

RECONFIGURING RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY IN ISLAMIC EDUCATION: TOWARD A PEDAGOGICAL MODEL OF CRITICAL RELIGIOUS LITERACY

Fahmi Khumaini^{1*}

¹ Universitas Nahdlatul Ulama Sunan Giri, Bojonegoro, Indonesia

*Corresponding Author : fahmi@unugiri.ac.id

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Abstract

This article examines the reconfiguration of religious authority in Islamic education by conceptualizing authority as a pedagogical formation rather than merely as a sociological or media-related phenomenon. The study responds to the tension between classical sources of authority grounded in ‘ilm, adab, sanad, teacher-student relations, and scholarly recognition, and contemporary sources mediated by formal institutions, academic credentials, bureaucratic certification, public communication, and algorithmic visibility. Employing library research with a historical-conceptual approach, this article analyzes selected scholarly works on Islamic intellectual tradition, educational institutions, pesantren, modern Islamic education, and digital Islam. The findings indicate that religious authority in Islamic education is formed through four interrelated dimensions : epistemic depth, ethical formation, institutional



credibility, and digital literacy. The article concludes that Islamic education should cultivate critical religious literacy by enabling students so they can distinguish scholarly legitimacy from popularity, credentials from competence, and digital visibility from epistemic accountability.

Keywords: *Adab; Digital Literacy; Islamic Education; Religious Authority; Ulama.*

Abstrak

Artikel ini mengkaji rekonfigurasi otoritas agama dalam pendidikan Islam dengan menempatkan otoritas sebagai formasi pedagogis, bukan semata-mata fenomena sosiologis atau media. Kajian ini berangkat dari ketegangan antara sumber otoritas klasik yang bertumpu pada 'ilm, adab, sanad, relasi guru-murid, dan pengakuan komunitas keilmuan, dengan sumber otoritas kontemporer yang dimediasi oleh institusi formal, gelar akademik, sertifikasi birokratis, komunikasi publik, dan visibilitas algoritmik. Dengan metode studi pustaka dan pendekatan historis-konseptual, artikel ini menganalisis karya-karya akademik terpilih tentang tradisi intelektual Islam, institusi pendidikan, pesantren, pendidikan Islam modern, dan Islam digital. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa otoritas agama dalam pendidikan Islam terbentuk melalui empat dimensi yang saling terkait: kedalaman epistemik, pembentukan etis, kredibilitas institusional, dan literasi digital. Artikel ini menyimpulkan bahwa pendidikan Islam perlu mengajarkan otoritas sebagai objek literasi keagamaan kritis agar peserta didik mampu membedakan legitimasi keilmuan dari popularitas, kredensial dari kompetensi, dan visibilitas digital dari akuntabilitas epistemik..

Kata Kunci: *Adab; Literasi Digital; Otoritas Agama; Pendidikan Islam; Ulama.*

INTRODUCTION

Religious authority has always been central to Islamic education because Islamic learning is concerns not only the transmission of knowledge but also the formation of legitimate religious actors who are authorized to teach, interpret, and guide. In this article, religious authority refers to the socially recognized capacity of religious actors to interpret religious knowledge, guide religious practice, and shape normative understanding within specific communities of learning. This authority is not merely possessed by individuals; rather, it is claimed, exercised, negotiated, and recognized within particular epistemic, ethical, institutional, and social contexts (Krämer & Schmidtke, 2006; Zaman, 2002). In the Islamic intellectual tradition, this legitimacy is cultivated through disciplined engagement with texts, proximity to recognized teachers, ethical formation, participation in scholarly networks, and recognition by a community of learning. Religious authority therefore does not emerge from a single source. It is produced through the relationship among knowledge, teachers, students, institutions, and publics.

This issue has become increasingly important in contemporary Islamic education. Muslim students today encounter religious knowledge across multiple educational and digital environments: pesantren, madrasah, Islamic schools, universities, mosques, study circles, social media accounts, video platforms, podcasts, online courses, and religious applications. The classroom is no longer the only organized space of religious learning. Students may receive a fatwa through a short video, learn Qur'anic interpretation through a podcast, follow a preacher through Instagram, and evaluate religious claims through the visibility and affective appeal of digital content. This evolving learning ecology reshapes how religious knowledge is received and the ways religious authority is recognized (Hew, 2018; Husein & Slama, 2018; Nisa, 2018b; Slama, 2018).

The classical structure of religious authority in Islamic education was grounded in the centrality of knowledge. Rosenthal shows that *'ilm* occupied a decisive place in Islamic civilization and shaped religious, social, intellectual, and ethical life (Rosenthal, 2007). Al-Attas connects education with *adab*, namely the proper ordering of knowledge, action, and moral responsibility (Al-Attas, 1999). Berkey explains that the transmission of knowledge in medieval Muslim societies took place through networks of teachers, students, patrons, texts, and institutions (P. Berkey, 1992). Makdisi demonstrates that institutions such as the madrasa organized learning, teaching posts, endowments, and scholarly recognition (Makdisi, 1981). These works indicate that Islamic education has historically produced authority through a dense configuration of epistemic, ethical, social, and institutional elements.

Contemporary Islamic education has transformed this traditional configuration. Formal schooling, state regulation, accreditation, academic degrees, teacher certification, university-based research, and professional standards introduce new mechanisms of legitimacy. These mechanisms can expand access, strengthen accountability, and connect Islamic education with wider academic systems. At the same time, they can also reduce authority to formal credentials when detached from scholarly depth, ethical discipline, and pedagogical accountability. The problem is not the presence of modern institutions. The problem lies in the disconnection between institutional recognition and the older epistemic-ethical foundations of authority.

