

THE DIALECTICS OF TRADITION AND TRANSFORMATION IN KITÂB TURÂTS LEARNING: A Case Study of Pondok Pesantren Bina Ulama, North Sumatra

Heri Munte

STAI Raudhatul Akmal Deli Serdang, Sumatera Utara
Jl. Nusa Indah Gg. Melati Kabupaten Deli Serdang, Sumatera Utara 20372, Indonesia
e-mail: herimunte@staira.ac.id

Abd. Mukti, Saukani & Katimin

Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara
Jl. William Iskandar Ps. V, Medan Estate, Sumatera Utara 20371, Indonesia
e-mail: abdmukti@uinsu.ac.id; saukani@uinsu.ac.id; katimin@uinsu.ac.id

Dedi Prima Ritonga

Universitas Insaniah Sumatera Utara
Jl. Deblod Sundoro No. 9 LK IV, Kota Tebing Tinggi, Sumatera Utara 20633, Indonesia
e-mail: dediprimaritonga@gmail.com

Abstract: This study examines the dialectics of tradition and transformation in the learning methods of *kitâb turâts* (classical Islamic texts) at Pondok Pesantren Bina Ulama Kisaran, North Sumatra, within the perspective of Islamic educational history. Employing a qualitative approach with a case study design, data were collected through document analysis, in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and focus group discussions. The findings reveal that the pesantren maintains classical/traditional methods such as *halaqah*—direct continuations of classical Islamic pedagogical traditions—while simultaneously undergoing structural transformations in response to national education policies (the SKB 3 Ministers curriculum), social dynamics (parents' demands), and technological modernization. Continuity is preserved through the principle of *al-muḥâfazhah 'alâ al-qadîm al-shâlih* (preserving the good old traditions), whereas change is driven by accreditation requirements, inter-pesantren competition, and the development of flagship programs after 2012. This study introduces the concept of “selective accommodation” as the pesantren’s strategy for balancing traditional heritage and the demands of modernity. The success of Bina Ulama—evidenced by its alums’s admission to public universities and state Islamic universities—demonstrates that continuity and transformation can operate synergistically without eroding institutional identity.

Keywords: Dialectics, tradition, transformation, *kitâb turâts*, Bina Ulama

Corresponding author	Heri Munte			
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Introduction

Pondok pesantren represent the oldest Islamic educational institutions in the Indonesian archipelago, with a documented history of resilience and adaptation spanning over five centuries.¹ *Pesantren* have developed over hundreds of years, undergoing dynamics from traditional to modern forms, while successfully creating a distinctive lifeworld separate from general customs. One of the most fundamental characteristics of *pesantren* education is the teaching of *kitab turats* (or *kitab kuning*)—classical Islamic works written between the 8th and 18th centuries CE—which encompass various disciplines such as jurisprudence (*fiqh*), theology (*tauḥid*), Qur’anic exegesis (*tafsîr*), prophetic traditions (*hadîts*), Arabic syntax (*nahwu*) and morphology (*sharf*), and Sufism (*tasawwuf*).² Teaching methods such as *sorogan* (individualized instruction), *bandongan* (non-graded classical system), *wetonan* (scheduled religious sessions), and *ḥalaqah* (study circles) have been transmitted intergenerationally as an intellectual heritage.³

The resilience and adaptability of *pesantren* for over five centuries are inseparable from their ability to balance the preservation of tradition with the demands of changing times. This dialectical principle is reflected in the classical maxim that remains alive in many *pesantren* today: *al-muḥafazhah ‘alâ al-qadîm al-shâlih wa al-akhdzu bi al-jadîd al-ashlah* (preserving the good old traditions while adopting the new that is better). This maxim serves not merely as a motto but as an ideological framework for responding to social dynamics, national education policies, and technological modernization. Within this context, *pesantren* not only maintain classical methods such as *sorogan*, *bandongan*, and *ḥalaqah* but also selectively accommodate new elements deemed better, without losing the roots of their scholarly identity.

Pondok Pesantren Bina Ulama Kisaran, located in Asahan Regency, North Sumatra, represents a salient example of a *pesantren* that has consistently preserved the teaching of *kitâb turâts* amidst the currents of modernization. According to official data from the *pesantren*’s Website (binaulama.id), this institution was founded in 1995 by the late KH. Alimuddin Siregar, BA, a distinguished scholar who actively served as a religious teacher, preacher, founding figure of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) in Asahan Regency, and Chairman of the Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI) of Asahan Regency for the 2000-2005 period.

The background to the establishment of this *pesantren* is highly relevant to the research focus on tradition and transformation. According to the official historical narrative of the *pesantren*, Bina Ulama was founded in response to “the challenges and developments of an increasingly modern era, the diminishing of moral character, and the decreasing number of people who understand religion in studying the *kitab turats* amidst an increasingly moderate life.” The enduring principle upheld by the founder and maintained to this day is the maxim *al-muḥafazhah ‘alâ al-qadîm al-shâlih wa al-akhdzu bi al-jadîd al-ashlah* (“Preserving the good old traditions while adopting the new that is better”). This maxim serves as an ideological framework explaining why Bina Ulama consistently maintains traditional methods while remaining open to selective transformation.

The maxim *al-muḥâfazhah ‘alâ al-qadîm al-shâlih wa al-akhdzu bi al-jadîd al-ashlah* not only functions as a pedagogical and ideological principle but also creates space for the pesantren to respond to broader contemporary issues, including discourses on sustainable development and environmental preservation. In its development, *pesantren*, as the oldest Islamic educational institutions in the archipelago, have begun to demonstrate their strategic role not only in religious and moral domains but also in the national environmental movement. The selective transformation undertaken by *pesantren* such as Bina Ulama—preserving classical scholarly traditions while accommodating new and better elements—enables these institutions to contribute to larger social agendas without losing their authentic identity. Thus, the study of the dialectics of tradition and transformation at Pondok Pesantren Bina Ulama Kisaran possesses significance that extends beyond the history of Islamic education, namely, it also helps explain how religious institutions can become important actors in responding to the challenges of the times, including issues of sustainable development.

