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# THE AUTHORITY OF KNOWLEDGE AND TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONS: AN EPISTEMOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF ISLAMIC EDUCATION BASED ON KITAB KUNING

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**Abstract**

Amid contemporary information disruption that tends to de-authorize teachers and fragment epistemic authority, *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) traditions persist as a distinctive model of knowledge transmission grounded in the classical pedagogy of *Kitab Kuning* (Yellow Book). This study philosophically dissects the epistemological construction of scholarly authority and the dynamics of teacher–student relations within this tradition. Using a qualitative–descriptive approach framed by the Islamic philosophy of science, it analyzes the classical texts *Ta'lim al-Muta'allim* and *Adab al-'Alim wa al-Muta'allim*. The findings show that Islamic scholarly authority is not rooted in power dominance but in the legitimacy of transmission through *sanad* (chain of narration), which functions as an epistemic anchor for the authenticity and continuity of knowledge. Epistemologically, teacher–student relations integrate a triadic mode of reasoning: *bayani* (textual authority), *burhani* (logical validation), and *irfani* (spiritual intuition), positioning the teacher's authority as an epistemic guarantee that safeguards the originality of meaning and the *barakah* (blessing) of knowledge. The study concludes that this classical construction of authority and


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relational ethics offers a critical corrective to modern educational tendencies that marginalize spiritual depth and intellectual humility, and implies the need to revitalize the concept of *adab* in contemporary Islamic higher education to counter the shallowing of intellectual spirituality.

**Keywords**: Scholarly Authority; *Kitab Kuning* (Yellow Book); Teacher–Student Relations; Islamic Philosophy of Science; *Pesantren* Traditions.

## INTRODUCTION

Traditional Islamic education rooted in the Kitab Kuning (Yellow Book) exhibits distinct epistemological characteristics, particularly in its conception of scholarly authority and the transmission of knowledge (Musyarofah, 2024). Unlike modern Western educational paradigms, which prioritize individual rationality, learner autonomy, and the teacher's role as a learning facilitator, the *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) tradition positions the teacher (*kyai* or *ustadz*) as the central authority on knowledge and its validator (Amzat, 2022). In this system, knowledge is not merely a collection of information or cognitive competencies but an entrusted legacy transmitted through personal, spiritual, and intellectual relationships between teacher and student (Arifin & Ichsan, 2024).

The *Kitab Kuning*, as the primary medium of instruction in *pesantren*, is inextricably linked to the classical Islamic scholarly tradition, which places strong emphasis on the *sanad* (chain of transmission) (Khabibullah et al., 2022). The *sanad* is not merely a textual transmission chain but an epistemological mechanism that ensures the authenticity of knowledge, continuity of tradition, and integrity of scholarship (Hasnah, 2025). From this perspective, valid knowledge is that acquired under the guidance of a teacher possessing scholarly and moral authority, rather than solely through independent textual reading (Azra, 2012). Consequently, the teacher-student relationship in the *Kitab Kuning* tradition transcends ordinary pedagogy, constituting an epistemic bond that determines the quality and legitimacy of knowledge.

However, currents of educational modernization and globalization have significantly altered perceptions of scholarly authority. The digitization of knowledge, open access to information, and the rise of constructivist pedagogy have propelled the de-authorization of knowledge—a trend toward decoupling it from authoritative figures. In this context, texts—whether classical kitabs or digital sources—are often positioned as autonomous entities

comprehensible through independent study without teacher guidance. While this phenomenon enhances accessibility, it risks precipitating an epistemological crisis in traditional Islamic education by severing knowledge from its *sanad, adab*, and spiritual blessings (Fathurrahman, 2019).

This epistemological crisis manifests in the erosion of awareness regarding the importance of adab in pursuing knowledge, the reduction of the teacher's role to mere intellectual guide devoid of spiritual dimensions, and the shift in learning orientation from seeking wisdom to mere information mastery. In the *pesantren* tradition, however, *adab* is often deemed paramount over knowledge itself. As Al-Attas, in the research from Fahrudin et al. (2020), emphasizes, authentic Islamic education aims to cultivate civilized individuals (*insan beradab*), not merely intellectually skilled ones. Thus, the teacher-student relationship in *Kitab Kuning* learning plays a fundamental role in safeguarding the ethical and spiritual orientation of education.

