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The Synergy of Islamic Education and Sufism in Fostering Religious Moderation and Preserving Local Culture to Achieve the Sustainable Development Goals: A Study at Pesantren Tebuireng

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Abstract

Objective: This study aims to examine the integration of religious moderation and local cultural preservation through the synergy of Islamic education and Sufi (tasawuf) values at Pesantren Tebuireng in supporting the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). **Theoretical framework:** The research is grounded in theories of religious moderation, Islamic education, Sufi spirituality, and cultural preservation, emphasizing the interconnectedness of spiritual development, social harmony, and local wisdom. **Literature review:** Previous studies have discussed religious moderation, pesantren education, and local cultural sustainability independently; however, limited research has comprehensively explored how tasawuf-based Islamic education simultaneously strengthens moderate religious attitudes and preserves local cultural traditions within a formal educational institution. **Method:** This study employs a qualitative approach using literature analysis, document review, in-depth interviews with pesantren leaders, educators, and students, as well as participant observations of educational activities and cultural practices. The collected data were analyzed through thematic analysis to identify patterns of value integration and educational implementation. **Results:** The findings reveal that integrating Sufi teachings into Islamic education effectively cultivates religious moderation by promoting tolerance, compassion, humility, and mutual respect while reinforcing the preservation of local cultural traditions through religious rituals, communal practices, and cultural appreciation. These educational practices strengthen students' spiritual character, social responsibility, and cultural resilience, contributing directly to SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions). **Implications:** The study provides a practical educational model for policymakers and Islamic educational institutions seeking to balance religious values with cultural sustainability and peaceful coexistence. **Novelty:** This research offers a comprehensive institutional model demonstrating how tasawuf-based Islamic education harmonizes religious moderation with local cultural preservation, presenting a replicable framework for strengthening spiritual character and cultural resilience in diverse educational contexts.

Keywords: religious moderation, islamic education, sufi values, local cultural preservation, sustainable development goals (sdgs).

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is widely recognized as one of the most culturally and religiously diverse countries in the world. With more than 87% of its population adhering to Islam and the presence of minority groups such as Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, and Confucians,

Indonesia upholds religious pluralism through constitutional guarantees and a long-standing tradition of interfaith harmony.[1] Indonesia's cultural richness—reflected in more than 700 ethnic groups, hundreds of regional languages, traditional arts, and local customs—serves as the foundation of social cohesion and embodies the national motto *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (Unity in Diversity). These diverse cultural expressions often function as instruments to promote tolerance, strengthen social bonds, and reinforce communal identity, demonstrating how local wisdom supports the values of diversity and inclusivity.[2] In this context, the preservation of local culture is not only an effort to safeguard ancestral heritage but also a social strategy that strengthens community resilience in the face of change and potential conflict. Thus, Indonesia's diversity emerges not merely as a demographic fact but as a form of social capital that actively shapes traditions of tolerance, inclusivity, and interreligious harmony.

Within this socio-cultural landscape, *pesantren*—traditional Islamic educational institutions—play a crucial role in shaping religious understanding, moral character, and the preservation of culture in Indonesian society.[3] *Pesantren* serve not only as centers for Islamic learning but also as institutions that socialize local customs, preserve traditional cultural practices, and instill a moderate religious attitude.[4] *Pesantren* leaders, such as *kiai*, hold significant influence in guiding students (*santri*) to internalize religious values, cultural traditions, and ethical conduct. In many *pesantren*, traditional arts, regional languages, and communal rituals are integrated into daily life, creating an educational environment that strengthens religious identity while preserving cultural continuity.[5] In this way, *pesantren* not only produce individuals knowledgeable in religious matters but also cultural actors capable of interpreting Islamic teachings contextually and appreciating local wisdom. This dual role positions *pesantren* as strategic institutions that maintain a balance between tradition and modernity while also strengthening social harmony within a pluralistic society.