Digital media further intensifies this transformation. Studies on digital Islam in Indonesia show that religious authority is increasingly shaped by visibility, affect, circulation, audience engagement, and platform architecture. Akmaliah shows how new media has generated contestation over moderate Islam and religious authority (Akmaliah, 2020, 2022). Arifianto links post-

Reformasi struggles over Islamic authority to the marketplace of ideas, new preaching actors, and media circulation (Arifianto, 2020). Beta, Lengauer, Nisa, and Muttaqin show that digital spaces reshape piety, gendered religious subjectivity, and the production of new religious influencers (Beta, 2019; Lengauer, 2018; Muttaqin, 2020; Nisa, 2018b). Hannan and Mursyidi further describe social media as a site of fragmentation of religious authority among contemporary Indonesian Muslims (Hannan & Mursyidi, 2023).

Read together rather than sequentially, these three bodies of scholarship describe not three unrelated topics but three successive answers to a single question: on what basis is a religious speaker recognized as legitimate? In the classical accounts, legitimacy rests on mastery of knowledge disciplined by adab and certified through sanad and communal recognition (Attas, 1999; Makdisi, 1981; P. Berkey, 1992; Rosenthal, 2007). In the modern accounts, the locus of recognition shifts to institutional and credential-based warrant, through accreditation, degrees, certification, and bureaucratic governance. In the digital accounts, recognition is increasingly conferred by visibility and audience response organized through platform architecture and algorithmic circulation (Akmaliah, 2020, 2022; Arifianto, 2020; Beta, 2019). Comparing the three along this common axis of how legitimacy is recognized reveals both continuity and displacement: each successive register adds a mechanism of recognition without necessarily preserving the epistemic and ethical criteria that grounded the previous one. Credentials can certify status without guaranteeing depth; visibility can confer reach without guaranteeing competence. This comparison is what motivates the framework proposed below. Precisely because legitimacy is now recognized through several partly independent mechanisms, Islamic education requires a way to evaluate authority across all of them at once, rather than defaulting to any single register. The four dimensions developed in this article correspond to the criteria that this comparison shows to be at stake: epistemic depth and ethical formation preserve the

classical grounds of legitimacy, institutional credibility addresses the modern grounds, and digital literacy addresses the mediated grounds.

These studies have substantially advanced the analysis of religious authority in the sociology of religion, digital religion, gender studies, and Indonesian Islam. Their limitation for the present purpose is not one of quality but of orientation. This scholarship is designed primarily to describe and explain how authority is contested, fragmented, and redistributed across publics, platforms, and institutions. Akmaliah documents the erosion and attempted reclamation of moderate religious authority in new media ([Akmaliah, 2020, 2022](#)); Nisa and Slama trace how piety and da'wa are reconstituted through social platforms ([Nisa, 2018a, 2018b](#); [Slama, 2018](#)); Hannan and Mursyidi characterize social media as a site where authority fragments ([Hannan & Mursyidi, 2023](#)). These are, by design, diagnostic accounts: they map the conditions under which authority is produced and destabilized. They do not, and do not set out to, provide evaluative criteria by which a learner might distinguish legitimate from illegitimate authority, nor a pedagogical account of how such criteria could be taught. Two specific limitations follow. First, because the analytical object is the public or digital sphere, Islamic education appears in this literature largely as a context in which contested authority circulates, rather than as the site at which criteria of authority are formed, transmitted, and assessed. Second, because the aim is explanatory rather than normative, the literature can show that popularity is increasingly mistaken for scholarly legitimacy without supplying the pedagogical resources students would need to tell the two apart. The gap addressed here is therefore not the absence of studies on religious authority, which are numerous, but the absence of a framework that treats religious authority as a pedagogical problem, one that specifies the criteria by which authority should be evaluated and the means by which

those criteria can be taught. It is this evaluative-pedagogical deficit, rather than a shortage of descriptive scholarship, that the four-dimensional framework proposed in this article is designed to address.

This article addresses that gap by arguing that religious authority in Islamic education should be understood as a pedagogical configuration. The term pedagogical configuration extends the relational conception of religious authority already established above, namely authority as conferred within a community of learning rather than possessed by an individual (Krämer & Schmidtke, 2006; Zaman, 2002), into the domain of pedagogy proper. In grounding the term this way, the analysis draws on established educational scholarship in which authority is understood not as a personal possession but as an effect of the pedagogic relation itself: Bourdieu and Passeron's account of pedagogic authority, in which the legitimacy to transmit is conferred by the pedagogic relation rather than held prior to it, and Bernstein's analysis of pedagogic discourse, in which knowledge is recontextualized and legitimated through the rules governing its transmission (Bernstein, 2000; Bourdieu, 1977). It names authority as an effect of educational relations: constituted through how knowledge is transmitted, who is authorized to transmit it, and by what criteria recognition is granted, rather than carried into those relations ready-made. The term is therefore not a synonym for authority that is taught; it names authority as a formation produced by pedagogy, which is what allows the four dimensions below to function as criteria of formation rather than as a checklist of traits.