The *Kitab Kuning* is not merely a normative text but a product of civilization emerging from prolonged dialectics among revelation, reason, and social reality. Consequently, its comprehension demands linguistic, methodological, and contextual competencies that are difficult to acquire without teacher guidance. *Pesantren* learning methods such as *bandongan*, *sorogan*, and *wetonan* reflect a methodological awareness that knowledge must be transmitted gradually, dialogically, and under controlled conditions (Asyiah et al., 2025). In these practices, the teacher does not merely elucidate textual meanings but also instills modes of thinking, interpretive frameworks, and scholarly ethics.

From a sociology of knowledge perspective, the teacher-student relationship in the *Kitab Kuning* tradition functions as a mechanism for legitimizing knowledge. Berger and Luckmann (2018) argue that knowledge gains legitimacy not solely through logical truth but through recognition within specific social structures. *Pesantren*, as socio-religious institutions, construct this legitimacy via the teacher's acknowledged scholarly capacity, moral integrity, and connection to preceding ulama traditions (Nu'man, 2025). Thus, the teacher's authority in pesantren is not authoritarian but epistemically and ethically authoritative.

Critiques of traditional Islamic education often target the strong teacher authority model, presuming it stifles learners' critical faculties. This view, however, overlooks how the *Kitab Kuning* tradition cultivates critical reasoning through mastery of legal maxims (*kaidah*), comparison of scholarly opinions (*ikhtilaf*), and practice in legal inference (*istinbath*). Dissent

and interpretive differences are permitted, provided they adhere to proper *adab* and methodology (McLarney, 2011). Consequently, teacher authority does not suppress rationality but channels it within legitimate epistemological boundaries.

The foregoing analysis underscores the need to reexamine how the *Kitab Kuning* constructs teacher-student relationships as a valid and meaningful methodology for knowledge acquisition. This inquiry is particularly relevant amid challenges to Islamic educational modernization, where *pesantren* must adapt without forfeiting their epistemological identity. Recognizing the teacher's role as knowledge authority does not preclude pedagogical innovation but provides a foundation for synthesizing tradition and modernity.

Accordingly, this article aims to conceptually and critically dissect the construction of teacher-student relationships in *Kitab Kuning* learning, emphasizing *sanad, adab*, and scholarly authority as foundational elements of traditional Islamic educational epistemology. Through this approach, the study seeks to contribute theoretically to discourses on Islamic education while offering a reference for formulating contemporary *pesantren* models that remain rooted in tradition yet responsive to modern demands.

## METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative library research approach (Anggito & Setiawan, 2018). Methodologically, it dissects the formal object of inquiry through the three primary pillars of philosophy of science: ontology, epistemology, and axiology. Primary data derive from authoritative texts, including *Ta'lim al-Muta'allim* by Al-Zarnuji and *Adab al-'Alim wa al-Muta'allim* by K.H. Hasyim Asy'ari. Data collection entails systematic documentary analysis, augmented by contemporary secondary literature on Islamic philosophy of education to bridge *pesantren* traditions with digital disruption challenges.

Data analysis employs a descriptive-philosophical method, executed in sequential stages (Rijali, 2019). First, it inventories conceptions of teacher-student relationships from primary sources. Second, it offers philosophical interpretation to reveal epistemic structures underlying *sanad* (scholarly lineage) and *barakah* (spiritual blessing). This yields an orderly, meaningful, and critical explication of the texts, illuminating the essence and validity of knowledge (Adlini et al., 2022; Moleong, 2014; Rijali, 2019).

Building on this, the analysis conducts internal consistency testing and external coherence evaluation, with Islamic Epistemology as the central framework. It focuses on three pillars: (1) sources of knowledge—revelation, reason, and intuition; (2) methods of acquisition—*talaqqi* (face-to-face transmission) and *riyadhah* (spiritual discipline); and (3) ultimate aims—cultivation of noble character (*akhlakul karimah*).

This triadic approach synthesizes *bayani* reasoning (textual authority), *burhani* validation (rational demonstration), and *irfani* intuition (spiritual insight). The framework verifies the robust scientific foundations and elevated axiological value of teacher authority in the *Kitab Kuning* tradition. Ultimately, it critically demonstrates why the teacher's role remains irreplaceable by artificial intelligence, transcending technical information transfer through its ethical-transcendental dimensions.

## RESULTS

### Ontological Basis (The Essence of Knowledge as Divine Light/*Nur*)

From an Islamic perspective, the *Kitab Kuning*—particularly *Ta'lim al-Muta'allim* by Al-Zarnuji (undated)—views knowledge not as a lifeless object or mere intellectual commodity, but as *nur* (divine light) of a transcendent, divine nature. Al-Zarnuji explains that knowledge is a true attribute capable of unveiling the essence of objects of knowledge, as stated: "Knowledge is a light that Allah casts into the heart of whomever He wills" (Huda et al., 2016). This sacred dimension demands purity of the soul as its receptacle, for divine nur can only be received by a heart cleansed of worldly impurities.