Furthermore, *pesantren* are increasingly viewed as significant actors in the national environmental movement. Pratisti notes that the active involvement of pesantren constitutes one of the four pillars of the “Green Indonesia” movement.⁴ Therefore, the study of *pesantren* transformation, including that of Pondok Pesantren Bina Ulama Kisaran, is relevant not only for the history of Islamic education but also for understanding the contribution of religious institutions to sustainable development.

This study aims to: (1) describe the historical development of *kitâb turâts* learning methods at Pondok Pesantren Bina Ulama Kisaran; (2) analyze the forms of transformation that have occurred in response to social dynamics, national education policies, and modernization; and (3) identify the factors underlying the continuity and change of these methods from the perspective of Islamic educational history.

Method

This study employed a qualitative approach with a case study design. A historical approach was used to reconstruct the development of learning methods from the pesantren’s establishment (1995) to the present, while a phenomenological approach was employed to capture the lived experiences of current practitioners.⁵

The research was conducted at Pondok Pesantren Bina Ulama Kisaran, located at Jl. Bina Ulama No. 1, Kisaran, Asahan Regency, North Sumatra. This pesantren was founded in 1995 and currently has two locations: the old campus on Jalan Cemara and a new campus spanning 3.5 hectares in Kampung Subur.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on the following criteria: (1) possessing in-depth knowledge of *kitab turats* learning methods; (2) having been part of the pesantren for a minimum of five years; and (3) voluntarily agreeing to participate.

Data were collected through four techniques: (1) document analysis, examining pesantren historical documents, organizational structure, institutional profile and vision-mission statements, and curriculum documents; (2) semi-structured in-depth interviews; (3) participatory observation; and (4) focus group discussions. Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, which consists of three concurrent flows of activity: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification.⁶

Result and Discussion

The Historical Development of Turats Book Learning at Bina Ulama Kisaran

The Founding Period and Early Traditions (1995–2012)

Pondok Pesantren Bina Ulama Kisaran was established in 1995 on Jalan Cemara, Selawan Village (then Mutiara Village), East Kisaran District, Asahan Regency, North Sumatra, under the leadership of KH. Alimuddin Siregar, BA. Al-Mukarrom Tuan Ruslan Daud Nasution, a charismatic scholar in Asahan, conducted the groundbreaking ceremony. Construction began with one classroom. In 1996, the pesantren opened enrollment for new students at the RA/MDA (kindergarten/early religious education) level and appointed Ust. Aswiluddin Rambe as the school principal. Concurrently, regular Kitab Kuning (classical Islamic texts) study sessions were initiated, led by KH. Alimuddin Siregar, BA and Tuan H. Ghazali Abdurrahman.⁷ This marked the beginning of the tradition of traditional sorogan (individualized) and bandongan (classical non-graded) methods at this pesantren.

Theoretical Integration: Tradition and Continuity in Islamic Education

The preservation of traditional methods at Bina Ulama illustrates that tradition is not a static inheritance but a dynamic process of continuity and change. Through intergenerational transmission, traditional practices are continuously negotiated, reinterpreted, and adapted to changing educational, social, and institutional contexts.⁸ The sorogan, bandongan, and halaqah methods practiced at Bina Ulama demonstrate strong continuity with the classical Islamic pedagogical tradition that developed in the Middle East. As Dhofier identifies, these methods are not merely technical procedures but embody specific epistemologies and social relations between teacher (*kyai*) and students (*santri*).⁹ The *halaqah* (study circle) tradition, in particular, can be traced to the mosques of Damascus and Cairo during the 13th century, where students would sit in a circle around a scholar to study classical texts.¹⁰

At Bina Ulama, this tradition is maintained through the direct transmission of scholarly authority. The pesantren's founder, KH. Alimuddin Siregar, was a scholar with a robust scholarly network: he was a founding figure of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) in Asahan Regency and Chairman of the Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI) of Asahan Regency (2000-

2005), indicating recognition of his scholarly authority at the regency level.¹¹ The belief in *barakah* (spiritual blessing) transmitted through sanad (chain of transmission) constitutes the primary reason why sorogan and bandongan traditional methods are strictly maintained, while also serving as the foundation for the principle of “*al-muhâfazhah ‘alâ al-qadîm al-shâlih*” (preserving the good old traditions).

Kitâb Turâts: Definition and Position in the Pesantren Curriculum

The term *turats* (from the Arabic *al-turâts*, meaning heritage) refers to the treasury of classical Islamic scholarship produced between the 8th and 18th centuries CE. In the Indonesian *pesantren* tradition, these texts are more popularly known as *kitab kuning*.¹² At Pondok Pesantren Bina Ulama Kisaran, the *kitab turats* curriculum is integrated with the SKB 3 Menteri (Three Ministers Decree) curriculum and the *tahfîzh* (Qur’an memorization) program.¹³ At the *Wushthâ* level (equivalent to junior high school/MTs), the targeted learning outcomes for students include the ability to read and understand the *Jurumiyah* (basic Arabic syntax and morphology). At the *‘Ulyâ* level (equivalent to senior high school/MA), the targeted outcomes include the ability to read unvocalized Arabic texts (*kitab gundul*), such as *Imriti*, *Alfiyah*, and *Fathul Mu’in*, as well as mastery of ‘ulumul Qur’an (Qur’anic sciences), *musthalahul hadîts* (*Hadîts* terminology), and *ushûl fiqh* (principles of Islamic jurisprudence).¹⁴ The *pesantren*’s flagship programs also include the *Hafîzh/ah* (Qur’an memorization), *Qâr’ah* (Qur’anic recitation), *Muhaddits/ah* (*Hadîts* specialization) programs, and the “Majlis Sibawaih” (advanced study of Arabic syntax, morphology, rhetoric, and eloquence), which were developed after 2012.¹⁵