This configuration is formed through four interrelated dimensions: epistemic depth, ethical formation, institutional credibility, and digital literacy. These dimensions were not adopted from a pre-existing model, nor postulated in advance; as detailed in the Method, they were consolidated from the grounds of authority that the historical-conceptual analysis surfaced, with each register

of authority translated into the pedagogical criterion it implies. Epistemic depth refers to mastery of Islamic sources, scholarly traditions, interpretive discipline, and contemporary knowledge. Ethical formation refers to adab, integrity, humility, and responsibility in using religious knowledge. Institutional credibility refers to the ability of pesantren, madrasah, Islamic schools, universities, and digital learning platforms to organize learning with accountable standards. Digital literacy refers to the capacity to evaluate online religious content, algorithmic visibility, rhetorical persuasion, and the credibility of religious speakers.

The novelty of this article lies not only in relocating the discussion of religious authority from a predominantly sociological or media-centered issue to a core problem of Islamic education, but in the specific contribution this relocation makes possible. The article's principal contribution is an analytical framework, a four-dimensional pedagogical model comprising epistemic depth, ethical formation, institutional credibility, and digital literacy, for evaluating how religious authority is constituted and recognized in contemporary Muslim learning environments. The value of this framework is that it neither treats digital authority as a phenomenon external to education nor romanticizes classical authority as a complete solution to contemporary challenges. Instead, it specifies how classical, modern, and digital sources of authority interact and provides criteria by which their competing claims to legitimacy can be assessed pedagogically. Accordingly, this article aims to analyze how religious authority is formed, institutionalized, and reconfigured within Islamic education, and to formulate a pedagogical framework for evaluating legitimate religious authority in contemporary Muslim learning environments.

METHOD

This study employs library research with a historical-conceptual approach. This approach is particularly suited to the article's aim because the framework it develops rests on a diachronic claim: that the criteria by which religious authority is recognized have been successively reconfigured across classical, modern, and digital conditions. Constructing an evaluative framework adequate to this reconfiguration requires tracing how each layer of authority was historically formed and what it displaced or preserved from the preceding one, an analytical task that a single-site empirical study, capturing authority at one moment and in one setting, is not designed to perform. A historical-conceptual approach allows the study to reconstruct this layered formation and to synthesize its criteria into a coherent pedagogical model, which is the object of the analysis rather than the description of a particular educational site. The analysis is based on selected core conceptual works and recent peer-reviewed journal articles related to Islamic intellectual tradition, Islamic education, pesantren, religious authority, and digital Islam. The corpus was selected to represent three layers of discussion: classical foundations of authority, modern institutional transformation, and digital mediation of religious knowledge.

The corpus was constructed through purposive selection rather than exhaustive or systematic search, a strategy appropriate to a conceptual study whose aim is to build an interpretive framework rather than to establish the prevalence of a phenomenon. Works were identified through a combination of foundational-text selection and citation tracking: canonical conceptual and historical studies were included on the basis of their established standing in the study of Islamic knowledge transmission and religious authority, while recent peer-reviewed studies were located by following citations within and across these works and the specialized journals in which the contemporary

debate is concentrated. Candidate works were admitted according to three inclusion criteria: conceptual relevance to the formation or evaluation of religious authority, contribution to scholarship on Islamic education or digital Islam, and analytical usefulness for tracing the shift from scholarly transmission to institutional and platform-mediated recognition. Applying these criteria produced a corpus organized into three analytical layers.

The first layer consists of core works that provide the conceptual and historical basis for understanding authority in Islamic education. Krämer and Schmidtke and Zaman are used to define religious authority as a socially recognized and historically situated form of legitimacy (Krämer & Schmidtke, 2006; Zaman, 2002). Rosenthal, Al-Attas, Berkey, Makdisi, and Sirry are then used to explain the relationship among *‘ilm*, *adab*, *sanad*, scholarly networks, institutions, and the changing sources of religious authority (Al-Attas, 1999; Makdisi, 1981; Rosenthal, 2007; Sirry, 2015). The second layer consists of recent studies on Islamic education and *pesantren*. Isbah, Mustofa et al., Khoiriyah and Riyadi, Jusubaidi et al., and Nasir and Rijal are used to examine *pesantren* continuity, institutional adaptation, digital transformation, and Islamic higher education (Isbah, 2020; Jusubaidi et al., 2024; Khoiriyah & Riyadi, 2023; Nasir & Rijal, 2021; Yunus Mustofa et al., 2023). The third layer consists of studies on religious authority and digital Islam, including studies on digital Islam, religious authority, online piety, digital *da’wa*, and platform-mediated religious publics (Akmaliah, 2020, 2022; Arifianto, 2020; Beta, 2019; Hew, 2018; Husein & Slama, 2018; Nisa, 2018b; Slama, 2018; Solahudin & Fakhruroji, 2019). Together these three layers provide the classical, institutional, and digital coordinates required to construct and justify the proposed framework

The literature was analyzed through thematic-conceptual analysis combined with historical interpretation. The analysis proceeded by close reading of each work to extract its account of

how religious authority is grounded, recognized, and legitimated. These accounts were then coded conceptually, not through a pre-fixed coding scheme, but by identifying recurring categories as they emerged across the sources, such as knowledge (*'ilm*), ethical formation (*adab*), transmission and certification (*sanad*, *ijazah*), institutional recognition, and platform-based visibility. Categories that recurred across multiple works were grouped into higher-order conceptual clusters, and these clusters were compared for convergence and tension. Historical interpretation was then applied to order the clusters diachronically, tracing how the grounds of authority shift from teacher-centered transmission, to institutional recognition, to digitally mediated visibility.

