

Dynamics of Islamic Boarding School Family Communication in Determining Political Affiliation

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Abstract

The influence of *Kyai* and the *pesantren* family extends beyond religious and social realms and encompasses the political domain as well. The powerful influence of *kyai* and the *pesantren* has become a magnet for politicians not only for religious purposes, but political objectives as well. However, it is not easy for the *kyai* and *pesantren* families to decide on political affiliation. The dynamics of *pesantren* family communication occur in determining their political affiliation. This research was conducted using a qualitative approach and communication ethnography. The research was conducted in Islamic boarding schools families who were active in politics and had political affiliations. The results of the study show that the *pesantren* family has its own way of determining political affiliation. The dynamics of *pesantren* family communication in determining political affiliation can be a lesson for the wider community in determining political affiliation.

Keywords: Islamic boarding school family, family communication, determination of political affiliation

Introduction

The family is considered as the smallest unit of a society (Hermanto & Saleh, 2022). Typically, a family is formed due to a combination of biological connections, economic cooperation, and shared customs and practices (Hirabayashi, 2009). However, the concept of family does not only deal with its structure. For instance, Zloković et al. (2021) explain that beyond a family structure, there is an issue regarding family satisfaction, both for personal and relationship, that arises quite significantly. This is related to how the relationships within the family structure can create such an environment that allows the members to develop and grow emotionally in the expected way. This is one of the reasons why the family plays a vital role in shaping the personality of the members due to the fact that they develop and grow simultaneously in the similar atmosphere (Hermanto & Saleh, 2022).

In general, a family consists of a father, mother, and their children, with each member having specific roles and responsibilities (Ledbetter, 2015). This aligns with Astuti's (2011) statement about a family as a cohesive unit that consists of parents and children that share various aspects of life including the physical and emotional one. In most traditional contexts, parents are the ones with important and dominant roles within the family (Djamarah, 2014). Among their essential responsibilities, parents play a vital role in nurturing family harmony by fostering effective communication among all

members. This emphasis on communication serves as a key component in maintaining a healthy and thriving family environment.

The Islamic Boarding School family comprises individuals descended from *kyai*, who is religious leader (Mujib, 2018). Residing within a boarding school setting, the Islamic Boarding School family is responsible for the management and ownership of the boarding school itself (Sumbulah & Hidayati, 2009). According to Mujib (2018), the *pesantren* family is led by a *kyai*, accompanied by his wife referred to as *nyai*, and their children known as *gus* for boys and *ning* for girls. The *kyai* assumes a highly significant role within the *pesantren* family, exerting influence not only within the immediate *pesantren* community but also in the broader external society.

The *pesantren* family operates within a dynastic system that perpetuates its societal contributions encompassing religious, social, and political realms (Mujib, 2018). Gunawan and Satori (2014) elaborate that this dynastic system involves the succession of leadership within Islamic boarding schools, ensuring that successors are internal to the institution. Dhofier (2011) further emphasizes the close-knit relationships between relatives in Islamic boarding schools, extending beyond the immediate *pesantren* community. Such uniqueness of the *pesantren* family is characterized by the cultivation of strong successors, intermarriage among close relatives, and the perpetuation of intellectual chains through familial ties (Dhofier, 2011). As a result, the role of the *pesantren* family, particularly the *kyai*, remains substantial and enduring in people's lives.

The *kyai*, as the leader of the *pesantren* family, assumes significant responsibilities both within the family and society at large (Sunarto, 1996). Providing religious education to all family members becomes a fundamental duty for the *kyai*, serving to perpetuate their struggle and maintain their influence as religious and community leaders (Dhofier, 2011). Furthermore, the role of the *kyai* extends to religious education in society, as they are revered figures who impart knowledge and enlightenment about Islam to Muslims (Khani et al., 2015). Beyond the religious sphere, *kyai* wields considerable influence in socio-political domains, primarily because of his central position within Islamic boarding schools (Suprayogo, 2009). As Islamic scholar responsible for teaching and propagating Islamic teachings, *kyai* garners respect and serves as influential figures for Muslims (Syahputra, 2007).

Despite their influential role in politics, *kyai* often operate from a position outside the inner circle of political actors and affairs (Huda, 2007). Nonetheless, their political influence remains substantial, frequently leading to success for supported parties and politicians (Huda, 2007). Suprayogo (2009) delineates three types of *kyai*'s involvement in politics: active participation as politicians, neutrality with limited political engagement as political observers and critics, and apathy or non-participation in political activities to focus on Islamic religious education in *pesantren*. Although *kyai*'s political involvement may vary, those actively engaged in politics face criticism from some quarters (Abdurrohim, 2008).