Kitâb turâts occupies a highly central and strategic position in the *pesantren* curriculum. It is not merely a textbook but constitutes the identity, primary reference, and source of character formation for students. This robust position is grounded in historical, theological, and pedagogical justifications that have been tested over centuries. Mastery of *kitâb turâts* remains the primary goal and the distinguishing feature of *pesantren* graduates compared to graduates of other educational institutions. As Mas’ud argues, these traditional methods constitute an “intellectual heritage” that carries both religious authority and local wisdom.¹⁶

Traditional Kitab Turats Learning at Bina Ulama

Traditional *kitab* learning at Bina Ulama is conducted in accordance with *salafiyah* (traditionalist) *pesantren* customs: students wear *sarung* (traditional wrapped fabric), *jubah* (robes), and *serban* (turbans) wrapped around their heads.¹⁷ The *kyai* or *ustâdz* (religious teacher) reads the *kitâb turâts* aloud while students listen and provide *makna gundul* (interlinear translation) in their own copies of the text. The *sorogan* (individualized) method is applied to students who have reached an advanced level, wherein they read the text directly before the *kyai* or *ustadz* to receive intensive correction. The *halaqah* (study circle) method is implemented in small group discussions on specific texts, such as in the Majlis Sibawaih program.¹⁸

In 1997, MTs Salafiyah (Salafiyah Junior High School) was established through a meeting at the residence of the Foundation Chairman, led directly by KH. Alimuddin Siregar, BA. A crucial decision made at this meeting was the adoption of the SKB 3 Menteri (Three Ministers Decree) curriculum alongside the *Kitab Kuning* (Salafiyah) curriculum. The integration of the formal madrasah curriculum with the *Kitab Kuning* (Salafiyah) curriculum at Bina Ulama should be situated within the broader policy legacy of the 1975 Joint Decree of the Minister of Religious Affairs, the Minister of Education and Culture, and the Minister of Home Affairs, commonly known as the SKB Tiga Menteri. The decree defined madrasahs as institutions in which Islamic religious subjects constituted at least 30 percent of the curriculum alongside general subjects; in practice, this framework was commonly associated with an approximately 70:30 distribution between general and religious subjects. At Bina Ulama, the formalization of MTs Salafiyah therefore created a framework in which grade-level schooling and general-subject instruction could coexist with the pesantren's *Kitab Kuning* tradition.¹⁹ For Bina Ulama, this represented the starting point of structural transformation: the pesantren was required to adopt classical grading systems, lesson plans, and standardized evaluations alongside traditional methods. Drs. Masrab Al-Badry was appointed as the Madrasah Head.

In 2003, at the request of parents who desired an advanced level based on *Kitab Kuning*, a Madrasah Aliyah (Islamic Senior High School) was established as a continuation of the Tsanawiyah (junior high) level, commencing in the 2003/2004 academic year. In 2005, the pesantren developed its facilities and infrastructure by adding new classrooms, sports facilities, constructing dormitories, expanding land area, and building a library containing *Turâts* books (*Kitab Kuning*) as references in jurisprudence (*Fiqhiyah*), instrumental sciences (*Ilmu Alat*), Qur'anic exegesis (*Tafsîr*), prophetic traditions (*Ḥadîts*), and various other disciplines.

The Post-Founder Period (2012–Present)

KH. Alimuddin Siregar, BA, passed away in 2012. After his death, the pesantren continued to make improvements and develop new programs: the *Ḥafizh/ah* (Qur'an memorization), *Qâri'ah* (Qur'anic recitation), *Muḥaddits/ah* (*Ḥadîts* specialization) programs, and the "Majlis Sibawaih" (advanced study of Arabic syntax, morphology, rhetoric, and eloquence). In 2013, under the leadership of Foundation Chairperson Rabi'atul Adawiyah Siregar, S.Pd.I, MM, together with the Chair of the Board of Advisors, Dr. H. Ali Muammar Qadafi Srg, S.Pd.I, M.Pd.I, an agreement was reached to focus more on Salafiyah (classical) subjects (*Kitab Kuning*) and to expand programs for strengthening religious skills. In 2021, construction began on a new campus on a 3.5-hectare plot of land in Kampung Subur (approximately 6 km from the previous location), with facilities to be equipped according to educational needs and a continuously growing student population expected to reach thousands.

Theoretical Integration: The Dialectics of Tradition and Modernity

The relationship between tradition and modernity in Islamic educational institutions has been a central theme in the scholarship on *pesantren*. Building upon the classical maxim *al-muhâfazhah ‘alâ al-qadîm al-shâlih wa al-akhdu bi al-jadîd al-ashlah*, this study adopts a dialectical perspective that views tradition and transformation not as opposing forces but as mutually constitutive elements. As argued by Abdullah, *pesantren* have historically demonstrated a unique capacity to negotiate between the preservation of classical Islamic scholarship and the accommodation of new educational forms.²⁰ This dialectical framework allows for an analysis that moves beyond simplistic dichotomies of traditional versus modern, instead focusing on how selective accommodation operates as a strategic response to changing contexts.

From the perspective of classical Islamic educational history, the methods practiced at Bina Ulama demonstrate strong continuity with the *halaqah* (study circle) tradition in the mosques of Damascus and Cairo during the 13th century. This continuity is not accidental but reflects what Makdisi identified as the institutional resilience of Islamic pedagogy, where core methods of knowledge transmission—including direct teacher-student interaction, oral recitation, and textual commentary—have persisted across centuries and geographical contexts.²¹ At Bina Ulama, this historical continuity is reinforced by the *pesantren*’s explicit identification with Ahlussunnah wal Jama’ah and the Nahdlatul Ulama tradition, which upholds *sanad*, *ijazah* (certification of authorization of scholars), and the authority of scholars as essential components of legitimate knowledge transmission.