The analysis proceeded in four stages. First, the study identified epistemic and ethical foundations of authority in Islamic intellectual tradition. Second, it examined the role of ulama, teacher-student relations, and educational institutions in legitimizing authority. Third, it analyzed the effects of modern credentials and bureaucratic governance. Fourth, it interpreted digital visibility as a new condition that requires pedagogical evaluation.

These stages were diagnostic before they were constructive: each stage surfaced the criteria by which authority was recognized within a given register, and the four dimensions of the framework were then consolidated from the criteria that recurred across the stages. The relation between the stages and the dimensions is not one of simple correspondence. The first stage surfaced two distinct criteria, mastery of knowledge and its ethical ordering, which were retained as separate dimensions, epistemic depth and ethical formation, because the sources consistently treat competence and character as distinguishable grounds of legitimacy. The second and third stages both concerned the organization and warranting of learning through recognized structures, teacher-student relations and institutions in the classical case, credentials and bureaucratic

governance in the modern case, and their shared criterion was consolidated into a single dimension, institutional credibility, spanning both traditional and modern institutional forms. The fourth stage surfaced a criterion without classical precedent, recognition conferred by visibility and platform circulation, which was retained as digital literacy. The four dimensions are therefore the product of the analysis rather than its premise: they represent the consolidated set of evaluative criteria that the four-stage historical reading brought to the surface, grouped so as to preserve genuinely distinct grounds of authority while merging those that differ only in institutional era.

As a library-based conceptual study, this article does not involve human participants, interviews, surveys, or personally identifiable data. Ethical responsibility is maintained through accurate citation, careful paraphrase, responsible interpretation of sources, and the exclusion of uncited claims.

This design also carries a methodological limitation that should be stated at the outset. Because the framework is derived through historical and conceptual synthesis rather than fieldwork, it is analytically warranted but not yet empirically validated: the study establishes that the four dimensions are conceptually grounded in the sources of religious authority, but not that they operate as described in specific classrooms, pesantren, universities, or digital learning settings. The historical-conceptual approach is suited to constructing the framework, as argued above, but the complementary task of testing it belongs to subsequent empirical research. The concluding section returns to this point and specifies how such validation might be pursued.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Epistemic-Ethical Foundations of Religious Authority

The first finding is analytical rather than expository: read together, the classical sources reveal that religious authority in Islamic education is constituted not by knowledge alone, nor by ethics alone, nor by transmission alone, but by the integration of the three into a single epistemic-ethical structure, such that the removal of any one weakens authority into a lesser form. This is not a claim that any of the cited authors makes individually; it is the inference that follows from placing their accounts in relation. Knowledge supplies the epistemic basis, *adab* supplies its ethical ordering, and *sanad* supplies the chain of accountable transmission; the finding is that these function as interdependent conditions rather than as separable virtues. This integration is what distinguishes scholarly authority from opinion, rhetorical performance, or social influence, each of which can reproduce one component while lacking the others.

Rosenthal's account of *'ilm* provides the starting point for this argument. In Islamic civilization, knowledge was not only a cognitive category but also a civilizational value that shaped religion, law, ethics, literature, politics, and social life (Rosenthal, 2007). The scholar's authority emerged from the capacity to preserve, interpret, and transmit knowledge responsibly. This means that authority was inseparable from learning. It was produced through sustained engagement with inherited sources and through the ability to make those sources meaningful for religious life. Rosenthal's account is drawn on here not for its own sake but as evidence for the first component of the integrated structure: it establishes that knowledge functioned as a condition of authority, which the present analysis then holds in tension with the ethical and transmissional components that follow, none of which Rosenthal's account alone supplies.

Al-Attas deepens this epistemic foundation by linking education to *adab* (Al-Attas, 1999). In this framework, knowledge must be ordered by moral discernment, proper recognition, and ethical responsibility. Authority is therefore not reducible to mastery of information. It requires the formation of the person who bears knowledge. This point is crucial for Islamic education because it shows that the legitimacy of a religious teacher is formed by the integration of competence and character. The teacher is authoritative not only because he or she knows, but because knowledge is carried with responsibility. Al-Attas is invoked here to establish the second component of the structure, ethical ordering, as interdependent with, and not derivable from, the epistemic component set out above.

Sanad and *ijazah* extend this epistemic-ethical structure into a pedagogy of accountability. Sanad connects a learner to teachers and to a recognized genealogy of transmission. *Ijazah* indicates that a teacher recognizes a student's competence to transmit a text, discipline, or body of knowledge (Arjmand, 2018). These practices do not simply certify knowledge in a bureaucratic sense. They locate knowledge in a chain of responsibility. The student receives knowledge from a teacher, learns the discipline of transmission, and becomes accountable to the tradition that grants legitimacy. Arjmand's account supplies the third component of the integrated structure, accountable transmission, which binds the epistemic and ethical components into a socially recognized chain rather than leaving them as individual attainments.

This structure differs from modern forms of recognition, but it does not necessarily stand in opposition to them. Academic degrees, certification, and institutional accreditation can support religious authority when they are connected to intellectual rigor and ethical responsibility. They become problematic when they function as formal symbols detached from scholarly depth. The central issue for Islamic education is therefore the relation between

knowledge, ethical formation, and recognition. Religious authority, in this sense, requires the integration of knowledge, adab, and recognition. Knowledge provides the epistemic basis of authority, adab gives knowledge its ethical orientation, and recognition situates authority within scholarly and institutional communities (Al-Attas, 1999; Berkey, 1992; Rosenthal, 2007). Without this integration, authority may be reduced to ideological persuasion, moralism without competence, or public visibility without epistemic accountability, especially in contexts where religious messages circulate through institutional credentials and digital media.

