

Communication Accommodation of the Kiai in the Effort to Acculturate Islamic Culture at Pondok Pesantren Az-Zahrowiyah Perigi, Tambelangan, Sampang

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Keywords	Abstract
Acculturation; Cross-Cultural Communication; Cultural Mediator; Kiai; Pesantren.	Amid the social life of the Madurese community, the acculturation between local traditions and Islamic values continues to unfold at Pondok Pesantren Az-Zahrowiyah Perigi, Tambelangan, Sampang. In this process, the Kiai serves not only as a religious leader but also as a communicator and mediator who maintains the balance between local culture and Islamic teachings. This study aims to provide an in-depth description of the communication strategies employed by the Kiai in managing this acculturation within the pesantren environment. This research uses a qualitative method with a descriptive approach through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and documentation. Data analysis was conducted through reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing to identify patterns and strategic meanings within the Kiai's communication practices in the daily life of the students and the surrounding community. The outputs of this study include a research proposal, a final MBKM Research report, an activity logbook, and a draft scientific article targeted for publication in an accredited national journal. The findings indicate that the Kiai's communication strategies are accommodative, adaptive, and humanistic, enabling him to mitigate cultural conflicts, shape students' behavior, and maintain harmony between Madurese local values and Islamic principles. This research underscores that the success of cultural acculturation in pesantren is strongly influenced by the Kiai's communicative ability to guide, calm, and unite the community.

INTRODUCTION

The Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), developed by Howard Giles (2016), explains that in communication, individuals tend to adjust (accommodate) their speaking style, expressions, and nonverbal behaviors in order to be accepted by their interlocutors and achieve certain social goals, such as creating closeness, gaining approval, or maintaining self-identity. Within this theory, three main strategies are recognized: convergence (adjusting communication to become closer to the interlocutor), divergence (asserting identity by maintaining differences), and maintenance (preserving one's original communication style without adjustment). In socio-religious contexts, figures such as *Kiai* are clear examples of actors who consciously or unconsciously apply these CAT principles. As religious communicators and community leaders, *Kiai* often adapt their delivery of religious messages to the social and cultural backgrounds of the community so that their teachings are easily accepted without creating resistance (Abdullah & Kusaeri, 2024; Azharghany, 2022; Maula & Rofiki, 2025; Muntoha et al., 2025; Nashihin et al., 2025). According to Haya (2019), as religious and cultural leaders, *Kiai* not only teach Islamic

knowledge but also serve as moral and social figures who guide society to live by Islamic values.

In Madurese society, the position of the *Kiai* goes beyond formal religious authority; he becomes a symbol of honor, a protector, and a determinant of the direction of social life. *Kiai* leadership is charismatic, where authority and scholarship provide strong social legitimacy to mediate conflicts and maintain value stability in society (Jauhari et al., 2024; Nasith, 2024; Rahmawati & Ikramatoun, 2025; Zainuddin et al., 2026). As cultural mediators, *Kiai* bridge the gap between the normative teachings of Islam and the empirical cultural practices of the people. Through persuasive and adaptive communication, *Kiai* negotiate cultural values so they remain aligned with Islamic principles without erasing local identity. In this context, cultural acculturation becomes an inseparable process. Cultural acculturation is the encounter between two systems of values in this case, Islam and local culture which produces forms of adaptation and transformation without eliminating their essential character (Roszi, 2018). Throughout the history of Islamization in the Indonesian archipelago, acculturation unfolded peacefully through socio-cultural approaches rather than coercion. Local traditions not in conflict with Islamic teachings were preserved, while those not aligned were adapted to fit Islamic values. In *pesantren* environments, this acculturation is reflected in customs, symbols, and social practices that blend religious elements with local wisdom, such as the use of regional languages in religious lessons, forms of respect toward teachers, and the performance of local traditions within an Islamic framework. In Madura, the socio-cultural dynamics of *pesantren* and the community show a closely interconnected relationship (Taufiqurrahman, 2007). *Pesantren* serve not only as religious educational institutions but also as centers of social, cultural, and moral life. Local values such as *bhepak-bhebu-guru-ratoh* (obedience to parents, teachers, and leaders) strengthen the *pesantren*'s position as a respected institution and moral reference point. In such a social setting, *pesantren* become spaces where Islamic values and Madurese traditions interact. Therefore, the *Kiai*'s role in managing cross-cultural communication becomes essential for maintaining harmony between the *pesantren* and the community.

