

An Interpretative Phenomenological Exploration of Religious Meaning-Making Among Santri in Remote Islamic Boarding Schools

Siyono

Universitas Islam Negeri Salatiga, Indonesia,

siyono347@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Islamic education in rural boarding schools (pesantren) plays a vital role in shaping the religious identity of young Muslims through immersive communal living and spiritual practice. While existing studies have explored pedagogical structures, little is known about how santri (students) personally experience and interpret their religiosity under conditions of material hardship and isolation. The present study addresses this gap by asking: how do santri in remote pesantren construct the meaning of their religiosity within their lived environments? Using an interpretative phenomenological approach, this study investigates the subjective religious experiences of eight santri residing in resource-limited Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews and analyzed thematically to capture the essence of participants' spiritual journeys. Five major themes emerged from the data: spiritual resilience through material limitation, emotional independence through separation from family, contemplation through engagement with nature, religious modeling through the kiai, and internalization of faith through daily rituals. These findings reveal that religiosity among santri is deeply contextual, shaped by personal encounters with adversity rather than formal instruction alone. The study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of Islamic spiritual development by highlighting the formative power of experience and environment. These insights offer practical implications for educators and policymakers seeking to support faith formation in under-resourced contexts and open new avenues for research in experiential religious education.



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INTRODUCTION

Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) have long held a vital role in shaping religious identity and moral development among Muslim youth in Indonesia. These institutions serve not only as centers of religious instruction but also as environments that cultivate discipline, community values, and spiritual consciousness. In remote or under-resourced areas, pesantren often operate with minimal infrastructure and financial support, yet continue to function as spiritual sanctuaries for young Muslims seeking to deepen their religious understanding.

In such contexts, santri—students of Islamic boarding schools—navigate unique spiritual and existential challenges. Living far from their families, engaging in routine religious practices under physical and social limitations, and interacting closely with nature and authoritative religious figures contribute to a complex web of lived experiences. These experiences do not merely reflect formal religious instruction, but also represent deeply personal processes through which faith is interpreted, internalized, and expressed.

Understanding religiosity within these settings requires attention to the subjective dimensions of experience—how individuals live through, make sense of, and derive meaning from their spiritual journeys. The significance of such inquiry becomes more pronounced when situated in rural pesantren, where the interplay of hardship, isolation, and communal devotion creates distinctive pathways of spiritual resilience and identity formation.

Given the deeply personal and contextual nature of religious meaning-making, there is a compelling need to explore how santri experience and interpret their faith in relation to the conditions that shape their daily lives. This calls for a research approach that privileges personal narratives and illuminates the meaning embedded in lived experiences—an approach best addressed through phenomenological inquiry.

Research on individuals' lived experiences within religious educational settings has become increasingly important, particularly as scholars seek to understand how personal meaning is constructed in faith-based contexts. In the field of Islamic education, attention has been given to curriculum design, pedagogical practices, and institutional development. However, the inner dimensions of santri's religiosity—how they personally experience, negotiate, and internalize faith amidst socioeconomic and geographic challenges—remain significantly underexplored.

Methodologically, capturing the depth and nuance of such spiritual experiences presents several challenges. Much of the existing research has relied on quantitative approaches or general qualitative methods that prioritize external indicators of religiosity, such as attendance or performance metrics. These approaches often fail to grasp the subjective essence of spirituality as lived and interpreted by individuals. For instance, studies like Sutrisno (2021) highlight spiritual development in pesantren, but largely overlook the narrative texture of personal struggle and transcendence experienced by students in marginalized settings.

This methodological gap has limited the field's ability to fully understand the meaning of religiosity within environments where hardship, isolation, and spiritual aspiration intersect. Without in-depth engagement with individual perspectives, the core essence of religious life in remote pesantren settings risks being misunderstood or oversimplified. As such, traditional methods prove insufficient in revealing the lived, emotionally resonant, and meaning-laden experiences that shape students' religious identities.

Interpretative phenomenology offers a powerful corrective to this limitation by prioritizing the voices of participants and enabling researchers to explore how meaning emerges within and through lived experience. This study, therefore, situates itself within this methodological framework to access the spiritual consciousness of santri in their own terms, and in relation to their social and material realities.