The implication is pedagogical. This requires Islamic education to treat the validation of religious knowledge as part of its curriculum. Students need to learn the difference between primary sources, interpretive traditions, scholarly debate, popular preaching, ideological messaging, motivational speech, and digital content. They should understand why a religious claim requires evidence, why interpretation requires training, and why ethical responsibility matters in speaking about religion. In this sense, the epistemic-ethical foundation of authority becomes an object of curriculum, not merely a background assumption, and it is this pedagogical inference, rather than the summary of classical scholarship on which it rests, that constitutes the finding of this section.

Pedagogical Subjects and Institutional Recognition

The second finding is that religious authority is formed through pedagogical subjects and institutional spaces. Ulama, kiai, teachers, lecturers, and religious educators are not only transmitters of information. They are pedagogical subjects whose authority is produced through learning, teaching, discipline, recognition, and institutional participation. Religious authority is therefore personal and institutional at the same time. It attaches to

the formation of the teacher and to the structures that authorize teaching.

Berkey shows that in medieval Muslim societies knowledge circulated through networks of scholars, students, patrons, texts, and institutions. The teacher-student relationship functioned as the basic social unit of scholarly transmission. Students sought recognized teachers, attended lessons, read texts, received correction, and built reputations through participation in learned circles. Authority emerged from this social and pedagogical environment. It was never only an individual claim; it depended on recognition by others within a community of learning (Berkey, 1992). Makdisi's study of the madrasa clarifies the institutional dimension of this process. The madrasa did not merely provide a building for learning. It organized teaching posts, endowments, students, methods of instruction, and forms of scholarly recognition (Makdisi, 1981). Through institutionalization, knowledge acquired continuity and social form. Teachers taught within recognized spaces, students joined organized forms of learning, and communities identified certain institutions as credible sites of religious instruction.

In Indonesia, pesantren represents a distinctive institutional form of religious authority. Pesantren combines textual learning, communal discipline, moral formation, ritual practice, and kiai leadership. Isbah shows that pesantren remain important Islamic educational institutions while adapting to changing Indonesian contexts. Pesantren authority is not produced only through curriculum. It is formed through daily routines, proximity to kiai, communal life, discipline, and the social trust built around the institution. This is why pesantren authority has a strongly embodied and communal character (Isbah, 2020).

Recent studies show that pesantren continue to transform under modern conditions. Mustofa et al, describe how digital technology has changed pesantren learning through hybrid

practices and online forms of religious instruction (Yunus Mustofa et al., 2023). Khoiriyah and Riyadi show changes in Islamic studies traditions at pesantren, including transformations in learning materials and curriculum (Khoiriyah & Riyadi, 2023). Jusubaidi et al. present Gontor as a model of transformative religious education in which institutional life, management, discipline, and public speaking activities contribute to student formation (Jusubaidi et al., 2024). These studies indicate that pesantren authority is not static. It is continuously reorganized through institutional adaptation.

Islamic higher education introduces another institutional configuration. Universities and Islamic higher education institutions produce authority through academic degrees, research, publication, professional standards, and bureaucratic recognition. Nasir and Rijal show that Islamic higher education institutions can become important sites for mainstreaming religious moderation through curriculum and institutional culture. In this context, a lecturer or researcher may gain authority through a combination of religious competence, academic literacy, publication, institutional position, and public engagement (Nasir & Rijal, 2021).

The coexistence of pesantren, madrasah, Islamic schools, universities, and digital platforms creates a plural ecology of authority. Each institution has its own mechanisms of recognition. Pesantren emphasizes continuity with tradition, kiai authority, discipline, and communal trust. Universities emphasize research, academic training, publication, and credentials. Digital platforms emphasize reach, accessibility, and audience engagement. These institutions should be examined as distinct but interacting sites of legitimacy. It should clarify how each produces legitimacy, where each is strong, and where each requires correction.

Modern Credentials and Digital Visibility

The third finding is that modern and digital contexts reconfigure authority by introducing new mechanisms of recognition. In modern education, authority is mediated by

curriculum, academic degrees, accreditation, certification, institutional governance, and professional standards. In digital environments, authority is mediated by visibility, audience response, platform circulation, content aesthetics, and algorithmic recommendation. These mechanisms expand the field of religious authority, but they also produce new ambiguities.

Modern credentials create formal pathways for recognition. A teacher may be recognized through pedagogical certification, a lecturer through doctoral education and publication, an institution through accreditation, and a curriculum through state regulation. These mechanisms are valuable because they provide standards, quality assurance, and public accountability. Yet they can also create a bureaucratic understanding of authority. When credentials become detached from knowledge and adab, authority is reduced to administrative status. The pedagogical challenge is to integrate formal recognition with epistemic depth and ethical responsibility.

Digital visibility creates a different mechanism. Social media platforms reward content that gains attention, emotional response, shareability, and recurring engagement. [Hew \(2018\)](#) shows how visual persuasion and social media aesthetics shaped the propagation of Felix Siau. Nisa analyzes how ODOJ used social media to mobilize Qur'anic piety through WhatsApp-based networks ([Nisa, 2018b](#)). Nisa also shows how Instagram created creative and lucrative forms of da'wa among female Muslim youth ([Nisa, 2018a](#)). Husein and Slama demonstrate that online piety generates religious enthusiasm and anxiety, especially around the problem of *riya'* and the performance of piety ([Husein & Slama, 2018](#)). These studies show that digital religion is not only a new channel of communication; it is a new condition for the circulation and evaluation of religious messages.