One concrete example of this communication accommodation can be found at *Pondok Pesantren Az-Zahrowiyah* Perigi, Tambelangan, Sampang. There are several findings indicating cultural and moral shifts among the students, which challenge efforts to harmonize Islamic teachings with local values. First, the noise from motorcycle exhausts frequently used by local residents and newcomers is considered disruptive to the sanctity of worship and the atmosphere of tranquility that should be maintained. Second, the excessive use of loudspeakers during *pesantren* activities disrupts the focus of religious lessons, reducing the effectiveness of the learning and devotional environment. Third, the emerging trend of Jamet style imitation among new students shows outside influences entering the *pesantren*, potentially lowering levels of modesty and decorum expected in Islamic cultural settings. Fourth, there are indications of moral decline or reduced etiquette, believed to result from interactions between students and newcomers from outside the village, causing *pesantren* values to gradually erode. In this situation, the acculturation of Islamic teachings and local culture becomes a strategic necessity to preserve both religious values and local wisdom while ensuring relevance for contemporary students. Based on an initial interview conducted on 20 September 2025 with KH. Muhyiddin Ahmad, the elder and advisor of *Pondok*

Pesantren Az-Zahrowiyah Perigi, it is known that he frequently uses adaptive communication strategies when addressing differences in community habits, such as using the Madurese language in sermons, employing local analogies to explain Islamic concepts, and adopting a tolerant attitude toward traditions that do not contradict Islamic teachings.



Figure 1. Interview with the Kiai

These communication strategies demonstrate how the *Kiai* applies CAT principles contextually: adjusting communication style (convergence) to build closeness with the community, emphasizing religious values when Islamic principles are threatened (divergence), and maintaining the *pesantren's* distinctive spiritual communication patterns (maintenance).

Previous studies highlight the importance of the *Kiai's* role as a mediator capable of resolving issues within both the *pesantren* and the broader community. Utami (2015) found that *Kiai* plays a strategic role in forming adaptive communication patterns among students, the community, and evolving local traditions. Ismail and Wardi (2019) emphasize how Madurese society upholds the philosophy of *bhepak bhebu guru ratoh*, where obedience is given to parents, teachers, and governing authorities. Falakhina and Hernawati (2025) show that *Kiai* act as guides and teachers equipped with deep religious knowledge. Ramadhan (2018) found that *Kiai* maintains harmony in *pesantren* life through communal prayers and regular lessons. Darwis Nasution (2017) argues that the *Kiai's* charismatic leadership can mitigate social conflict and strengthen cultural integration. Savitri and Utami (2015) note that effective cross-cultural communication depends on one's ability to manage anxiety and uncertainty arising from differences in values and norms. In the context of cross-cultural communication, interactions occur among individuals or groups from different cultural backgrounds, involving adaptation, interpretation, and meaning exchange. This concept is relevant in *pesantren*, where students come from diverse regions and cultural backgrounds, making intercultural communication essential for shaping identity and social interaction with the local community.

Thus, this study seeks to examine how the *Kiai* implements communication accommodation strategies in the process of cultural acculturation between Islam and local traditions at *Pondok Pesantren Az-Zahrowiyah Perigi*. The research focuses on understanding the role of the *Kiai's* accommodative communication as a means of social mediation and how these communicative approaches maintain balance between Islamic values and Madurese

cultural traditions. This study is expected to provide an in-depth understanding of accommodative communication practices within *pesantren* and enrich theoretical perspectives on cross-cultural communication in religious and social contexts in Madura.