At the same time, following, this study recognizes that these methods have never been static but have undergone modifications in response to changing educational demands, including the introduction of madrasa systems and formal schooling. The transformation at Bina Ulama demonstrates what Azra and Steenbrink have documented more broadly in Indonesian Islamic education: *pesantren* have undergone significant transformations since the colonial period, responding to Dutch educational policies, the rise of Islamic reform movements, and post-independence national education systems.²² More recent studies by Lukens-Bull and Pohl have extended this analysis to contemporary dynamics, including the impact of accreditation requirements, competition among *pesantren*, and the integration of information technology.²³

Transformation of Learning Methods as a Response to National Education Policies and Social Dynamics

The decision to establish MTs Salafiyah in 1997 with the SKB 3 Menteri (Three Ministers Decree) curriculum alongside the Kitab Kuning (Salafiyah) curriculum represented the most fundamental moment of transformation for Bina Ulama. The SKB 3 Menteri curriculum mandated that madrasas have a standardized class structure (Grades 7, 8, 9 for MTs; Grades 10, 11, 12 for MA), fixed lesson schedules (7:30 AM to 1:30 PM for the formal curriculum),

lesson plans for each subject, and evaluation through written examinations (mid-semester assessments, end-semester assessments, school/*madrasah* examinations, national examinations). Therefore, Islamic boarding schools must implement a dual system: during the day, teachers (*ustâdz*) teach using classical assessment methods and lesson plans; at night, they return to traditional methods for yellow book study sessions—the implementation of this curriculum combination. The learning methods employed at Pondok Pesantren Bina Ulama Kisaran combine the Salafiyah curriculum with the curriculum aligned with the SKB 3 Menteri. General subjects such as mathematics and biology use textbooks corresponding to the SKB 3 Menteri curriculum. Meanwhile, Islamic religious subjects such as the History of Islamic Civilization (SKI), Akidah Akhlak (faith and ethics), jurisprudence (*fiqh*), Qur’anic exegesis (tafsir), and prophetic traditions (Hadith) utilized kitab turats such as Khulashah Nurul Yaqin, Fathul Majid, Washaya, Fathul Qarib, Fathul Mu’in, Tafsir Jalalain, and Arba’in.²⁴

Data from the pesantren’s official website confirms that this integration was successful. In 1999, the inaugural cohort of students graduated in a ceremony officiated by H. Ridwan Lubis, accompanied by the Head of the Ministry of Religious Affairs Office, the Police Chief, the Military District Commander 0208, and the Regent of Asahan. In 2000, the second cohort graduated in a ceremony officiated by the Regent of Asahan, accompanied by the Head of the Ministry of Religious Affairs Office of Asahan, Drs. Yusuf Ady, the Police Chief of Asahan, the Military District Commander 0208, and the Chair of the Regional House of Representatives (DPRD) Level II of Asahan Regency, H. Syamsul Bahri Batubara.²⁵ The fact that high-ranking regional officials attended the graduation ceremonies indicates that the state had formally recognized Bina Ulama graduates as a result of the pesantren’s compliance with the national curriculum.

Theoretical Integration: Selective Accommodation as an Analytical Concept

This study proposes the concept of “selective accommodation” as an analytical tool for understanding the specific strategies pesantren employ in negotiating tradition and transformation. Derived from the classical principle of preserving the good old while adopting the new that is better, selective accommodation refers to the deliberate and critical process by which pesantren evaluate external innovations—whether from national education policies, technological developments, or social changes—and integrate them only when they align with institutional identity and core religious values. This concept differs from mere adaptation or passive acceptance, emphasizing instead agency and discernment on the part of *pesantren* leadership.

The transformation of kitâb turâts learning at Bina Ulama does not represent a replacement of traditional pedagogy with a formal school model. Rather, it reflects the institutional integration of traditional pesantren methods—such as sorogan, bandongan, and halaqah—with a formal grade-level system, scheduled instruction, curricular planning, and standardized assessment. This arrangement enables the pesantren to

preserve the authority, textual discipline, and teacher–student relations associated with kitâb turâts learning while responding to the administrative and academic requirements of formal madrasah education.²⁶ This transformation embodies the principle of selective accommodation in action: the pesantren adopted the structural elements of the national education system (grading, scheduling, formal assessment) while maintaining the core pedagogical practices of kitab turats instruction (*sorogan*, *bandongan*, *halaqah*). The dual system that emerged—formal education during the day and traditional religious study in the evening—represents what might be termed “layered accommodation,” where different pedagogical domains operate according to different logics.

However, selective accommodation at Bina Ulama goes beyond mere layering. It involves a value-based evaluation of benefit (*maslahah*), where old traditions are preserved if they are deemed still good (*shâlih*), and new elements are adopted if they are deemed better (*ashlah*). The criteria for “good” here are not only pedagogical but also ideological (aligned with Ahlussunnah wal Jama’ah) and pragmatic (proven to produce successful graduates). This evaluative framework explains why certain modern elements (such as the SKB curriculum and formal accreditation) were adopted while others (such as replacing traditional texts with modern textbooks for religious subjects) were resisted.

Programmatic Transformation: Development of Flagship Programs After 2012

Following the death of KH. Alimuddin Siregar in 2012, the pesantren did not experience stagnation. Rather, under new leadership, new programs were developed that represent forms of selective transformation: the *Hâfizh/ah* (Qur’an memorization), *Qâri/ah* (Qur’anic recitation), *Muḥaddits/ah* (*Hadîts* specialization) programs, and the “Majlis Sibawaih” (advanced study of Arabic syntax, morphology, rhetoric, and eloquence). These programs were responses to demands from parents who desired specific expertise (*tahfizh*, *qirâ’ât*, *Hadîts* specialization) beyond the standard curriculum. The Majlis Sibawaih program, for instance, represents a transformation of the classical halaqah method: small group discussions led by a teacher (*ustâdz*) to discuss advanced Arabic grammar texts (*nahwu*, *sharf*, *bayân*, *balâghah*). This program retains the essence of the halaqah method but with a more formal structure and measurable learning outcomes.

In 2013, under the leadership of Foundation Chairperson Rabi’atul Adawiyah Siregar, S.Pd.I, MM, together with the Chair of the Board of Advisors, Dr. H. Ali Muammar Qadafi Srg, S.Pd.I, M.Pd.I, an agreement was reached to focus more on Salafiyah (classical) subjects (*Kitab Kuning*). This decision demonstrates that amid the pressures of modernization, the pesantren consciously chose to strengthen its traditional identity as a salafiyah pesantren—a form of symbolic resistance against educational homogenization. This focus on Salafiyah subjects was implemented through increased instructional hours for *kitab kuning* in the curriculum, the acquisition of kitab turats for the library, and the enhancement of teacher qualifications in the instrumental sciences (*nahwu-sharf*).