The *kyai* and their families are integral to Indonesian political life, wielding influence at both regional and national levels (Dhofier, 2011; Mujib, 2018). This influence positions the *kyai* and their families as points of reference for political

officials and actors. Politicians partake in *sowan*, the act of visiting *kyai* and *pesantren*, seeking guidance regarding political matters and specific purposes (Zulfiansyah, 2015). *Sowan* serves as a form of face-to-face political communication (Inoguchi, 2015) and often establishes patron-client relationships between influential *kyai* and politicians requiring guidance in their political activities.

Politicians aim to make political offerings to *kyai* due to their significant influence in Indonesian politics. *Sowan* visits serve as opportunities to seek support from *kyai* and the *pesantren* family in political activities, particularly during regional and national elections. However, acquiring support from *kyai* and their families in political contests is not easily obtained. *Kyai*, as family leaders, engage in internal family communication to determine their political affiliations. The dynamics of *pesantren* family communication in determining political affiliations present intriguing subject matter for further study. It is within this context that the theory of coordinated management of meaning (CMM).

The theory of coordinated management of meaning (CMM) focuses on how people create and understand meaning through communication. It highlights the importance of shared realities and the role of narratives in shaping meaning. CMM suggests that individuals coordinate and manage meanings by interpreting messages, constructing narratives, and aligning their understanding with others. Imran et al. (2019) believe that CMM influences communication in various aspects including interpersonal and intercultural ones, its management, social communication, as well as mediation in communication. In addition, consultancy and therapy are also influenced by the CMM. Further, CMM theory also recognizes the influence of power dynamics in communication and emphasizes the need for collaboration and mutual adjustment to minimize misunderstandings. Overall, CMM provides insights into how communication shapes relationships and cultural systems by examining how individuals construct and coordinate meanings in their interactions.

Research Method

This study employed qualitative research method, specifically ethnographic study of communication, in which the researcher utilized interview and observation to collect the in-depth (Jarry & Jarry, 1991). In this research, the ethnographic study was conducted to provide a deep understanding of the various aspects of the *pesantren* family's life (Kriyantono, 2007). The researcher adapted the "SPEAKING" method, developed by Hymes, as a tool for conducting ethnographic studies of *pesantren* family communication (Tracy, 2013).

The SPEAKING method, developed by Dell Hymes, is an analytical framework used in ethnographic studies of communication. It provides a systematic way to examine and understand the communicative practices within a cultural or social group. Each letter in the acronym "SPEAKING" represents a different element of communication that is considered in the analysis (Manas & Chinmay, 2011; Zand-vakili et al., 2012):

1. **Setting and Scene:** This element refers to the physical and social contexts in which communication takes place. It covers factors such as location, time, and the roles and relationships of the participants.

2. Participants: This one focuses on the individuals' involvement in the communication, their identities, their social positions, and the roles they play where the communication occurs.
3. Ends: This refers to the goals, intentions, and purposes of the communication. It focuses on why individuals get participate in a communication and what purposes they want to achieve in the communication.
4. Act Sequence: This focuses on the structure and sequence of the communicative acts. It emphasizes in how actions, messages, and responses are organized and interconnected.
5. Key: This refers to the culturally significant symbols, phrases, or cues that hold particular meaning within the group. It explores the shared understandings and references that shape communication.
6. Instrumentalities: This focuses on the different channels and modes of communication employed within the group. It includes spoken language, nonverbal cues, gestures, and other forms of expression.
7. Norms and Genre: This examines the rules, norms, and expectations that govern communication within the group. It explores the customary patterns and genres of communication that are recognized and followed.

By utilizing the SPEAKING method, the researcher gained the detailed picture of the communication practices, cultural meanings, and social dynamics, in a community, in this case the *pesantren* family.

Results and Discussion

This research was conducted at a family of Islamic boarding school, known as *pesantren*, located in Jember, East Java. For privacy reasons, the institution was referred to as *Pesantren A*. The selection of the *Pesantren A* family for this study was based on several reasons. First, the *kyai*, who served as the leader of the *pesantren* family, possessed a political affiliation. Secondly, there were members of the *pesantren* family that actively engaged in political activities. Thirdly, the *kyai* had both congregations and students, called *santri*, who also actively participated in the politics. Lastly, there were politicians who approached the *kyai* with political offerings.

The *pesantren A* family's criteria, as established by the researcher, highlight the political affiliations within the family. The *kyai*, serving as the family leader, maintained a political affiliation in every political contest. This affiliation was manifested by directing the students, known as *santri*, to vote for specific individuals determined by the *kyai*. Moreover, the family members themselves possessed political affiliations. In fact, some members of the *Pesantren A* family actively participated in national politics. Additionally, the *kyai*'s congregations and students were engaged in political activities. Lastly, as the leader of the *pesantren* family, the *kyai* received requests for support from various politicians during political contests.

In addition to the several criteria already mentioned, the *pesantren A* family held significant influence in the local and national political contestation of Jember Regency.