Based on this background, the study is formulated to answer the main question of how the *Kiai* accommodates communication in the acculturation process between Islamic values and local traditions within the *pesantren* environment. This formulation serves as the analytical basis for examining the *Kiai*'s communicative role in maintaining value balance, mitigating cultural conflict, and ensuring harmony between Islamic teachings and local wisdom. In line with this problem formulation, the primary aim of the study is to describe in depth the *Kiai*'s communication accommodation strategies in managing the acculturation process at *Pondok Pesantren Az-Zahrowiyah Perigi*. This research seeks to reveal the approaches, communication patterns, and cultural adaptation practices employed by the *Kiai*, which may serve as a conceptual model for developing cross-cultural communication in *pesantren* and other Islamic educational institutions.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Approach and Type

This study employed a qualitative research design with a descriptive approach. A qualitative method is chosen because it aligns with the primary objective of the research, which is to understand and describe in depth the subjective experiences of the *Kiai* in carrying out religious communication related to the acculturation process between Islamic culture and local traditions at *Pondok Pesantren Az-Zahrowiyah*, Perigi, Tambelangan, Sampang. Qualitative research is not oriented toward numbers, statistics, or generalization; rather, it seeks to uncover the meanings, values, and interpretations given by research subjects to the phenomena they experience.

A descriptive approach is used because this study aims to portray in detail and systematically how the *Kiai*'s religious communication strategies are applied in social interactions, both with students (*santri*) and the surrounding community. This approach enables the researcher to describe these communication practices within their daily context and interpret the meanings embedded in them without altering or manipulating existing realities. As explained by Sugiyono (2023), descriptive qualitative research seeks to understand social reality as it is, allowing the researcher to capture the wholeness of the phenomenon from the participants' perspectives.

In the context of this study, the descriptive approach provides space to understand how the *Kiai* builds social legitimacy, manages value conflicts, and creates harmony between Islamic teachings and local Madurese traditions. Through this approach, the researcher not only describes religious communication practices as a means of message delivery but also reveals their roles as processes of meaning negotiation, identity formation, and cultural value reinforcement within the *pesantren* and community.

Thus, this descriptive qualitative study is expected not only to produce empirical descriptions of the *Kiai*'s communication strategies but also to provide deeper understanding of how religious communication functions as a bridge for cultural acculturation and serves as an essential instrument for preserving Islamic values and local wisdom amidst the social dynamics of Madurese society.

Research Stages

This study conducted through three main stages:

1. Pre-Field Stage (\pm 1 month / September 2025)

Activities include:

- a. Finalizing the research proposal and preparing instruments (semi-structured interview guide, observation guide).
- b. Conducting an in-depth literature review on intercultural communication, Islamic cultural acculturation, and the role of the *Kiai* in *pesantren*.
- c. Managing research permits at *Pondok Pesantren Az-Zahrowiyah Perigi*.

Outputs: interview protocol, observation guide, and research permit letters.

Indicators: availability of valid research instruments and granted field access.

2. Fieldwork Stage (\pm 2 months / October–November 2025)

This core stage includes data collection through:

- a. Participant Observation: observing daily activities of *santri*, *Kiai*–*santri* interactions, *dakwah* activities, and local cultural practices integrated into *pesantren* life.
- b. In-Depth Interviews: conducted with 10–15 key informants (*Kiai*, *Lora*, selected *santri*, and community leaders) selected using purposive sampling until data saturation is achieved.
- c. Document Study: gathering relevant documents such as *pesantren* archives, records of religious activities, and visual documentation (photos, brochures, or local manuscripts).

Outputs: raw data including interview transcripts, observation notes, and supporting documents.

Indicators: collection of comprehensive primary data and attainment of data saturation.

3. Data Analysis and Report Writing Stage (\pm 1 month / November–December 2025)

Data are analyzed using Miles & Huberman's interactive model (1994), consisting of:

- a. Data Reduction: filtering and focusing data on themes relevant to the research questions.
- b. Data Display: presenting data in narrative form, thematic charts, or diagrams to support conclusion drawing.
- c. Conclusion Drawing/Verification: deriving meanings from the data and validating them through member checks with key informants.

Outputs: research report draft, research poster, and scientific article for a national journal.

Indicators: completion of a coherent research report and submission-ready scientific article.