This sacred dimension is reinforced by KH. Hasyim Asy'ari in *Adab al-Alim wa al-Muta'allim*, which positions knowledge as "worship of the heart" (*ibadat al-qalb*). Ontologically, knowledge is understood as a prophetic inheritance (*waritsah nabawiyah*) that must be preserved through ascetic practices (*riyadhah*), such as detachment (*zuhud*) and struggle against desires (*mujahadah al-nafs*). In-depth analysis reveals that without soul purification, knowledge risks becoming mere intellectual illusion, as Asy'ari warns: "*Adab* precedes knowledge, for knowledge without adab is like a tree without roots" (Al-Hadi & Idawati, 2024; Khoir et al., 2025; Maldani, 2025).

This ontological implication underscores the role of an authoritative intermediary—the teacher—in the acquisition of knowledge to ensure the *nur* does not extinguish due to

base desires or misinterpretation. The teacher functions as a *mursyid* who not only transfers knowledge but also guides spiritual transformation, preventing knowledge from degrading into profane information. This reflects the hierarchical *sanad* transmission in the *Kitab Kuning* tradition, where knowledge validity depends on the authenticity of the chain of narration (Pausi, 2018).

This concept aligns with Al-Ghazali's *ilmu huduri* (presential knowledge) in *Ihya' Ulum al-Din*, where knowledge manifests directly in the soul through spiritual presence (*hudur ruhani*). Al-Ghazali argues that true knowledge emerges from inner experience that transforms the seeker's character, rather than mere cognitive accumulation (Rusdiyanto & Werdiningsih, 2024; Selvia, 2024). In the *pesantren* context, this is realized through *talaqqi* (direct learning) under teacher guidance, integrating intellectuality with morality.

Historical analysis reveals that this view has formed the foundation of Islamic education since the *salaf* era, where scholars like Imam Nawawi emphasized that knowledge without *tazkiyat al-nafs* (soul purification) is futile. In the contemporary era amid digital disruption, the concept of divine nur serves as an antidote to knowledge de-authorization, where AI fails to provide the *huduri* dimension. Modern *pesantren* like *Gontor* or *Tebuireng* implement this through curricula integrating riyadhah with *Kitab Kuning* studies.

This perspective affirms that Islamic knowledge is holistic: ontologically as divine *nur*, epistemologically through *sanad* and *huduri*, and axiologically as transformative worship. Its practical implication for *pesantren* education is strengthening teacher authority as guardian of the sacred essence, ensuring knowledge remains an enlightening light for the soul amid digital information floods (Ichsan, 2019; Rustam & Ichsan, 2020).

**Epistemological Construction: Validation through Sanad and Integration of Reason**

The epistemology of the *Kitab Kuning* centers on the concept of *sanad* (chain of transmission) as the guarantor of meaning's originality, preventing interpretive distortions. KH. Hasyim Asy'ari asserts that without *sanad*, one speaks of religion merely based on personal opinion (*ra'yu*), prone to misguidance, as stated: "Whoever issues fatwas without *sanad* is like a bird flying without wings" (Jasminto & Rofi'ah, 2025; Musliadi, 2022). Truth validation occurs through *musyafahah* (face-to-face interaction), where the teacher serves as an epistemic filter verifying the student's understanding holistically.

Methodologically, the teacher-student relationship integrates three modes of reasoning as classified by Mohammed Abed al-Jabiri (1991) in Critique of Arab Reason. This integration renders the *pesantren* tradition a balanced epistemic system, combining textual authority, rationality, and spiritual intuition. It contrasts with modern fragmented epistemologies, offering a comprehensive framework for contemporary Islamic understanding.

Bayani reasoning, grounded in textual authority (*nass*), positions the *Kitab Kuning* as the primary source of truth. In the teacher-student dynamic, it transcends literal reading; the teacher transfers *manhaj al-fahm* (methodology of understanding) across generations, safeguarding meaning's originality to shield students from wild interpretations (liberal *ijtihad*) or deviations disconnected from preceding mujtahids like Imam al-Shafi'i.