This influence was evident through the visits made by numerous politicians, both national and regional, who sought guidance from the *kyai*. Seeking the *kyai*'s direction was not limited to ordinary days but also extended to times of political contests. During these contests, political actors not only sought guidance but also requested support from the *kyai* and the entire *pesantren* family. Consequently, the *pesantren* A family possessed a method to determine its political affiliation in every political contest.

The first approach to determine political affiliation involved family political deliberations. The *kyai* initiated political meetings with family members to ascertain the family's political affiliation. These deliberations were attended by both politically active and non-active family members. Family members engaged in politics played a crucial role in providing insights into the current political landscape. On the other hand, those not involved in politics followed and supported the decisions made by the *kyai* regarding political affiliation.

Apart from the family meetings, several episodes were undertaken to determine political affiliation. The initial episode involved the arrival of politicians who visited or made "*sowan*" (a customary visit) to the *kyai*. Typically, these politicians sought support from the *Kyai* and the *pesantren* family in political contests. In this episode, the *kyai* expressed his opinion and requested family members to perform "*tabayyun*" which involved verifying or validating the information provided about the political figure. In the subsequent episode, family members gathered information from external sources outside the *pesantren* A to confirm and validate the information received from the politicians seeking support. Active family members engaged in politics shared the information they had gathered. Unfortunately, differences in the information received by individual family members often arose.

These discrepancies in information led to internal conflicts within the *pesantren* family, which marked the transition to the third episode. Notably, these conflicts occurred in the presence of the *kyai*, who served as the leader of the family. Consequently, disharmony within the family necessitated the prompt identification of a resolution. The fourth episode involved conflict resolution among the *pesantren* family members. The *kyai*, assuming responsibility as the family leader, undertook the task of resolving the issue. In this regard, the *kyai* examined and analyzed the information gathered by the family members to determine the primary factors contributing to the conflict. Following a meticulous process, it was discovered that the divergence in information resulted from the varying activities pursued by family members. With the authority vested in the *Kyai*, a decision was made to support a specific politician, and all family members were instructed to adhere to this mutual decision.

The communication episodes observed throughout the determination of the *pesantren* family's political affiliation align with the principles of the coordinated management of meaning (CMM) theory. These episodes illustrate the coordination required to achieve understanding, which materializes at different stages. Notably, this study's unique aspect is the occurrence of periods where coordination is not initially achieved, only to be eventually realized after conflict resolution.

Furthermore, storytelling constitutes another element of the coordinated management of meaning (CMM) theory. The *kyai* and family members exchanged stories that shed light on the dynamics of family communication during the process of determining political affiliation. Each family member shared their lived experiences and

narratives throughout the process of communication, which subsequently influenced actions and the extent to which coordination was achieved.

Moreover, the *pesantren* family sought guidance from the *mursyid* in determining their political affiliation. However, only the *kyai* possessed the privilege to request instructions from the *mursyid*, as he was the sole individual with access to communicate with them. The *mursyid*, a teacher who guided the *kyai* in matters of religion and *thoriqoh*, was consulted when the deliberation process failed to reach a consensus decision. The *kyai* maintained intensive communication with the *mursyid* through any means of communication, relaying all the information received from politicians and family members without alteration.

The *kyai*'s obedience to the *mursyid*'s instructions when seeking guidance demonstrated a profound respect and adherence to his role as a student. This high level of obedience established a patron-client relationship between the *kyai* and the *mursyid*, with family members dutifully following all instructions provided by the *mursyid*. This adherence to established traditions exemplified the uniqueness of the *pesantren* family.

High compliance, as observed in the *pesantren* family, can also be analyzed through the lens of the coordinated management of meaning (CMM) theory. The realization of high compliance signifies successful coordination in the communication process. This coordination represents the agreement reached by both parties from the outset. Throughout the process of determining political affiliation, the *kyai*'s obedience to the *mursyid*'s instructions exemplifies a form of conformity established through coordination.

Conclusion

Kyai, as a prominent figure in society, wields significant influence across various domains such as religion, social issues, culture, and politics. This influence extends not only to the *kyai* individually but also to the entire *pesantren* family under their leadership. Politicians recognize and leverage this influence, seeking support particularly during political contests. However, deciding a political affiliation is not an easy and simple issue for the *pesantren* family.

There are several processes that the *kyai* needed to consider before coming to a decision regarding the political affiliation. The first is related to family deliberations to determine the political preferences. This deliberation process is dynamic due to the fact that the family members may have predetermined political preferences. Additionally, the *kyai* seeks guidance from their *mursyid* or teacher, demonstrating the deep respect the *kyai* holds as a student towards their teacher, who is also a member of the *pesantren* family.

The process of determining the political affiliation of the *pesantren* family can serve as a valuable learning experience for the broader community. It emphasizes that political affiliation cannot be established arbitrarily but requires a thorough process. The information obtained must undergo verification and cross-referencing to ensure accuracy regarding the political figures under consideration. Moreover, seeking

guidance from a teacher or an individual with higher knowledge is crucial to prevent any missteps in determining the political affiliation.

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