Variables Observed

In qualitative research, the term “variables” refers to research focuses. The observed variables in this study include:

- a. *Kiai*'s communication accommodation strategies: *dakwah* messages, cultural symbols, communication media, and persuasion techniques.
- b. Role of the *Lora* (the *Kiai*'s son): functioning as an internal informant and communication mediator.
- c. Responses of *santri* and the community: acceptance, resistance, or adaptation toward cultural acculturation.

- d. Supporting and inhibiting factors of communication accommodation: local traditions, religious doctrines, *Kiai's* authority, and social conditions.

Research Design

This study adopts a single case study design with *Pondok Pesantren Az-Zahrowiyah Perigi* as the unit of analysis. Data collection techniques include:

- a. In-depth interviews with the *Kiai*, *Lora*, *santri*, and community leaders.
- b. Participant observation of *santri* activities, *pesantren* traditions, and interactions between local culture and Islamic values.
- c. Documentation, including *pesantren* archives, activity records, photos, and other relevant documents.

Data analysis follows Miles & Huberman's model (data reduction, display, and conclusion drawing/verification), combined with thematic analysis to identify patterns in the *Kiai's* communication strategies in cultural acculturation.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Research Findings

This section presents the research findings regarding the communication strategies employed by the *Kiai* in the acculturation process between Islamic culture and local Madurese traditions at *Pondok Pesantren Az-Zahrowiyah Perigi*. The data are thematically organized to illustrate the main emerging patterns based on in-depth interviews, participant observation, and *pesantren* documentation.

1. The *Kiai's* Communication Strategies in Guiding *Santri*

The findings indicate that the *Kiai* applies an accommodative, gentle, and calming communication approach in guiding the *santri*. The *Kiai* adapts his language style and tone according to the characteristics of the person he is speaking to. During an interview, (K1) stated:

"When speaking to the santri, I use a soft tone so they don't feel pressured. When people are yelled at, they tend to close their hearts."

This is reinforced by the testimony of a *santri* (S1), who said that the *Kiai* *"never gets angry, but his words are always firm and make us aware."*

This approach is also evident when dealing with *santri* influenced by outside cultures, such as the *jamet* trend, untidy hair, tight clothing, or motorbike convoys. Instead of punishing them directly, the *Kiai* chooses to give personal advice. A caretaker (P1) explained:

"When there are santri who follow the jamet style or join convoys, the Kiai always says: remind them gently. Santri have soft hearts when spoken to kindly."

Thus, the *Kiai's* communication pattern emphasizes exemplary conduct, gentleness, and interpersonal approaches, making it easier for *santri* to accept guidance.

2. Managing Cultural Conflicts within the *Pesantren* Environment

The research shows that cultural conflicts around the *pesantren* vary, such as:

- a. The use of loud sound systems during tok-otok events or weddings,
- b. Noisy modified exhausts (*knalpot blong*),
- c. The *jamet* trend and modern lifestyles among youths,
- d. Value conflicts between senior and new *santri*, or influences from newcomers.

The *Kiai* acknowledges that conflict is a natural part of social life. He explained:

“Conflicts will always exist. My duty is to mediate, not to take sides. I talk to both parties.”

In the case of noisy sound systems, the *Kiai* personally visits the sound operator or gathers them in a discussion forum. The *Kiai* said:

“I tell them gently: You may use the sound system, but don’t disturb others. The santri need to study.”

(P1) confirmed that when the *Kiai* or Lora intervenes directly, issues are usually resolved immediately because the community holds him in high regard.

This shows that the *Kiai*’s conflict management is preventive and persuasive rather than repressive, maintaining harmonious relations between the *pesantren* and local community.

3. Instilling Adab and Exemplary Conduct

One significant finding is the *Kiai*’s emphasis on adab (proper manners). According to him:

“Adab is higher than knowledge. No matter how smart a person is, it is meaningless without adab.”

To uphold adab, the *Kiai* implements rules such as:

- a. Prohibition of mobile phones for *santri*,
- b. Restrictions on extreme hairstyles,
- c. Prohibition of tight clothing,
- d. Prohibition of inappropriate outside activities.