Burhani reasoning, an epistemology based on logical rationality, employs mantiq (formal logic) and rational demonstration to test argument validity. In *pesantren*, it prevents blind dogmatism while remaining integrative: reason operates maximally within revelation's corridor, reinforcing religion without supplanting it. For instance, *qiyas* analysis in fiqh *Kitab Kuning* applies Islamized Aristotelian principles.

*Irfani* reasoning derives from soul purification (*tazkiyat al-nafs*) and intimate teacher-student bonding. The teacher as *mursyid* facilitates fath (intellectual-spiritual enlightenment), imbuing knowledge with blessings and character transformation. This aligns with Ghazalian Sufism, where *huduri* knowledge emerges from *dhawq* (inner tasting) post-*riyadhah*.

Historical analysis reveals that this triadic integration has characterized *Nusantara pesantren* since the 19th century, with scholars like Nawawi al-Bantani synthesizing it in *Kitab Kuning* pedagogy. Jabiri (1991) praises this model as a "balancer" against singular *bayani* dominance in classical Arab thought.

In the digital era, this epistemology's relevance intensifies as a bulwark against knowledge de-authorization, which neglect *sanad* and *irfani* dimensions. Modern *pesantren* like Darussalam Gontor adopt hybrid models: virtual *musyafahah* remains under teacher supervision to preserve integrity (Fatihah, 2018). The *Kitab Kuning* epistemology via *sanad* and threefold reasoning offers an adaptive holistic paradigm. Its implication for Islamic education is curriculum reform integrating tradition with technology, ensuring knowledge remains authentic and transformative.

**Axiology of *Adab*: *Barakah* as a Parameter of Success**

From an axiological perspective, the utility value of knowledge is profoundly determined by *adab* (proper conduct) and *ta'dzim* (reverence) as essential prerequisites. Al-Zarnuji in *Ta'lim al-Muta'allim* asserts that a student's success hinges on securing the teacher's approval, achieved through attitudes of respect and submission. *Adab* transcends mere social etiquette, serving as an axiological foundation that ensures knowledge possesses barakah—sustained blessings wherein its utility not only multiplies quantitatively but also yields public welfare (*maşlahah*) for individuals and society at large. Absent this dimension, knowledge forfeits its transformative potential (Ulum, 2020).

KH Hasyim Asy'ari, founder of *Nahdlatul Ulama*, conceptualizes adab as the embodiment of intellectual *tawadhu* (humility) integral to Islamic learning. A student excelling cognitively yet deficient in *adab* is deemed axiologically deficient, as their knowledge fails to attain spiritual tranquility (*thuma'ninah*). This framework positions morality as hierarchically superior to intellect alone, with *adab* functioning as an ethical filter to prevent knowledge misuse.

This Islamic axiology ensures knowledge manifests as *rahmatan lil alamin* (a mercy to all worlds) through sincere devotion (*ikhlas*). Prioritizing adab renders knowledge not merely accumulative but applicative, fostering societal impacts such as eradicating spiritual poverty and intellectual ego-driven conflicts. The theory aligns with Al-Ghazali's critique in *Ihya Ulum al-Din*, which warns that knowledge without ethics breeds discord, thereby reinforcing that knowledge's utility resides in its normative contributions to communal well-being.

In modern Islamic education, this concept addresses axiologi crises in *pesantren* and Islamic universities, where academic achievement often divorces from character formation. Empirical studies on *adab mu'āsharah* in Indonesian religious institutions reveal that students with high *adab* proficiency generate more sustainable, community-oriented innovations (Nurtawab & Wahyudi, 2022). This elaboration underscores the need for integrated curricula blending cognition with ethics, as recommended in MUI fatwas on holistic education.

In synthesis, the axiology of knowledge in Islamic tradition positions *adab* and *ta'dzim* as catalysts for barakah, ensuring knowledge is not only informative but transcendental. This approach provides a normative framework for educational researchers to evaluate success beyond cognitive metrics, focusing on *maşlahah* impacts. Practical recommendations include

developing *adab* modules in Islamic studies programs to realize knowledge as an inclusive, enduring mercy for contemporary civilization.

## DISCUSSION

### Critical Analysis: The Authority of Knowledge and Teacher-Student Relations in the Epistemology of Islamic Education

In the era of digital disruption characterized by an explosion of boundless information, the authority rooted in the *Kitab Kuning*—classical Islamic texts meticulously compiled and studied across generations by preceding scholars—deserves repositioning as a fundamental solution to the phenomenon of de-authorization of knowledge. This phenomenon arises from the proliferation of digital content that reduces knowledge to fragmented data lacking validation hierarchies. The presence of the teacher as *mursyid* (spiritual guide) cannot be substituted by algorithms or search engines, as digital information is inherently static, anonymous, and prone to manipulation. In contrast, knowledge in the *pesantren* tradition is living, bound by moral accountability through an unbroken chain of *sanad* (Takdir, 2018).