Pesantren Tebuireng in Jombang, founded in 1899 by K.H. Hasyim Asy'ari, stands as a prominent example of how Islamic education, religious moderation, and local cultural traditions can be harmoniously integrated. Initially established in a village facing various social challenges, *Pesantren Tebuireng* quickly developed into a center of religious reform, moral development, and community revitalization.[6] Through pedagogical innovations—such as the transition from the *sorogan* method to the *madrasah* system—*Tebuireng* adapted to the needs of modern education without abandoning the classical Islamic scholarly tradition.[7] Historically, this *pesantren* has been known for promoting moderate Islam, fostering interreligious relations, and integrating Sufi values that emphasize spirituality, compassion, self-discipline, and tolerance.[8] It is this openness to renewal, combined with a commitment to tradition, that has enabled *Tebuireng* to maintain its relevance amid Indonesia's evolving social dynamics over time. Thus, the *pesantren* has become not only a reference point for moderate Islamic education but also a model of successful integration of spiritual values and local culture that continually strengthens the social cohesion of the community.

Islamic education at *Pesantren Tebuireng* is strengthened by the integration of Sufi teachings, which encourage students to cultivate spirituality, ethical behavior, and balance in religious practice.[9] Sufi values play an essential role in shaping students to develop an inclusive and tolerant understanding of Islam.[10] In the context of Indonesia's plural society, the integration of Islamic pedagogy and Sufism contributes significantly to fostering religious moderation, promoting peace, and preserving cultural heritage.[11] Sufi practices such as *dhikr*, meditation, compassion, and humility help build a spiritual foundation that supports harmony between religion and culture.[12] Thus, Sufism functions not only as a spiritual discipline but also as a pedagogical framework that shapes students' character, enabling them to respond to diversity wisely and humanely. This integration demonstrates how the inner dimension of Islam can

serve as a strategic social resource for maintaining cultural cohesion and reinforcing the values of moderation in communal life.

Local culture also plays a central role in fostering tolerance and unity within the pesantren environment.[13] Elements such as traditional arts, communal rituals, regional languages, and interfaith celebrations serve as cultural media that strengthen mutual respect and social cohesion.[14] At Pesantren Tebuireng, these forms of local wisdom are combined with Islamic teachings to create an environment where religious moderation grows naturally and cultural identity remains preserved. This synergy helps cultivate students who possess social awareness, cultural rootedness, and balanced religious expression.[15] Thus, local wisdom functions not merely as a complement to pesantren traditions but also as an educational instrument that refines attitudes, broadens empathy, and strengthens social bonds among students. Such integration of culture and religion affirms that the religious moderation cultivated within pesantren is firmly rooted in the local context, making it more relevant, sustainable, and effective in maintaining societal harmony.

This article aims to analyze how the integration of religious moderation and local cultural preservation—reinforced by Sufi values—shapes educational practices at Pesantren Tebuireng. It explores how Islamic education interacts with cultural traditions to produce a harmonious relationship between religion and local identity. The central hypothesis of this study is that the synergy among Islamic education, Sufism, and cultural heritage contributes to the development of a moderate religious understanding, the sustainability of local cultural values, and support for broader societal goals, including those outlined in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).[16] Through an examination of this integration, the present study provides insights into the ways in which Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) can function as a model for cultivating tolerance, sustaining cultural heritage, and promoting a holistic approach to Islamic education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on Islamic education, religious moderation, and local culture in Indonesia indicates that pesantren have long been recognized as strategic institutions for transmitting religious knowledge while simultaneously preserving cultural continuity.[17] Previous studies highlight how pesantren contribute to social cohesion, promote tolerance, and preserve local traditions through a combination of religious instruction, community engagement, and cultural practices embedded in daily life—such as the use of local languages, traditional arts, and communal rituals.[18] Research on Pesantren Tebuireng specifically underscores its historical role as an institution that is both reformist and traditional, striving to preserve classical Islamic scholarship while responding to the demands of modern education and broader social realities, particularly in promoting inclusive and moderate Islamic values. At the same time, broader studies on Indonesian Islam highlight the importance of local wisdom and cultural practices in upholding *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* and preventing the emergence of exclusive or radical religious interpretations.[19] Thus, pesantren—including Tebuireng—function as key institutions that bridge religious traditions and local cultures, thereby fostering generations of Muslims who are both devout and responsive to Indonesia's socio-cultural diversity.