Algorithmic visibility should therefore be understood as a condition of authority rather than as a sufficient source of legitimacy, a distinction that constitutes the analytical core of this

subsection. Algorithms organize attention by recommending, ranking, circulating, and amplifying content, and in doing so they introduce a logic of recognition that operates independently of epistemic and ethical criteria: content is elevated by engagement, not by evidentiary quality, so that popularity, affective resonance, and short-form clarity can each be mistaken for scholarly authority, credibility, and interpretive competence respectively. These risks are not external to education, because students already learn religion through these platforms. The significance of the Indonesian digital-Islam scholarship, read collectively rather than case by case, is that it documents this displacement across multiple sites and actors. Studies of the fragmentation and attempted reclamation of moderate religious authority ([Akmaliah, 2020, 2022](#)), of the post-Reformasi marketplace of preaching ([Arifianto, 2020](#)), of contestation through disruptive media ([Jahroni & Faisal Bakti, 2023](#)), and of fragmentation even within established institutional bodies such as the MUI in provincial towns ([Rosidi et al., 2021](#)) converge on a single finding: recognition is increasingly conferred by visibility and circulation, and this new mechanism competes with, rather than merely supplements, the classical and institutional grounds of legitimacy. It is this convergence, not any single study, that establishes the reconfiguration the framework names, and it is precisely because visibility can override epistemic accountability that digital literacy is required as a distinct evaluative dimension rather than as an optional technical skill.

Digital religious authority is also gendered and socially situated. Beta shows that young Muslim women's groups can function as religious influencers at the intersection of commerce, piety, and politics ([Beta, 2019](#)). Muttaqin demonstrates how social media preaching can reproduce gender bias under the authority of popular religious figures ([Muttaqin, 2020](#)). Fuad and Ramadhan show that feminist contestation of religious authority has implications for Islamic education ([Nur Fuad & Rizky Ramadhan, 2023](#)). These studies make clear that digital authority is not neutral.

It involves bodies, gender, class, aesthetics, ideology, commerce, and public participation.

For Islamic education, the implication is precise. Students should be trained to evaluate how authority is constructed. They need to ask who speaks, from what educational background, with which sources, under what institutional affiliation, through what media logic, and with what ethical consequences. A preacher may be popular but weak in source-based reasoning. A scholar may be highly trained but unable to communicate publicly. An institution may be accredited but weak in ethical formation. A pesantren may preserve adab but require stronger digital literacy. Authority must therefore be evaluated through multiple criteria.

A Pedagogical Framework for Authority Reconfiguration

The fourth finding is that Islamic education requires a framework for evaluating reconfigured authority. This article proposes four dimensions: epistemic depth, ethical formation, institutional credibility, and digital literacy. These dimensions synthesize the classical concern with *'ilm* and adab, the institutional concern with credibility and accountability, and the contemporary concern with digital mediation.

Two questions bear on the adequacy of this scheme: why these dimensions are conceptually distinct, and why, taken together, they are sufficient for the analytical task the framework is designed to perform. They are distinct because each names a ground of legitimacy that the others cannot supply. Epistemic depth concerns what is known and how well; ethical formation concerns the disposition with which knowledge is held and communicated; these are kept separate because the sources consistently treat competence and character as independently variable, since a scholar may possess one without the other, and authority fails differently in each case. Institutional credibility concerns the structures that authorize and warrant teaching, a

matter neither reducible to individual knowledge nor to individual character, since it pertains to the organization of trust across a community. Digital literacy concerns the conditions of mediation under which claims to authority now circulate and are recognized, a criterion that has no classical equivalent and cannot be absorbed into the other three, because it addresses not the speaker's qualities or the institution's standing but the logic of the channel through which recognition is conferred. Removing any one dimension would leave a class of illegitimate authority that the remaining three cannot detect: knowledge without ethics, competence without institutional accountability, or scholarly and institutional legitimacy without the capacity to evaluate how visibility distorts recognition.

The claim to sufficiency is bounded rather than absolute. These four dimensions are sufficient in that they encompass the grounds of religious authority surfaced by the historical-conceptual analysis undertaken here, the epistemic, the ethical, the institutional, and the mediational, which correspond to the successive registers through which authority has been recognized across classical, modern, and digital conditions. The framework does not claim to exhaust every conceivable basis of authority: dimensions such as charismatic appeal, political power, or economic patronage also shape religious authority and may warrant integration in future elaborations of the model. What the framework claims is narrower and defensible: that for the pedagogical task of teaching students to evaluate legitimate religious authority under contemporary conditions, these four dimensions capture the criteria that the analysis identified as decisive, in a form that is non-redundant and jointly adequate to that task.

Epistemic depth refers to serious engagement with Islamic sources, interpretive traditions, and contemporary knowledge. It protects students from fragmented learning and superficial religiosity. It also enables them to distinguish between evidence-

based argument, personal opinion, ideological persuasion, and motivational rhetoric. Solahudin and Fakhruroji show that internet-based Islamic learning practices in Indonesia are connected to religious populism and authority. This reinforces the need for students to learn how arguments are produced and how sources are used (Solahudin & Fakhruroji, 2019). Ulya similarly emphasizes that digital da'wa reshapes preaching practices and religious authority, requiring more reflective approaches to online Islamic discourse (Ulyan, 2023).