However, these rules are applied humanely. The *Kiai* does not immediately punish but provides understanding and example.

(S1) explained:

“The Kiai always reminds us gently. But when it comes to adab, he is firm and uncompromising.”

Pesantren documentation, including written rules and notice boards, reinforces the importance of adab in the *pesantren* environment.

4. Accommodating Local Culture and Aligning It with Sharia

The *Kiai* does not reject Madurese cultural traditions; instead, he aligns them with Islamic values. He explained:

“Culture has good aspects and those that need improvement. I do not change things abruptly. Being harsh will only create resistance.”

Examples of cultural transformation include:

- a. ritual offerings (*sesajen*) replaced with food donations,
- b. incense retained but reinterpreted as room fragrance,
- c. Friday night traditions reinforced with *Yasin* recitation, *Sholawat Diba’*, and collective prayer.

According to (P1), the community easily accepts these changes because the *Kiai* conveys them gently and with relatable examples.

This indicates that the *Kiai*’s strategy is accommodative rather than confrontational, preserving local traditions while ensuring they remain aligned with Islamic principles.

5. Religious Tourism (Toran) as a Form of Wellness Tourism

Another interesting finding is the *Kiai*’s provision of healthy recreation for *santri* through religious tourism, known locally as Toran. (P1) explained:

“The Kiai always says santri need relaxation, but not the kind that leads to negative behavior. Thus, he directs them to religious tours such as Wali Lima or trips around Madura.”

When asked about wellness tourism, the caretaker admitted being unfamiliar with the term:

“To be honest, I didn’t understand the term wellness tourism at first. But after you explained it, I realized that what the Kiai encourages is the same thing.”

Thus, Toran functions as:

- a. Healthy entertainment for *santri*,
- b. Strengthening spiritual development,
- c. Moral control over recreational activities,
- d. A culturally relevant form of modern wellness tourism.

Documentation of Toran activities supports this finding as an effective form of spiritual recreation.

6. Relationship Between the *Pesantren* and Surrounding Community

Residents and *santri* guardians, including Ahyani (M1), described the community’s deep respect for the *Kiai* and view the *pesantren* as a center of peace. He said:

“When there is a problem, people look for the Kiai. His explanations calm the situation.”

He also confirmed the strong relationship between the *pesantren* and the community:

“Santri often help with community events, and we join religious gatherings together. There is no distance between the pesantren and the community.”

For the community, the presence of the *Kiai* helps maintain social harmony, particularly regarding cultural issues such as *rokat somor*, *tok-otok*, and other local traditions.

Discussion

The *Kiai*’s Communication Strategy through Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT)

1. Convergence: Adjusting language and tone

Convergence is evident when the *Kiai* adjusts his speech, tone, and examples to suit the audience. (K1) explained:

“When talking to santri, I use a soft tone so they are not afraid or pressured. But when speaking to elders or community leaders, the language must be more polite. When we speak harshly, people close their hearts.”

(S1) supported this by saying:

“When the Kiai advises or reprimands us, the tone is always soft. But somehow it touches our hearts, so it’s easy to accept.”

Key findings:

- a. The *Kiai* uses a soft tone with *santri*.
- b. He uses more formal, polite language with elders.
- c. He uses local metaphors and stories for easier understanding.

This demonstrates convergence aimed at emotional connection and message effectiveness.

2. Divergence: Maintaining boundaries with incompatible cultural elements

Divergence appears when the *Kiai* sets limits on outside cultures that contradict *pesantren* values such as *jamet* trends, loud exhausts, or inappropriate dancing. (K1) emphasized:

“When it comes to adab, I never compromise. Extreme hairstyles or improper convoys are clearly prohibited. But I explain it gently so they understand.”

(P1) confirmed:

“The jamet trend influenced the new santri. But the Kiai always says: ‘Talk to them gently. Their hearts are soft.’ The prohibition is clear, but the delivery is gentle.”

Key findings:

- The *Kiai* rejects practices conflicting with Islamic values but communicates it softly.
- He guides *santri* back to adab while acknowledging cultural influences.
- Divergence is applied without harming social relations.