In terms of theoretical foundations and key concepts, several analytical frameworks are highly relevant to this study. The Theory of Religious Moderation focuses on balanced expressions of religiosity, avoiding extremism, and supporting tolerance, dialogue, and respect for diversity. The Theory of Cultural Preservation emphasizes the importance of safeguarding local heritage—such as language, rituals, and arts—as a means of strengthening identity and social resilience.[20] Sufism is regarded not only as a spiritual tradition within Islam but also as a pedagogical source that cultivates

purification of the soul, compassion, humility, and love, thereby reinforcing moderate and humanistic religious attitudes. A social constructivist perspective, including Foucault's concepts of discourse, power, and knowledge, provides analytical tools to understand how religious and cultural meanings are constructed, negotiated, and internalized within institutional environments such as pesantren.[21] Through discursive practices—such as sermons, curricula, rituals, and everyday interactions—students (santri) learn to interpret religion and culture in particular ways that may either support or challenge religious moderation and cultural preservation. Moreover, discussions on Education for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) highlight how education can promote peace, cultural diversity, and social sustainability, while also providing a broader global framework for understanding the role of pesantren.[22] Therefore, the integration of these theoretical frameworks enables a more comprehensive analysis of how pesantren serve as arenas for shaping adaptive and moderate religious and cultural identities that remain relevant to contemporary global challenges.

Despite the richness of existing scholarship, several gaps and debates remain within the literature. First, many studies on religious moderation and pesantren are normative or descriptive in nature, focusing on policy narratives or general claims about moderation. However, relatively few in-depth studies examine how moderation and cultural preservation are actually practiced and experienced at the micro level within a single pesantren.[23] Second, although studies on Pesantren Tebuireng have documented its historical development and inclusive orientation, there remains a limited amount of systematic analysis on how Sufi values, Islamic education, and local cultural practices are specifically integrated to shape students' everyday lived experiences and religious dispositions.[24] Third, the explicit connection between pesantren-based religious moderation, local cultural preservation, and the Sustainable Development Goals—particularly those related to quality education, peace, justice, and strong institutions—remains largely underexplored.[25] These three gaps indicate the need for research that not only describes moderation and cultural preservation as ideal concepts, but also traces how both are lived, negotiated, and reproduced in the daily practices of students. Such an approach would provide a deeper understanding of the internal dynamics of pesantren as complex spaces for the formation of religious and cultural identities.

There is also an ongoing debate regarding the role of Sufism in contemporary Islamic education: while many scholars view Sufism as an essential source for cultivating tolerance and inner ethical refinement, others question whether certain Sufi practices may lead to passive attitudes or reduced engagement in social transformation.[26] In addition, some critics argue that the modernization and formalization of pesantren curricula risk marginalizing local cultural traditions, whereas others contend that such reforms are necessary to ensure the continued relevance of pesantren. These gaps and tensions in the literature underscore the urgency of conducting an in-depth case study of Pesantren Tebuireng to analyze how Islamic education, Sufi values, and local cultural traditions are synergized in practice to cultivate religious moderation and cultural sustainability.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology of this study is designed to explore the integration of Islamic education, Sufism, religious moderation, and local cultural preservation at Pesantren Tebuireng. This research employs a qualitative approach by combining literature analysis and a case study method to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena under investigation.[27] The literature analysis focuses on Foucauldian theory within the context of Islamic education and Sufism,[28] while the case study method provides practical insights into how these theoretical concepts are applied within

the pesantren environment.[29] his dual-method approach ensures that both theoretical and empirical data are thoroughly analyzed in order to address the research questions.[30]