Ethical formation refers to adab, integrity, humility, and responsibility in producing and receiving religious knowledge. It prevents authority from becoming self-display, domination, or manipulation. The question is not only whether a claim is technically correct, but also whether it is delivered with responsibility, contextual awareness, and concern for social consequences. Islamic education should therefore evaluate authority through moral responsibility as well as knowledge competence.

Institutional credibility refers to accountable structures of learning. Pesantren, madrasah, Islamic schools, universities, and digital learning platforms need standards that connect teaching, curriculum, competence, and public trust. Institutions should not merely authorize teachers through administrative status. They should cultivate intellectual discipline, research literacy, pedagogical competence, and ethical accountability. In this sense, institutional credibility is not bureaucracy; it is the social organization of trust.

Digital literacy in Islamic education is not merely technical competence in using media; it is the ability to evaluate how platforms, algorithms, visual persuasion, and audience metrics shape the credibility of religious claims. Students need to evaluate recommendation systems, engagement metrics, visual persuasion, rhetorical style, emotional framing, source citation, and the

difference between learning and consumption. Slama notes that practicing Islam through social media has become a significant feature of Indonesian Muslim life (Slama, 2018). Lengauer shows that digital Islamic socialities in Bandung involve the sharing of piety, moral aspiration, and communal belonging. These findings indicate that digital literacy must become part of religious literacy (Lengauer, 2018).

The following table synthesizes the proposed framework by connecting classical sources of authority, modern-digital conditions, and the pedagogical tasks required in contemporary Islamic education.

Table 1. Pedagogical Framework for Evaluating Reconfigured Religious Authority

Dimension	Classical Basis	Modern-Digital Condition	Pedagogical Task
Epistemic depth	<i>ʿIlm</i> , textual mastery, sanad, scholarly debate.	Information abundance, short-form content, populist claims.	Teach source evaluation, argument analysis, and interpretive discipline.
Ethical formation	Adab, humility, responsibility, teacherly example.	Self-display, controversy, affective persuasion, gendered authority.	Cultivate integrity, digital ethics, and responsible religious communication.
Institutional credibility	Halaqah, madrasa, pesantren, scholarly recognition.	Accreditation, certification, academic degrees,	Connect credentials with competence, quality

		digital platforms.	assurance, and public trust.
Digital literacy	Pedagogical proximity and gradual learning.	Algorithmic visibility, metrics, influencer culture, fragmented learning.	Train students to distinguish scholarship, preaching, ideology, and popularity.

This framework clarifies the meaning of reconfiguration. As a synthesis, the framework shows that authority is neither inherited intact from tradition nor produced entirely by modern institutions or digital platforms. Reconfiguration does not mean that classical authority disappears and digital authority replaces it. It means that sources of legitimacy are rearranged. Sanad interacts with certification. Adab interacts with professional ethics. Kiai authority interacts with institutional accreditation. Scholarly recognition interacts with public communication. Digital visibility interacts with source verification.

The framework also avoids false oppositions. Classical transmission and modern academic structures can support one another when both are grounded in knowledge and responsibility. Pesantren and universities can complement each other when pesantren contributes embodied adab and textual continuity, while universities contribute research discipline and critical inquiry. Digital platforms can support da’wa and learning when they are connected to verification, source-based reasoning, and ethical communication. The aim is not to reject digital religion, but to reconnect it with the epistemic and ethical foundations of Islamic education.

The contribution of this article lies in identifying religious authority as a central issue in Islamic education. Authority is not

merely held by ulama, kiai, lecturers, or digital preachers. It is produced through educational processes: how knowledge is taught, how teachers are recognized, how institutions authorize learning, how students evaluate claims, and how publics respond to religious messages. Treating authority as a pedagogical configuration enables Islamic education to respond more critically to modern and digital changes.

Although the framework is developed largely through Indonesian material, its analytical reach is not confined to that setting. A distinction clarifies the scope of the claim. The four dimensions function as analytical categories that are not specific to any single national context: the tension between epistemic depth and mere information, between ethical formation and rhetorical performance, between institutional accountability and formal credentialing, and between substantive legitimacy and algorithmic visibility, arises wherever Islamic education operates under conditions of institutional differentiation and digital mediation (Eickelman & W. Anderson, 2003; Krämer & Schmidtke, 2006; Zaman, 2002). What is context-specific is the institutional form through which each dimension is realized. In Indonesia these forms include the pesantren and the authority of the kiai (Bruinessen, 2012; Isbah, 2020); in other settings the same dimensions are instantiated through different structures, such as the madrasa systems of South Asia, the established scholarly institutions of the Arab world, or the diaspora educational settings of Europe and North America, each with its own configuration of institutional and digital authority (Bunt, 2018; Hefner, 2007; Zaman, 2002). The framework therefore travels as a set of evaluative criteria that any of these contexts can apply, while the specification of which institutions carry those criteria remains a matter for context-specific analysis. Understood in this way, the article contributes to international debates on religious authority and Islamic education by offering a portable pedagogical vocabulary for a problem, the reconfiguration of authority across classical, institutional, and

digital registers, that is common to Muslim educational settings globally even where its concrete manifestations differ.