Theoretical Integration: Resistance and Accommodation in Pesantren Transformation

The preservation of kitâb turâts learning in pesantren should not be viewed merely as resistance to modernization. Instead, it reflects an effort to sustain traditional religious learning while adapting selected aspects of formal education to contemporary institutional and social needs.²⁷ By maintaining classical scholarly authority and traditional teaching methods, pesantren subtly yet firmly demonstrate their autonomy against state intervention. This symbolic resistance aims to preserve a space for existence and collective identity amidst hegemonic currents that tend toward homogenization.²⁸ The preservation of kitâb turâts learning in pesantren is better understood as a process of institutional adaptation than as resistance to modernization. Pesantren may retain classical texts, established modes of teacher–student transmission, and religious-ethical formation while selectively incorporating elements of formal education, such as graded instruction, curriculum planning, assessment, and general-subject provision. This integrative approach enables pesantren to preserve their distinctive religious identity while responding to changing educational expectations and institutional demands.²⁹

The 2013 decision to focus more on Salafiyah subjects can be understood as what Scott terms “weapons of the weak”—everyday forms of resistance that do not confront power directly but nevertheless maintain autonomy and identity. By strengthening its traditional curriculum, Bina Ulama carved out a distinctive institutional identity that differentiates it from more “modern” Islamic educational institutions. This strategy has proven successful: the pesantren’s emphasis on kitab kuning has become its unique selling point, attracting parents who want their children to receive intensive classical Islamic education without neglecting the national curriculum.

At the same time, the development of flagship programmes—including Hafiz/Hafizah, Qâri’/Qâri’ah, Muḥaddith/Muḥaddithah, and Majlis Sibawaih—shows the diversification of religious learning pathways at Bina Ulama. These programmes complement, rather than replace, kitâb turâts instruction by providing more structured opportunities for Qur’anic memorisation, recitation, hadith studies, and advanced Arabic language learning.³⁰ Their development suggests an institutional effort to expand religious specialisation while maintaining the pesantren’s commitment to classical Islamic learning. These programs respond to contemporary demands (parents wanting specialized expertise, competition in religious competitions) while remaining rooted in traditional Islamic scholarship. The Majlis Sibawaih program, for example, maintains the halaqah method but adds formal structure and measurable outcomes, demonstrating how accommodation can occur within the framework of tradition.

Transformation Driven by Social Dynamics: Changes in Student Demographics and Achievement

Pesantren data reveal significant demographic changes. According to the pesantren's monitoring, 95% of alumni have been accepted into public universities (both general public universities and state Islamic universities) to pursue undergraduate, master's, and doctoral degrees, both domestically (Medan, Pekanbaru, Samarinda, Padang, Aceh, Palembang, Makassar, Yogyakarta, Bandung, Jakarta) and abroad (Egypt, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Madinah, Malaysia).³¹ This remarkably high success rate (95%) has become a primary attraction for prospective students and their parents. Consequently, parental expectations of the pesantren have increased: they want their children not only to master the kitab kuning but also to possess strong academic capabilities to compete for admission to public universities and state Islamic universities.

The pesantren has responded by integrating clear learning outcome targets for each level. At the Wustha level (equivalent to junior high school/MTs), the targeted outcomes for students include: memorization of a minimum of 1–3 juz of the Qur'an; understanding the basics of tajwid (Qur'anic recitation rules); ability to read and understand the Jurumiyah (basic Arabic syntax and morphology); ability to engage in conversation (muhadatsah) and deliver speeches in Arabic and English; and understanding the basics of Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh ibadah) and ethics (akhlak) (Bina Ulama, 2025b).

Operationally, the daily routine of students reflects the integration of traditional and modern methods. Students begin studying kitab after the dawn prayer (salat subuh) from 5:30 AM to 6:00 AM. Subsequently, they attend formal classes from 7:30 AM to 12:30 PM. At 4:00 PM, students participate in specialized programs such as qira'ah (Qur'anic recitation), tahfiz Al-Qur'an (Qur'an memorization), and tahfiz Hadith (Hadith memorization). Friday is a full holiday or rest day (Observation, 2026). This schedule demonstrates how the pesantren integrates kitab kuning study sessions (traditional), structured formal education, and intensive flagship programs into a single daily cycle. Indeed such program has been in the rising across so many *pesantrens* of the region.³²

At the Ulya level (equivalent to senior high school/MA), the targeted outcomes are more advanced: mastery of Ulumul Qur'an (Qur'anic sciences), Musthalahul Hadits (Hadith terminology), and Ushul Fiqih (principles of Islamic jurisprudence); memorization of 10–30 juz (for the Tahfidz program); ability to read unvocalized Arabic texts (kitab gundul) such as Imriti, Alfiah, and Fathul Mu'in; and possessing preaching (dakwah) skills, leadership abilities, and readiness for community service. These measurable learning targets represent a transformation from the traditional evaluation system, which relied solely on oral demonstration before the kyai.

Theoretical Integration: Pesantren and Social Change Beyond Religious Instruction

Recent scholarship has expanded the understanding of pesantren's roles beyond religious and moral education. Pratisti identifies pesantren as one of four pillars of the "Green Indonesia" environmental movement, indicating their growing involvement in sustainable development agendas. Similarly, other studies have documented pesantren's contributions to community development, economic empowerment, and interfaith dialogue.³³ This broader perspective informs the present study's recognition that transformations in learning methods may be linked to larger social responsibilities and that the study of pedagogical change has implications beyond the history of Islamic education alone.

The success of Bina Ulama alumni in gaining admission to public universities demonstrates what Bourdieu would recognize as the conversion of cultural capital (religious knowledge) into institutional capital (university admission and degrees).³⁴ This success provides empirical evidence that traditional methods (halaqah) are compatible with, and may even support, students' academic achievement in formal education. The integration of the SKB 3 Menteri curriculum with the kitab kuning curriculum has proven to produce graduates who not only master kitab turats but also compete successfully for admission to public universities. The fact that alumni are dispersed both domestically and abroad provides strong social legitimacy for the pesantren to maintain its traditional methods.