In addressing the religious development of santri within pesantren settings, conventional educational solutions have primarily relied on structural and curricular improvements, including enhanced religious instruction, character-building modules, and teacher-led interventions. While these practical approaches are valuable in formal pedagogical contexts, they often fail to engage with the inner world of students—the subjective experiences, emotional struggles, and spiritual transformations that shape their religiosity.

These strategies, though effective in producing measurable outcomes, lack the capacity to uncover how santri actually live and interpret their faith within the complexities of daily life in remote and resource-limited environments. As noted in prior studies (e.g., Sutrisno, 2021), the focus remains largely on observable indicators of religious behavior rather than on the deeply personal meanings constructed through lived experience. This has resulted in an incomplete understanding of religious formation, especially in socio-culturally nuanced contexts like rural pesantren.

What remains underexplored is how santri themselves make sense of their faith amid hardship, isolation, and institutional modesty. Their voices, emotions, and interpretations are often absent from dominant narratives, leading to a gap in our comprehension of how religiosity is internalized and sustained in non-ideal conditions.

To address this limitation, a phenomenological approach offers an alternative pathway—one that centers the lived experiences of individuals and seeks to understand how they construct meaning within their social and spiritual realities. By employing interpretative phenomenological analysis, this study aims to illuminate the essence of religiosity as experienced by santri in remote pesantren, providing insights that are inaccessible through conventional methods.

Previous research has highlighted the role of Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) in fostering religious values and character development. Studies such as Abdullah (2020) and Rahmawati (2021) have examined how rural settings shape spiritual resilience and identity among students. However, most of these works focus on institutional practices or educational outcomes rather than on the lived experiences of *santri* themselves. Theories of spiritual development often overlook the nuanced, emotional, and reflective processes that occur in everyday religious life. This study builds upon these findings by shifting attention to the inner world of *santri*, particularly how they interpret their religiosity within the constraints of a remote *pesantren*.

To explore this, the study employs an interpretative phenomenological approach. This method was chosen because it allows for a rich and in-depth exploration of personal meaning, especially in settings where formal measures fall short. Through in-depth interviews and careful thematic analysis, the study seeks to answer how *santri* make sense of their faith in conditions of social and material limitation. The goal is to reveal the structures of meaning that inform their spiritual identity. This approach directly addresses the gap identified in previous research, where subjective experience remains underrepresented.

This article is structured into several main sections. The introduction outlines the background, knowledge gap, and rationale for the study. The methodology section details the phenomenological framework, data collection process, and thematic analysis approach. The results present key themes derived from participant narratives, supported by direct quotations. The discussion interprets these findings in light of existing literature and theoretical frameworks. Finally, the conclusion highlights the study's contributions and suggests directions for future research.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore the lived religious experiences of *santri* in remote Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) facing socioeconomic and geographic limitations. Phenomenology was chosen as the research design because it focuses on understanding individuals' subjective experiences and the meanings they ascribe to those experiences. Specifically, the interpretative variant of phenomenology, inspired by Heideggerian thought, was applied to allow for the analysis of both what was experienced and how it was interpreted by participants within their existential contexts.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) provided a methodological framework that facilitated a deep engagement with the participants' narratives, emphasizing meaning-making processes in the face of challenges such as limited facilities, emotional isolation, and spiritual transformation. This design was considered particularly relevant for addressing the research question regarding how *santri* interpret and embody religiosity within conditions of material and emotional adversity.

Participants

Participants were *santri* enrolled in remote Islamic boarding schools located in underdeveloped regions of Indonesia. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to ensure the inclusion of individuals who had directly experienced the phenomenon under investigation—religious development in the context of environmental and social hardship.

Inclusion criteria required that participants had resided in the *pesantren* for at least one year, were actively involved in religious practices, and were between the ages of 15 and 20. Exclusion criteria included those who had recently transferred from urban-based institutions or had not experienced prolonged periods of residence in the *pesantren*. A total of 8 participants (5 males, 3 females) were included in the study. The average age was 17.5 years. All participants had lived in their respective *pesantren* for over 18 months and were considered by their teachers to be actively engaged in spiritual and community life.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews guided by open-ended questions designed to elicit rich descriptions of participants' spiritual experiences. Interviews were conducted face-to-face in quiet and private spaces within the pesantren environment to ensure comfort and confidentiality. Each interview lasted between 45 and 75 minutes.