This approach has practical implications. Islamic education curricula should include the history of Islamic knowledge transmission, the meaning of sanad and ijazah, the role of adab, the formation of institutions, the function of academic credentials, and the dynamics of digital religious authority. Teachers can invite students to compare religious arguments, trace sources, analyze online preaching, evaluate institutional credibility, and reflect on the ethics of religious communication. Such pedagogy prepares students to become responsible religious subjects who respect tradition, engage modern institutions, and navigate digital complexity critically.

CONCLUSION

This article has examined the reconfiguration of religious authority in Islamic education by placing authority within the relationship among knowledge, adab, ulama, institutions, modern credentials, and digital visibility. The analysis shows that religious authority in Islamic education is neither a fixed possession of particular actors nor a mere product of public popularity. It is a pedagogical configuration formed through the interaction of epistemic depth, ethical formation, institutional credibility, and digital literacy.

The study answers its research objective by showing that the classical, modern, and digital grounds of religious authority, namely scholarly transmission, institutional credentialing, and algorithmic visibility, do not operate as separate historical stages but as coexisting mechanisms that interact, compete, and sometimes correct one another. The significance of this result lies less in cataloguing these mechanisms than in what their coexistence implies for Islamic education. If legitimacy is now conferred

through several partly independent channels simultaneously, then no single inherited criterion, neither the authority of the teacher, nor the warrant of the institution, nor the reach of the platform, can by itself distinguish legitimate from illegitimate authority. This is why the reconfiguration of authority is not merely a descriptive fact about contemporary religious life but a pedagogical problem: it shifts the burden of evaluation onto the learner, and therefore onto the educational settings responsible for forming the learner's judgment. The theoretical contribution of the study is to specify that burden as a set of teachable criteria rather than leaving it to intuition or exposure.

The main conceptual contribution of this article is the proposal to treat religious authority as an explicit object of Islamic educational literacy. This contribution can be located precisely against the existing literature. Scholarship on religious authority in digital Islam and the sociology of religion has established, with considerable analytical force, how authority is formed, contested, fragmented, and redistributed across publics, platforms, and institutions. That scholarship is, by design, diagnostic: it explains the conditions under which authority is produced and destabilized. The present framework advances this body of work in a specific way, by converting its descriptive findings into evaluative and pedagogical criteria. Where the existing literature shows that visibility increasingly competes with scholarly legitimacy, the framework specifies the criteria by which a learner can tell the two apart, and locates the responsibility for teaching those criteria within Islamic education. The advance, in other words, is from an account of how authority is contested in society to a framework for how authority can be evaluated in the classroom. Concretely, this reframes students as evaluators rather than only recipients of religious instruction, and it requires a curriculum connecting source criticism, interpretive discipline, adab, institutional accountability, and digital literacy, so that Islamic education can

distinguish scholarly legitimacy from popularity, credentials from competence, and digital visibility from epistemic accountability.

The article also shows that Islamic education should avoid two reductions. The first is reducing authority to inherited tradition alone, because contemporary Islamic education also requires academic rigor, institutional accountability, and public communication. The second is reducing authority to modern or digital recognition alone, because credentials and visibility require knowledge, adab, and scholarly responsibility. A constructive response lies in integrating classical transmission, modern institutional standards, and critical digital literacy within a coherent pedagogical framework.

The principal limitation of this study follows from its design: the framework is analytically warranted but not empirically validated. It is grounded in a defensible historical-conceptual synthesis of the sources of religious authority, but it has not been tested against field data on how students, teachers, pesantren, universities, or digital preachers actually negotiate authority in specific educational settings. Two consequences follow. First, the framework's claim to capture the decisive criteria of authority remains, at this stage, a conceptual claim open to empirical revision; validation would require studies that operationalize the four dimensions and examine whether they function as evaluative criteria in practice. Second, and as a specific case of this, the framework's transferability beyond the Indonesian material through which it was developed, argued above at the level of analytical categories, likewise awaits empirical demonstration in the different institutional settings of other Muslim educational contexts. These limitations do not undermine the framework's conceptual contribution, but they define precisely what that contribution is: a warranted analytical proposal that invites, rather than forecloses, empirical testing.

Several research designs would allow the framework to be tested, each addressing a specific claim it makes. A curriculum-evaluation study could operationalize the four dimensions as explicit assessment criteria within an Islamic-education programme and measure whether instruction organized around them improves students' ability to distinguish scholarly legitimacy from popularity and credentials from competence, a direct test of whether the dimensions function pedagogically as claimed. A comparative case study of contrasting institutional types, for instance a traditional pesantren, a modern Islamic university, and a predominantly digital learning platform, could examine how each realizes or neglects the four dimensions, testing both the framework's descriptive reach and the non-redundancy of the dimensions across settings. A multi-context comparative design extending beyond Indonesia to other Muslim educational settings could test the transferability argument by examining which dimensions travel as stated and which require re-specification through local institutional forms. Finally, a validation study using student cohorts could assess whether learners trained on the framework demonstrate measurably stronger discrimination between scholarly authority and algorithmic visibility than untrained peers, providing the empirical warrant the present study cannot supply. Together these designs would move the framework from a conceptually grounded proposal toward an empirically tested instrument for cultivating critical religious literacy.

Even with this limitation, the article makes a clear contribution: by reframing religious authority as a set of teachable and evaluable criteria rather than an inherited possession, it offers Islamic education a portable pedagogical basis for curriculum design and a foundation for the empirical research needed to refine it, and in doing so equips the field to cultivate learners who can navigate plural sources of religious authority with knowledge, adab, critical reasoning, and social responsibility.

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