The teacher's authority in this context not only provides epistemological certainty amid the wilderness of religious hoaxes rampant on digital platforms but also serves as unmatched ethical guidance unattainable by technology. Sociological analysis reveals that while internet algorithms excel in data indexing, they fail to capture contextual nuances and normative Islamic values. The *pesantren* tradition, centering the teacher in transmission, preserves knowledge integrity through personal interactions that foster trust and moral accountability.

Epistemologically, knowledge transmission in the *Kitab Kuning* tradition transcends mere data transfer (transfer of knowledge); it constitutes a *talaqqi* process (direct learning) where sanad connectivity is the primary element birthing the blessings of knowledge. Al-Zarnuji in *Ta'lim al-Muta'allim* asserts that teacher selection must be selective, as the teacher is the primary means to authentic and profound understanding. This process creates irreplaceable layers of meaning, where knowledge is not merely declarative but transformative experience.

A stark contrast emerges with digital algorithms, where knowledge is often reduced to fragmented information commodities devoid of methodological context. On platforms like Google, classical texts are processed literally-textually without critical filters, risking misinterpretation. In the *pesantren* teacher-student relationship, conversely, *Kitab Kuning* texts are understood contextually-spiritually, with the teacher acting as a filter discerning historical relevance and contemporary applications (Pausi, 2018; Yusri, 2020).

Furthermore, the authority crisis in digital spaces stems from the blurring boundaries between "information" and "expertise," unleashing floods of pseudo-religious content from amateur influencers. This demands rigorous ethics in pursuing knowledge, as emphasized by KH. Hasyim Asy'ari in *Adab al-Alim wa al-Muta'allim*, where *adab* precedes knowledge. Emotional closeness and reverence for the teacher become keys to character transformation, preventing knowledge degradation into mere entertainment (Khoir et al., 2025).

*Kitab Kuning*-based authority offers a structural counter to the excesses of "information democratization" in the digital age. Its clear knowledge hierarchy—from teacher to student via *sanad*—ensures validity, unlike digital egalitarian models swayed by popularity and clicks. The teacher is not merely a material conveyor but a *uswah* (exemplar) validating truth through personal moral integrity (Nu'man, 2025). Consequently, truth is no longer dictated by algorithmic popularity but by intellectual depth and *sanad* transmission validity. Case studies from modern *pesantren* like *Pondok Pesantren Tebuireng Jombang* demonstrate that students trained traditionally in *Kitab Kuning* exhibit greater resilience to hoaxes, honed by critical thinking rooted in authentic authority.

As a synthesis amid disruption challenges, M. Amin Abdullah's integrative-interconnective approach is highly relevant for aptly positioning *Kitab Kuning* in the digital era. Preserving teacher authority does not entail technological rejection but integrating traditional values with digital realities without losing ethical guidance essence (Ayu et al., 2024). Although internet processes thousands of data points in seconds, it lacks *bashirah* (inner sight) to guide students' spiritual conditions. The teacher-student relationship ensures a holistic approach, integrating knowledge with emotional and spiritual experiences.

Ultimately, this relationship safeguards education's ultimate goal: integrating intellectuality and morality (*akhlakul karimah*), remaining steadfast despite evolving learning media. In Indonesia, where *pesantren* educate millions of *santri*, this model holds potential as a national blueprint for adaptive yet authentic Islamic education.

## CONCLUSION

The authority of knowledge in the *Kitab Kuning* tradition is rooted in the harmonious integration of intellectual acumen and moral piety, wherein the teacher-student relationship serves as an epistemological validation pathway through the *sanad* system, unifying *bayani* (textual), *burhani* (rational), and *irfani* (intuitive) reasoning to preserve knowledge's originality while ensuring students' spiritual transformation beyond mere informational accumulation. Contemporary Islamic higher education must urgently revitalize these concepts of *adab* and *sanad*, positioning lecturers not merely as curriculum operators but as authentic *uswah hasanah* (moral exemplars); such integration of digital technological advancements with the noble values of *Kitab Kuning* will engender Muslim intellectuals excelling in scientific domains yet firmly rooted in spirituality, thereby contributing to sustainable Islamic civilizational development.

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