Furthermore, the high level of alumni success has created a strong and loyal alumni network. Many alumni subsequently send their own children back to Bina Ulama, become donors, or even serve as teachers (ustadz) at this pesantren. In interviews with the researcher, several alumni stated that the reason they send their children to Bina Ulama is that they themselves experienced the benefits of the traditional learning methods when they were students. In other words, the reproduction of habitus (Bourdieu, 1986) occurs through the alumni network: those who have achieved social and academic success tend to preserve the methods they experienced as students because those methods proved successful for them.

Response to Modernization and Technology

Although not explicitly documented on the official website, field observations and interviews with pesantren administrators reveal that Bina Ulama has adopted digital technology in a limited yet strategic manner. The pesantren maintains official WhatsApp groups for each class, which are used to share announcements, assignments, and audio recordings of traditional bandongan sessions. The pesantren library, which holds a collection of kitab turats, has gradually begun digitizing several reference texts in PDF

format to facilitate student access. However, the restrictions that have been implemented indicate a conscious effort to prevent the erosion of traditional methods: beginning students are still required to use printed texts and write manual interlinear translations (meaning *gandul*); the use of smartphones is prohibited during traditional learning sessions.

Beyond the adoption of communication technology, digital transformation has also begun to appear among teachers, albeit slowly. Some elderly teachers still struggle to adapt to digital devices. However, other teachers have started using laptops and projectors (*infokus*) in formal classroom instruction. This indicates that selective accommodation of technology occurs not only at the level of institutional policy but also at the level of individual pedagogical practices among the *ustâdz*. Nevertheless, traditional boundaries remain maintained: the use of projectors is only permitted during formal class hours, while traditional *kitab kuning* sessions remain entirely analog, using printed texts and manual interlinear translation (*makna gandul*).³⁵

Theoretical Integration: Continuity and Change in Pedagogical Traditions

The concept of pedagogical continuity is essential for understanding why certain teaching methods persist over time. Dhofier identifies *sorogan*, *bandongan*, and *halaqah* as core methods that have been transmitted across generations of *pesantren* education. These methods are not merely technical procedures but embody specific epistemologies and social relations between teacher (*kyai*) and students (*santri*).³⁶ Drawing on the work of Mas'ud, this study views these traditional methods as constituting an “intellectual heritage” that carries both religious authority and local wisdom. At the same time, following Bruinessen, it recognizes that these methods have never been static but have undergone modifications in response to changing educational demands, including the introduction of *madrasa* systems and formal schooling.

The selective adoption of digital technology at Bina Ulama reflects a nuanced approach to modernization. The *pesantren* has embraced technologies that support communication and access (WhatsApp, PDF digitization) while resisting technologies that might undermine traditional pedagogical practices (smartphones during *kitab* study sessions, replacing printed texts with digital versions). This selective approach demonstrates that the *pesantren* is not simply resisting or embracing technology but is engaging in a critical evaluation of how technology serves or undermines educational goals. This aligns with the principle of *mashlahah* (public benefit) that underlies Islamic legal reasoning: innovations are evaluated based on whether they promote good and prevent harm.

Factors Maintaining Continuity

This foundational *pesantren* principle, explicitly stated in the institution's official

profile, serves as the primary ideological basis for continuity. Inspired by the founding scholar, KH. Alimuddin Siregar, the principle advocates preserving beneficial traditions while adopting superior innovations, and continues to guide institutional decision-making. Traditional learning methods, regarded as part of al-qadim al-shalih, are upheld for embodying indispensable values: *sanad* (chains of authority), *barakah* (spiritual blessing), the prioritization of *adab* (manners) over knowledge, and close *kyai-santri* relationships. The institution's distinctive culture—students wearing sarung, jubah, and wrapped serban during study sessions—visually manifests this commitment to preserving good old traditions.

Pondok Pesantren Bina Ulama explicitly identifies itself with Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah. The founding scholar was a founding figure of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) in Asahan Regency, and the pesantren remains within the NU network to this day. This identity carries ideological consequences: the pesantren tends to be skeptical of modernization perceived as Westernization or secularization. In this context, preserving traditional learning methods is part of maintaining the identity of Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah, which upholds *sanad*, *ijazah* (certification of authorization of scholars), and the authority of scholars. The principle of al-muhafadzah 'ala al-qadim al-shalih for the Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah community is not merely a slogan but an established methodological approach to adhering to a school of thought (*madzhab*). Thus, the continuity of traditional methods at Bina Ulama cannot be separated from the pesantren's ideological commitment to Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah.

Pesantren data show that alumni have been accepted into public universities (both general public universities and state Islamic universities) to pursue undergraduate, master's, and doctoral degrees. This success rate provides empirical evidence that traditional methods (*halaqah*) are compatible with, and may even support, students' academic achievement in formal education. On the contrary, the integration of the SKB 3 Menteri curriculum with the *kitab kuning* curriculum has proven to produce graduates who not only master *kitâb turâts* but also compete successfully for admission to public universities. The fact that alumni are dispersed both domestically and abroad provides strong social legitimacy for the *pesantren* to maintain its traditional methods.³⁷

The high level of alumni success has created a strong and loyal alumni network. Many alumni subsequently send their own children back to Bina Ulama, become donors, or even serve as teachers (*ustâdz*) at this pesantren. In interviews with the researcher, several alumni stated that the reason they send their children to Bina Ulama is that they themselves experienced the benefits of the traditional learning methods when they were students. In other words, the reproduction of habitus occurs through the alumni network: those who have achieved social and academic success tend to preserve the methods they experienced as students because those methods proved successful for them.

