728>; Mohammad Hashim Kamali, “Extremism , Terrorism and Islam : Historical and Contemporary Perspectives,” *Islam and Civilisational Renewal* 6, no. 2 (January 1, 2015): 148–65, <https://doi.org/10.12816/0019163>.

teacher-student transmission system should be seen as a process of ethical and spiritual formation through adab, companionship, and purification of the self, instead a reductionist lens that views it as merely an intellectual certification thereby sustaining the living authority of Islamic tradition across generations. What is needed is not the "modernization" of pesantren epistemology toward a liberal model, but rather epistemological justice that recognizes the complexity and advantages of dual epistemology while remaining open to informed criticism.

This study operates within the constraints of philosophical analysis that, while rigorous, cannot fully resolve the tension between traditional and modern epistemologies or account for the significant variations in pesantren practice across Indonesia. The research necessarily privileges theoretical frameworks from Western philosophy and contemporary learning theory to validate pesantren epistemology, which itself reflects certain paradigmatic assumptions. Additionally, the analysis does not comprehensively address instances where pesantren institutions have genuinely failed their educational mission or cases where abuses of authority have occurred, focusing instead on the epistemological structure rather than all empirical manifestations of the tradition.

Akhirul kalam, For Islamic boarding schools, these findings provide conceptual language to articulate their epistemology while maintaining the hard core of sanad-ijazah principles and innovating through curriculum renewal and internal critical traditions. For critics and reformists, this study invites deep engagement with pesantren realities rather than caricatures, and reflection on whether their assumptions reflect Western paradigms adopted uncritically. For policymakers, the findings indicate the need for regulations respecting epistemic diversity, facilitating dialogue between traditional and moderate scholars, supporting hybrid pedagogical models, and maintaining firm action against abuse while allowing pesantren to preserve their epistemological identity. The productive path forward is neither defensive nor rejective, but rooted in tradition while enriched by modern theory, devoted to truth from all sources, capable of internal criticism while maintaining integrity: an approach necessary for developing an Indonesian Islamic education system truly transformative for the twenty-first century. *Wa Allahu a'lam bi al-shawab*

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