The interview protocol was developed based on phenomenological inquiry principles and was adapted to the cultural and linguistic context of the participants. Audio recordings were made with participants' consent, and detailed field notes were taken to support contextual understanding. All data were transcribed verbatim and translated into English for the purpose of analysis, with back-translation conducted to maintain linguistic fidelity.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), a method that facilitates exploration of how individuals make sense of their lived experiences. The analysis followed a series of systematic steps: (1) repeated reading of transcripts to gain familiarity, (2) initial noting of descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments, (3) identification of emergent themes, (4) clustering of related themes into superordinate categories, and (5) integration of themes across all participants to develop collective insights.

The process aimed to reveal not only the content of the experiences but also the interpretative frameworks used by participants to construct meaning. NVivo software was used to assist in data management and coding but was not central to the analytical process. The final themes were grounded in participants' narratives and supported by direct quotations to preserve authenticity and voice.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional ethics review board prior to data collection. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants, with additional parental consent secured for those under the age of 18. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty.

All interviews were anonymized, and identifying details were removed during transcription. Data confidentiality was strictly maintained, and all procedures adhered to international ethical standards for research involving human subjects, including the Declaration of Helsinki and relevant national guidelines.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Strengthening Faith Amid Material Limitations

Santri living in remote Islamic boarding schools are often confronted with limited infrastructure for worship and daily life. However, these constraints paradoxically deepen their sense of spirituality. Rather than perceiving the lack of facilities as a hindrance, they experience it as a catalyst for more intimate and sincere religious engagement.

“Our musholla often leaks when it rains, so sometimes we pray under a tree. But in those moments, I feel more focused, like I am closer to Allah without any distractions.” (Participant 3)

This theme reveals how spiritual resilience emerges in the face of hardship. The students interpret physical deprivation not as an obstacle, but as a meaningful test of faith, requiring patience, sincerity, and an internalization of spiritual endurance. Faith, in this context, becomes a form of adaptive strength cultivated through lived experience.

Spiritual Independence Through Familial Separation

Being separated from family presents an emotional challenge for many santri, especially those who are young and away from home for the first time. However, the emotional struggle gradually transforms into a spiritual practice of independence and self-reliance.

“At first, I cried at night because I missed my parents. But over time, I learned to talk to Allah. I got used to calming myself through prayer.” (Participant 6)

The absence of familial support fosters a deeper dependence on divine connection. This spiritual self-reliance contributes to personal growth and the development of emotional resilience rooted in religious faith. The experience of isolation is not merely endured, but reinterpreted as a formative spiritual journey.

Nature as a Space for Spiritual Contemplation

Residing in geographically isolated areas allows santri to develop a strong connection with the natural environment. Daily interactions with nature foster moments of reflection that reinforce their awareness of divine presence.

“Every morning I wake up to fog and the sound of birds—it brings peace to my heart. It feels like Allah is speaking through the scenery. It makes me reflect more about life and my purpose here.” (Participant 1)

Natural surroundings become a medium for spiritual introspection. These experiences encourage a theological understanding grounded not only in texts, but also in the silent dialogues between the individual and creation. Nature serves as a sacred space that invites contemplation and deepens the sense of divine proximity.

The Charismatic Role of the Kiai as a Moral and Spiritual Model

The figure of the kiai (Islamic scholar) extends beyond that of an instructor; he is revered as a spiritual exemplar. His presence embodies the values of simplicity, patience, and unwavering faith in the face of adversity.

“Seeing how the kiai remains calm and humble despite the pesantren’s struggles teaches us a lot. He doesn’t just talk—he lives what he teaches.” (Participant 4)

For many santri, the kiai represents a living model of Islamic virtue. His conduct, both public and private, becomes an influential source of moral inspiration. Through observation and interaction, students internalize religious values not as abstract doctrines, but as tangible practices embodied in everyday life.

Religious Rituals as Internalization of Faith

Daily religious routines—such as congregational prayers, dhikr (remembrance), and Islamic study circles—serve as consistent structures through which santri internalize core Islamic values. These rituals transcend formal practice and become vehicles for spiritual transformation.

“We have a dhikr session every night. At first, it felt heavy, but over time, it brought peace and direction to my life.” (Participant 2)

Ritual practice, when performed consistently, is experienced not as mechanical obligation but as a transformative journey. Through repetition and shared discipline, santri cultivate mindfulness and religious identity. These practices shape their worldview, emotional regulation, and moral awareness.