The 2013 decision to focus more on Salafiyah subjects (*Kitab Kuning*) represented an institutional policy that consciously chose continuity amidst the pressures of modernization. This decision was made under the leadership of Foundation Chairperson

Rabi'atul Adawiyah Siregar, S.Pd.I, MM, together with the Chair of the Board of Advisors, Dr. H. Ali Muammar Qadafi Srg, S.Pd.I, M.Pd.I. This demonstrates that transformation does not always mean the blind adoption of modern elements; transformation can also mean the strengthening of traditional identity as a form of differentiation from other Islamic educational institutions that are more “modern.” By focusing on Salafiyah subjects, Bina Ulama has carved out a niche market: a pesantren for parents who want their children to intensively study kitab kuning without neglecting the national curriculum.

Theoretical Integration: Continuity and Change in Pedagogical Traditions

The factors maintaining continuity at Bina Ulama reflect what Dhofier identifies as the resilience of core pesantren methods, which have been transmitted across generations not merely as technical procedures but as embodiments of specific epistemologies and social relations. The principle of *al-muḥâfazhah ‘alâ al-qadîm al-shâlih* operates as what Shils would recognize as a mechanism of traditional authority, where the past is valued not for its antiquity alone but for its proven efficacy in transmitting religious knowledge and forming virtuous character.

The emphasis on institutional identity as Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah reflects what Makdisi identified as the importance of scholarly lineage (*sanad*) in Islamic education. The preservation of traditional methods is not merely a pedagogical choice but an expression of theological commitment to a specific interpretive tradition. This commitment shapes not only what is taught but how it is taught, with methods such as sorogan and halaqah carrying ideological significance beyond their pedagogical functions.³⁸

Factors Driving Transformation

The most influential external factor driving structural transformation at Bina Ulama has been the SKB 3 Menteri (Three Ministers Decree) curriculum, implemented since the establishment of MTs Salafiyah in 1997. This mandate requires pesantren to allocate at least 70% of instructional hours to general subjects (e.g., Mathematics, Science, English) and no more than 30% to religious studies, including kitab kuning. Consequently, the institution has been compelled to recruit teachers with backgrounds in general education who may lack familiarity with traditional pedagogical methods. Additionally, accreditation requirements from BAN-S/M necessitate complete administrative documentation (e.g., lesson plans, syllabi, assessment records), thereby forcing the adoption of modern administrative systems.

However, this long-established structural arrangement now faces a serious policy dilemma. Recent directives from the Ministry of Religious Affairs to re-separate the salafiyah and madrasa education systems threaten to undermine the pesantren's integrated model. If enforced, approximately 160 certified teachers—most holding

credentials in SKB-mandated subjects such as mathematics and biology—would face adverse consequences, including mandatory retraining or potential loss of certification. Moreover, parents have expressed concerns that salafiyah diplomas may not be recognized for admission to public universities, police academies, or the Institute of Domestic Administration (IPDN) due to the absence of science or social studies concentrations. Such concerns could erode public confidence in the pesantren.³⁹ Institutional leadership hopes that the Government will provide concrete solutions for pesantren that have long operated integrated systems, ensuring that no party becomes a victim of abrupt policy changes.

In 2003, the pesantren established a Madrasah Aliyah (Islamic Senior High School) at the request of parents who desired an advanced level based on Kitab Kuning. This demonstrates that transformation—in this case, the establishment of a senior high school level—is not always driven by top-down Government policy but also by pressure from below (parents). Parents want their children not only to master the kitab kuning but also to hold recognized diplomas that enable them to pursue higher education. By establishing the Madrasah Aliyah, Bina Ulama responded to this pressure while simultaneously expanding its educational services.

In 2005, the pesantren developed its facilities and infrastructure by adding new classrooms, sports facilities, constructing dormitories, expanding land area, and building a library. This development was a response to the continuously increasing number of students. The library, equipped with kitab turats, became an important facility for students to engage in independent learning outside traditional class hours. In 2021, the pesantren began constructing a new campus on a 3.5-hectare plot of land in Kampung Subur. This new campus construction represents the most significant infrastructure transformation, which will enable the pesantren to accommodate thousands of students and provide more modern facilities.

Achievement data published by the pesantren indicate that Bina Ulama engages in healthy competition with other pesantren at the district, provincial, national, and even international levels. Bina Ulama students have “enlivened competitions in MTQ (Qur’anic Recitation Competition), MQK (Religious Knowledge Competition), and Pilda’i (Preacher Competition) and have succeeded in winning awards at the district/city, provincial, national, and even international levels”. To maintain these achievements, the pesantren must continuously improve the quality of its teaching methods, including in terms of technology mastery and more varied learning methods. The Majlis Sibawaih program (advanced study of Arabic syntax, morphology, rhetoric, and eloquence) can be understood as a transformation of the classical halaqah method into a more structured program oriented toward achievement in competitions. After the passing of KH Alimuddin Siregar in 2012, the pesantren did not cease to develop. Rather, the pesantren “continued to make improvements and develop new programs: the Hafizd/ah (Qur’an memorization), Qari/ah (Qur’anic recitation), Muhaddits/

ah (Hadith specialization) programs, and the ‘Majlis Sibawaih’”.

The transformation of flagship programs has also impacted infrastructure and selection systems. Over time, the pesantren has begun to separate locations for formal education and specialized programs. Whereas previously all activities were combined in one place, the pesantren now has two different locations. Specialized programs that once operated out of rented houses now have their own sufficiently large buildings. Students enrolled in specialized programs no longer attend formal classes but instead focus on their chosen fields while remaining registered with the pesantren.⁴⁰ Selection for specialized programs is conducted through memorization speed tests, measured in minutes, to determine six-month or one-year memorization targets. Several alumni of these programs have achieved success at national and international levels, such as Dedi Almansa and Dedi Armanza, who have performed in events in ASEAN countries and China.⁴¹ These achievements provide social legitimacy that the programmatic transformation undertaken by the pesantren has yielded concrete results.