The sampling in this study employs a purposive technique, with Pesantren Tebuireng selected as the primary research site due to its reputation as a leading Islamic institution that effectively integrates religious moderation with the preservation of local culture. The participants in this study include educators, pesantren administrators, and other stakeholders who are directly involved in educational and cultural activities at Pesantren Tebuireng.[31] The sampling process was designed to capture diverse perspectives on how the integration of religion and local culture is realized in practice, thereby ensuring that the findings reflect the complex dynamics present within the pesantren environment.[32]

Data collection was conducted through two primary approaches: textual analysis and a case study. The textual analysis involved examining books, scholarly articles, and relevant documents that discuss Islamic education, Sufism, and cultural preservation. This method helped establish the theoretical foundation and identify the key concepts relevant to the study. The case study component included in-depth interviews with teachers and pesantren administrators, as well as direct observations of educational, cultural, and religious practices at Pesantren Tebuireng. Together, these methods generated rich qualitative data and provided insights into the practical application of the theoretical concepts identified through the literature analysis.[33]

Data analysis was conducted using qualitative techniques to identify patterns, tendencies, and relationships within the data. Textual analysis was employed to interpret the key concepts emerging from the literature, while qualitative data from the case study were analyzed to understand the experiences and perceptions of the participants.[34] Ethical considerations were maintained throughout the research process, including obtaining informed consent from participants and ensuring the confidentiality of data. The limitations of this study include its focus on a single research site, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. Nevertheless, the detailed and transparent methodological description provides a strong foundation for interpreting the research results and offers valuable insights that may be applied to similar contexts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study, derived from the literature analysis and the case study conducted at Pesantren Tebuireng, indicate the presence of a distinctive educational environment shaped by the integration of religious moderation and local cultural preservation.[35] This environment is the product of a strong foundation in Islamic education, combined with Sufi values and the incorporation of local cultural elements.[36] For instance, Pesantren Tebuireng not only provides religious instruction but also integrates local languages and cultural traditions into its everyday educational practices.[37] This approach enables the students (santri) to deepen their understanding of Islamic teachings while simultaneously maintaining and preserving their local cultural heritage.[38] The data indicate that this environment fosters religious moderation among the students while simultaneously reinforcing the importance of local cultural identity.

Building on these findings, the in-depth analysis reveals that the integration of religious moderation and local cultural preservation at Pesantren Tebuireng does not occur spontaneously, but is formed through a series of mutually reinforcing discursive and pedagogical processes. Islamic educational practices rooted in Sufism provide an ethical and spiritual framework that emphasizes values such as compassion, humility, and openness, thereby serving as the foundation through which students internalize moderate attitudes. At the same time, the incorporation of local cultural elements—

through regional languages, communal traditions, and distinctive rituals—functions not only as a symbol of identity but also as an instructional medium that facilitates contextualized interpretations of Islamic teachings.

This integration demonstrates how educational processes in the pesantren operate on two levels: first, shaping students' ways of thinking through discursive constructions that link Islam with local values; and second, shaping their ways of acting through everyday practices that reinforce moderation and cultural preservation. Consequently, the educational environment at Pesantren Tebuireng not only produces religiously committed and knowledgeable individuals, but also social actors capable of harmoniously negotiating tradition and modernity, strengthening social cohesion, and sustaining cultural heritage amid ongoing social change.

One notable practice observed at Pesantren Tebuireng is the organization of interfaith activities that foster an inclusive atmosphere, in which individuals from diverse religious backgrounds can gather and engage in discussions on community-related issues.[38] In addition, the integration of Sufi teachings—such as the values of love, compassion, and humility—further strengthens the spirit of tolerance and unity among the students.[39] Routine practices such as Sufi meditation and *dhikr* also play an important role in cultivating a deeper understanding of religion and cultural values.[40] These practices not only enrich the students' spiritual life but also contribute to a more moderate and inclusive understanding of Islam.

These findings indicate that interfaith practices, Sufi spiritual exercises, and the integration of Sufi values at Pesantren Tebuireng function as mechanisms for shaping moderate religious identities through simultaneous processes of internalization at the cognitive, emotional, and social levels. Interfaith activities, for instance, are not merely dialogue forums but discursive spaces where students learn to negotiate the meaning of tolerance through direct interaction with others. Such interactions strengthen their capacity to engage differences constructively while cultivating more inclusive social dispositions.