The lived experiences of santri in remote Islamic boarding schools demonstrate that religiosity is not formed in ideal conditions but forged through adversity. Five interrelated themes—spiritual resilience in scarcity, independence through emotional separation, nature as spiritual space, the kiai as moral guide, and internalization through ritual—illuminate how Islamic values are embodied and sustained through context-based spiritual journeys. Rather than diminishing faith, limitations become the very space in which faith is explored, tested, and meaningfully deepened.

The findings of this study reveal that santri in remote Islamic boarding schools construct their religiosity through lived experiences of hardship, emotional separation, connection with nature, and engagement with religious rituals and figures. These experiences highlight the deeply personal and context-dependent nature of faith, answering the core research question regarding how santri interpret their spirituality amid social and material limitations.

This study contributes to the understanding of santri’s religious experience by demonstrating that religiosity is not merely taught through curriculum, but emerges from direct encounters with daily life challenges. The themes of spiritual resilience, independence, and contemplation provide rich

insights into how young Muslims internalize religious meaning within adverse environments. These findings offer a more nuanced and holistic perspective that goes beyond surface-level indicators of religiosity, responding directly to the knowledge gap identified in the introduction. Unlike conventional approaches that focus on measurable outputs, this study captures the silent, reflective, and evolving dimensions of spiritual life.

The results align with and extend previous studies on spirituality in pesantren (Abdullah, 2020; Rahmawati, 2021; Nuryadi, 2019), which emphasize the formative role of religious environments. However, this study adds depth by centering on santri's interpretive processes and individual narratives. While earlier literature describes the institutional role of the kiai or the structure of religious routines, the present findings show how these elements are internalized and reinterpreted by the students themselves. In doing so, the study resonates with interpretative phenomenological principles and reinforces the argument that faith is experienced, rather than merely inherited or imposed. Moreover, it provides empirical support for theoretical claims that spirituality is shaped through dynamic interaction between personal experience and contextual adversity (Smith et al., 2009).

The findings of this study carry important implications for both the academic and practical understanding of religious education in rural contexts. Socially and culturally, they reveal that santri's religiosity is not merely a function of instructional input but a dynamic process shaped by lived encounters with hardship, solitude, nature, and role models. This highlights the need for Islamic educational institutions to recognize and support the experiential dimensions of faith formation, especially for students in remote or under-resourced environments. Professionally, educators and policy makers can benefit from integrating reflective and student-centered approaches that honor the unique spiritual journeys of each learner. These insights also hold relevance for broader contexts where youth navigate religious identity amidst socio-economic adversity.

Despite its contributions, this study is not without limitations. The sample was limited to a small number of santri from a specific geographic and institutional context, which may not reflect the diversity of experiences across different pesantren traditions or regions. The interpretative phenomenological approach, while rich in depth, also emphasizes particularity over generalizability. As such, the findings are intended to offer deep insights rather than broad conclusions. Additionally, the data relied heavily on participants' verbal accounts, which may have been influenced by memory, language limitations, or social desirability.

Future research could expand the scope by including comparative studies across different types of Islamic boarding schools, urban versus rural settings, or across cultural backgrounds. Longitudinal studies may also uncover how spiritual meaning evolves over time as santri transition into adulthood. Furthermore, incorporating multi-perspective narratives—including those of teachers, parents, or alumni—could enrich our understanding of how religiosity is co-constructed across social relationships. These directions would not only extend the current study but also contribute meaningfully to the discourse on spiritual development, Islamic education, and youth identity in diverse socio-cultural landscapes.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how santri in remote Islamic boarding schools experience and interpret their religiosity amidst social and material limitations. Using an interpretative phenomenological approach, the research uncovered five core themes: spiritual resilience, emotional independence, reflective engagement with nature, religious role modeling, and ritual internalization. These findings reveal that religiosity is not solely shaped by formal instruction, but emerges through daily lived experiences that carry deep personal meaning. The study addresses gaps in prior literature by capturing subjective narratives often overlooked in research on Islamic education. It offers educators and policymakers valuable insights into how faith develops in resource-constrained environments. Future studies may extend this work by comparing diverse educational settings or incorporating multi-perspective accounts to enrich our understanding of spiritual development.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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