The development of these programs represents a response to increasingly complex contemporary challenges: parents want their children not only to master the kitab kuning but also to become hafiz (Qur’an memorizers), qari (Qur’an reciters with proper tajwid and melody), muhaddits (specialists in Hadith sciences), or Arabic language experts (through Majlis Sibawaih). This transformation is selective in nature: the pesantren does not change its core methods (halaqah) but rather adds intensive programs outside traditional class hours to address specific needs.⁴²

Theoretical Integration: Structural Pressures and Institutional Agency

The factors driving transformation at Bina Ulama reflect what Carnoy identified as the impact of state educational policies on educational institutions.⁴³ The SKB 3 Menteri curriculum represents a form of state intervention that shapes institutional structures, requiring pesantren to adopt formal schooling models while maintaining their traditional identity. However, as Scott’s theory of resistance suggests, pesantren are not passive recipients of state policy but actively negotiate the terms of compliance. The current policy dilemma regarding the re-separation of salafiyah and madrasa education systems illustrates the ongoing tension between state regulation and institutional autonomy.⁴⁴

Parental demands for advanced levels of education reflect what Bourdieu would recognize as the intersection of different forms of capital. Parents seek not only religious capital (kitab kuning mastery) but also institutional capital (recognized diplomas) that enables social mobility through higher education and professional careers. The pesantren’s response—establishing a Madrasah Aliyah—represents an institutional adaptation to changing parental expectations and social conditions.⁴⁵

The development of flagship programs after 2012 reflects what Lukens-Bull and Pohl have documented as contemporary dynamics in pesantren education, including

competition among institutions for students and prestige. The Majlis Sibawaih program, in particular, represents a transformation of the classical halaqah method to meet contemporary demands for specialized expertise and measurable achievement. This transformation demonstrates that pesantren are not static institutions but actively innovate within their traditional frameworks.

Dialectics of Continuity and Change in the Principle of “Al-Muhafadzah wa Al-Akhdzu”. The findings of this study demonstrate that Pondok Pesantren Bina Ulama Kisaran consistently upholds its enduring principle: “*Al-Muhafadzah ‘ala al-Qadim al-Shalih wa al-Akhdzu bi al-Jadid al-Ashlah*” (Preserving the good old traditions while adopting the new that is better). This principle is not merely a slogan but an operational guideline translated into institutional policies.

The Aspects of the Good Old Traditions That Are Preserved (Al-Qadim al-Shalih). The Traditional learning methods, as the core of the salafiyah pesantren tradition, are preserved in their entirety. The student culture of wearing sarung, jubah, and serban while studying is maintained as a form of respect for tradition. The kitab kuning curriculum with its standard texts (Jurumiyah, Imriti, Alfiyah, Fathul Mu’in) is preserved as the primary reference. The authority of the kyai and ustadz with documented chains of transmission (sanad) is maintained as a source of scholarly legitimacy.⁴⁶

The Changed or Added Elements (Al-Jadid al-Ashlah). The classical grading system with lesson plans, written examinations, and report cards has been adopted to meet the demands of the SKB 3 Menteri curriculum and accreditation requirements. Intensive programs (Tahfidz, Qari/ah, Muhaddits/ah, Majlis Sibawaih) have been added in response to parental demands and contemporary challenges. Infrastructure development (a new 3.5-hectare campus, a library with kitab turats, sports facilities) has been undertaken to improve service quality. Digital technology (WhatsApp, e-books, audio recordings) has been adopted in a limited and strategic manner.

Theoretical Integration: Selective Accommodation as a Refinement of Accommodation Theory

This study introduces the concept of selective accommodation, which differs conceptually from layered accommodation, as the former is not merely a separation of domains (e.g., formal vs. informal) but rather a value-based evaluation of benefit (maslahah). Layered accommodation assumes a separation of domains (formal vs. informal, day vs. night). In contrast, selective accommodation at Bina Ulama is more fundamentally based on an evaluation of benefit: old traditions are preserved if they are deemed still good (shalih), and new elements are adopted if they are deemed better (ashlah). The criteria for “good” here are not only pedagogical but also ideological (aligned with *Ahlussunnah wal Jama’ah*) and pragmatic (proven to produce successful graduates).⁴³

The concept of selective accommodation refines Geertz’s accommodation theory

by emphasizing agency and discernment in the process of adaptation. While Geertz focused on how religions adapt to modern contexts, selective accommodation highlights the active role of institutional actors in evaluating and selecting which modern elements to adopt and which to reject. This process is not merely reactive but involves strategic decision-making based on institutional values and goals.

Selective accommodation also addresses the limitations of the layered accommodation model, which assumes a simple separation of traditional and modern domains. At Bina Ulama, the integration of tradition and transformation is more complex and dynamic. The same teachers who conduct traditional halaqah sessions in the evening also teach formal classes during the day using modern pedagogical methods. The same students who wear sarung and jubah for kitab study also wear formal school uniforms and use modern textbooks for general subjects. This integration occurs at multiple levels—institutional, pedagogical, and individual—suggesting that tradition and transformation are not separate domains but interwoven elements of institutional life.

Conclusion

The tradition of kitab turats learning methods at Pondok Pesantren Bina Ulama Kisaran—including halaqah—represents a direct continuation of the classical Islamic pedagogical tradition that developed in the Middle East. This tradition of methods has been consistently preserved through the principle of *al-muhafadzah ‘ala al-qadim al-shalih* (preserving the good old traditions). Transformations observed at Bina Ulama fall into three distinct categories. These include responses to national education policies (such as the SKB 3 Menteri curriculum), adaptations to social dynamics and parental demands, and selective engagement with technological modernization. Factors underlying continuity and change at Bina Ulama can be explained through the principle of *al-muhafadzah ‘ala al-qadim al-shalih wa al-akhdzu bi al-jadid al-ashlah* (preserving the good old traditions while adopting the new that is better). Five factors maintain continuity (ideological commitment, Ahlussunnah identity, measurable success, alum network, Salafiyah focus policy) and five factors drive transformation (demands of the SKB 3 Menteri curriculum, parental demands, infrastructure demands, inter-pesantren competition, post-founder program development). Theoretically, this study introduces the concept of “selective accommodation” as a refinement of Geertz’s (1968) accommodation theory. Practically, the success of Bina Ulama can serve as a model for other pesantren in balancing tradition and transformation without losing institutional identity.

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