Conversely, *dhikr* practices and Sufi meditation cultivate inner discipline and reflective awareness that help students situate their spiritual experiences within the universal ethical framework of Islam, which emphasizes compassion and humility. The combination of these external social experiences and internal spiritual practices demonstrates that religious moderation in the pesantren is not constructed solely through doctrinal instruction, but through embodied experiences, emotional formation, and structured social relations. Thus, the integration of Sufi teachings and interfaith activities at Pesantren Tebuireng creates a model of Islamic education capable of balancing spirituality, intellectual development, and social sensitivity, thereby reinforcing the pesantren's role as a formative space for nurturing Indonesian Muslim identities that are peaceful and appreciative of diversity.

The discussion of the findings, framed through Foucault's theoretical perspective, highlights the significant role of discursive practices in shaping religious understanding and the preservation of local culture at Pesantren Tebuireng. The integration of Islamic education with Sufi teachings creates a discursive space in which religious discourse naturally incorporates local cultural values, which are subsequently reflected in religious practices. This supports Foucault's concept of the interrelationship between power, knowledge, and language in constructing social reality.[41] These findings indicate that such discursive practices promote a moderate understanding of religion, emphasizing universal values such as tolerance and respect for diversity, while simultaneously preserving local cultural roots.[42] This integration not only creates harmony within the pesantren environment but also contributes to the broader discourse on religious education and cultural preservation.

Further analysis reveals that the discursive practices at Pesantren Tebuireng operate through subtle processes that regulate what can be spoken, practiced, and understood as ‘truth’ in relation to religion and culture. Within a Foucauldian framework, the discursive space formed through the teaching of Sufism, religious rituals, and the use of local languages and cultural symbols functions as a *regime of truth* that shapes how students interpret their social reality. Through mechanisms of power that are productive rather than repressive, cultural values and moderation are encouraged to become part of the ‘legitimate knowledge’ within the pesantren context.

This process is evident in the gradual internalization by students of the interconnectedness between personal piety, respect for tradition, and openness to difference. Thus, the integration of Sufi teachings and local cultural practices not only reproduces established doctrines but also produces religious subjects who embody a moderate, pluralistic, and culturally grounded form of Islam. From this perspective, Pesantren Tebuireng is not merely a place of learning but an arena for the formation of subjects shaped by power–knowledge relations to respond to modernity and pluralism in ways that are harmonious, reflective, and contextually rooted.

Compared to previous studies, this research expands the understanding of how pesantren such as Tebuireng successfully integrate religious moderation with the preservation of local culture. While earlier studies have noted the efforts of pesantren in this regard, the present study offers a more in-depth analysis of how the specific integration of Sufi values enhances the harmony between religion and culture. These findings are consistent with similar research conducted in other Indonesian pesantren, reinforcing the relevance of this model in promoting a moderate understanding of Islam while simultaneously celebrating cultural diversity. The discussion also acknowledges the study’s limitations, such as its focus on a single pesantren, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. Future research may explore similar forms of integration in other cultural contexts to further broaden the understanding of these practices.

This study highlights the potential applicability of the integration model observed at Pesantren Tebuireng as an important reference for other Islamic educational institutions seeking to balance religious instruction with the preservation of local culture. By adopting similar practices, educational institutions can cultivate an inclusive learning environment that not only promotes religious moderation but also protects and celebrates diverse cultural values. This approach aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly in fostering tolerance, interfaith understanding, and cultural diversity, thereby contributing to harmony between religion and culture across various contexts.

An in-depth analysis of these implications suggests that the integration model practiced at Pesantren Tebuireng can serve as a strategic framework for Islamic educational institutions in formulating pedagogical approaches that are responsive to contemporary socio-cultural needs. The integration of religious education, Sufism, and local wisdom not only strengthens the cultural identity of the community but also creates learning mechanisms that cultivate cross-cultural competencies and broader social awareness. Within the context of the SDGs—particularly Goals 4.7 and 16.1—this approach helps institutionalize the values of peace, tolerance, and respect for diversity as integral components of the curriculum.