3. Maintenance: Consistency in communication as an ulama

Maintenance is reflected in the *Kiai*’s consistent communication style—calm, measured, and exemplary. (K1) said:

“Maintaining authority is not about shouting. It is about aligning words and actions. My teachers taught me this.”

(M1) added:

“The Kiai never speaks harshly. But that is what makes people obey, because he is consistent.”

Key findings:

- a. The *Kiai* maintains a calm, respectful manner of speaking.
- b. His authority comes from consistency, not strictness.
- c. The community respects him because of his stable character.

The *Kiai*’s Rhetoric Through Logos, Pathos, and Ethos

Field findings show that the *Kiai*’s authority is not built through a loud voice, threats, or punishment, but through exemplary conduct, behavioral consistency, and noble character. The *Kiai* explained:

“Maintaining authority is not about getting angry. It is about aligning words with actions.”

In Aristotelian rhetoric theory, the *Kiai*’s communication style reflects the three components of rhetoric:

1. **Ethos (credibility and character)**

The community and the *santri* respect the *Kiai* because of his integrity and consistency. His words and actions are aligned, which strengthens trust. This makes his advice effective and obeyed without coercion.

2. **Logos (reasoning)**

The *Kiai* explains the reasons behind every rule or prohibition logically and concretely. For example, noise from loud sound systems is explained as a disturbance to students who are reciting, and local traditions are clarified through reasonable arguments.

3. **Pathos (emotional appeal)**

The *Kiai* always speaks personally, gently, and with empathy. In handling conflicts, he chooses to “speak kindly” to the person involved, making them feel respected and emotionally touched. This makes the message easier to accept.

Thus, the *Kiai*'s rhetorical style reflects a balance of ethos, logos, and pathos, making his communication highly effective in reducing conflict, guiding the *santri*, and maintaining social harmony.

Cultural Accommodation and the Process of Islam–Madurese Acculturation

The findings show that the *Kiai* does not eliminate local traditions but gradually accommodates them while aligning meanings with Islamic teachings. Examples include:

- a. Replacing offerings with food donations,
- b. Reinterpreting incense use,
- c. Strengthening Friday night traditions with Islamic practices.

Effectiveness is supported by:

- a. Persuasive communication,
- b. Appropriate timing and approach,
- c. Use of local analogies.

This approach allows local traditions to continue while remaining Sharia-compliant.

Religious Tourism as a Form of Wellness Tourism

The Toran program aligns with wellness tourism by promoting spiritual rejuvenation, emotional well-being, and moral protection. Activities such as Wali Lima trips contribute to spiritual and mental wellness, consistent with Susanti (2022), who describes wellness tourism as promoting psychological and spiritual recovery.

Pesantren–Community Harmony in Cultural Communication Perspective

The relationship between the *pesantren* and the surrounding community is very harmonious. A local resident (Ahyani/M1) explained:

“When there is a problem, people look for the Kiai. His explanations are calming.”

The harmonious relationship between the *pesantren* and community reflects the *Kiai*'s cultural authority. His accommodative communication fosters trust, stabilizes social relations, and maintains cultural balance between Islamic values and local Madurese traditions.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the *Kiai* holds a central role in managing the acculturation between Islamic values and Madurese local culture at *Pondok Pesantren Az-Zahrowiyah* through communication accommodation strategies that align with the principles of Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT). The *Kiai* functions as both a social guide and a guardian of cultural harmony by applying convergence through the adaptation of language and local symbols, divergence toward cultural practices inconsistent with *pesantren* values, and maintenance in preserving his communicative identity as a wise and authoritative religious figure. His humanistic and dialogical approach enables effective resolution of cultural conflicts, while his accommodative communication produces a gradual and refined pattern of acculturation that redirects local traditions toward more *syar'i* expressions without eliminating their cultural essence. Additionally, the provision of religious and educational recreational activities reinforces the integration of cultural and Islamic values in the daily lives of the students. The *Kiai*'s exemplary conduct reflected in the consistency between his words and actions stands as the foundational element of effective communication and acculturation, ensuring broad acceptance of his teachings and policies among both the community and the students.

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