This implies that institutions adopting this model are not merely replicating cultural practices, but are developing a pedagogical framework that comprehensively connects spiritual, ethical, and cultural dimensions. Thus, the practices implemented at Pesantren Tebuireng have the potential to shift the paradigm of Islamic education from one that is primarily normative to a transformative model that shapes learners into agents of social change capable of maintaining religious–cultural harmony amid global dynamics.

Moreover, the synergy between Islamic education and Sufism at Pesantren Tebuireng provides an effective framework for achieving these goals. The integration of Sufi values into the curriculum has proven capable of fostering a balanced religious outlook while simultaneously strengthening the preservation of local traditions. The findings of this study offer valuable insights for the development of knowledge in the fields of Islamic education, religious moderation, and cultural preservation, highlighting how such a holistic approach can support broader sustainable development objectives, particularly in fostering harmonious and resilient communities.

Further analysis reveals that the success of the synergy between Islamic education and Sufism at Pesantren Tebuireng lies in its ability to integrate spiritual, intellectual, and cultural dimensions simultaneously, ensuring that the learning process is not only centered on the transfer of knowledge but also on the transformation of the learners themselves. Sufi values such as *mahabbah*, *tawadhu'*, *ikhlas*, and *tasamuh* function as ethical foundations that shape students' social sensitivity and cultural awareness, enabling them to interpret local traditions not as static inheritances, but as living sources of value that remain relevant to modern life. When these values are institutionalized through the curriculum, ritual practices, and everyday habitus, the pesantren creates a learning ecosystem that enables students to internalize religious moderation and cultural preservation as integral components of their religious identity. Thus, this synergy is not merely a pedagogical strategy, but a mechanism of social reproduction that produces religious subjects capable of contributing to social and cultural sustainability, while simultaneously reinforcing sustainable development goals through the formation of resilient communities capable of navigating social change.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study affirms that the integration of religious moderation and local cultural preservation at Pesantren Tebuireng has shaped a distinctive educational environment. This integration—achieved through the combination of a strong foundation in Islamic education, Sufi values, and local cultural elements—has produced a significant impact on the students by fostering a more moderate religious understanding. The emphasis on universal values such as tolerance, compassion, and appreciation of diversity, alongside the preservation of cultural traditions, customs, language, arts, and local practices, demonstrates the effectiveness of this approach within the framework of Islamic education. This study also illustrates the important role of discursive practices in shaping religious understanding and the preservation of local culture at Pesantren Tebuireng, consistent with Foucault's concept of the interrelation between power, knowledge, and language in constructing social reality and individual thought. The study not only reinforces previous findings but also expands the understanding of how religious moderation and cultural preservation can be effectively integrated within the pesantren context, particularly at Pesantren Tebuireng. The findings of this study offer a potential model for other pesantren and Islamic educational institutions seeking to harmonize religious teachings with the preservation of local culture. By integrating Sufi teachings into Islamic education, such institutions can cultivate an inclusive environment that encourages moderate religious perspectives while simultaneously safeguarding and enriching distinctive cultural traditions. This synergy not only enhances the educational experience but also supports broader social goals, such as fostering tolerance, promoting interfaith understanding, and embracing cultural diversity—all of which contribute to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The approach implemented at Pesantren Tebuireng demonstrates how the integration of Islamic education and Sufism can effectively balance religious and cultural values. By adopting similar practices, other institutions can play an important role in strengthening harmony between religion and culture, thereby contributing to a more tolerant and culturally diverse society. This model aligns with the SDGs as it promotes sustainable and inclusive education that respects spiritual and cultural dimensions, while also supporting the development of harmonious and resilient communities.

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Author Contribution

All authors contributed equally to the writing of this article. Their contributions include roles as lead author, co-authors, funders, article translators, and final editors. All authors have read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

All authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest related to the research and writing of this article.

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