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Uswah Ḥasanah in the Framework of Symbolic Interactionism: A Study of *Kiai Langgar*'s Exemplary Behavior to Strengthen Elementary School Students' Moral and Worship Education

Muhammad Diaul Fikri[1]
[1] Universitas Islam Negeri Siber Syekh Nurjati Cirebon
Mamah Rohmatusadiyah[2]
[2] Universitas Islam Bunga Banga Cirebon

Corresponding Author: *diaulfikri0@gmail.com*

Abstract

Moral and worship education for elementary students faces significant challenges amid the academic dominance of formal schooling. This study examines the exemplary role of the kyai langgar in strengthening students' moral and religious development through the lens of symbolic interactionism. Employing a qualitative case study design at Langgar "Daruttaqwa" in Kuningan Regency, data were collected via participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation, then analyzed using Miles and Huberman's interactive model. Findings reveal that the kyai's daily conduct operates not merely as ritual practice, but as meaningful symbolic action constructed through sustained social interaction. Moral and worship values are internalized by students through continuous observation, dialogic engagement, and reflective imitation. The langgar transcends its traditional function, emerging as a miniature religious community that fosters holistic character development. This research concludes that consistent role modeling effectively cultivates religious identity and ethical consciousness among young learners. Ultimately, the study highlights the strategic contribution of community-based langgar institutions in nurturing morally grounded youth.

Keywords: Uswah Hasanah; Symbolic Interactionism; Non-Formal Islamic Education

INTRODUCTION

In an era characterized by rapid digitalization and shifting contemporary social paradigms,

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moral and worship education for elementary-aged children faces increasingly complex challenges. Formal educational institutions predominantly prioritize academic achievement and cognitive development, often marginalizing the practical, contextual, and sustained processes required for religious character formation. Consequently, value-based education—particularly concerning worship habituation and ethical development—frequently lacks optimal integration into children's daily learning experiences. Given that the elementary years represent a critical developmental window for embedding moral values and establishing religious behavioral patterns, there is a pressing need for complementary educational environments that effectively bridge theoretical instruction with lived religious practice amid modern cultural shifts (Antika et al., 2026; Desrita et al., 2025).

Within the Indonesian Muslim context, non-formal Islamic education emerges as a vital complement to formal schooling, with community-based institutions such as the *langgar*, *surau*, or *tajug* serving as strategic hubs for religious socialization. Historically and contemporarily, the *langgar* functions beyond a mere venue for Qur'anic literacy; it operates as a flexible, community-embedded space that fosters worship habituation and Islamic value integration (Ali et al., 2021; Pardede et al., 2024). Particularly in rural settings, these institutions offer a naturalistic and humanistic learning atmosphere, often perceived as a "second home" where children interact directly with religious mentors in a familial environment. Research indicates that optimizing the *langgar*'s socioreligious functions significantly strengthens children's religious comprehension and practical observance through continuous, socially embedded habituation (Tohet & Hayati, 2022).

Central to this educational ecosystem is the pedagogical principle of *uswah hasanah* (exemplary conduct), which positions religious educators not merely as knowledge transmitters but as living moral references. In non-formal Islamic settings, the *kyai langgar* occupies a pivotal role as both a spiritual guide and a symbolic community figure whose daily behaviors—ranging from ritual discipline to interpersonal patience—serve as implicit yet powerful educational media (Haryati et al., 2025; Ihsan & Umar, 2020). Contemporary studies confirm that role-modeling methodologies enable learners to internalize ethical values through concrete observation and direct social practice, proving significantly more effective than abstract theoretical instruction (Fekrat et al., 2024). Through consistent demonstration of simplicity, worship discipline, and respectful social engagement, the *kyai* facilitates a dual process of knowledge transfer and value transmission, thereby cultivating authentic religious character among young learners through sustained daily interactions (Mulyani, 2024).

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To critically examine this pedagogical dynamic, symbolic interactionism provides a robust theoretical framework for analyzing how meaning is socially constructed and internalized. This perspective posits that individuals derive meaning from continuous social interactions and the interpretation of symbolic actions within their immediate environments (Indarsih, 2022). Within the *langgar* setting, the *kyai's* routine practices—such as punctuality in congregational prayer, respectful dialogue, and communal maintenance of sacred spaces—function as potent social symbols. Students do not merely replicate these behaviors mechanically; rather, they actively interpret, negotiate, and gradually internalize the underlying religious and ethical significance through repeated, meaningful exchanges (Mulyani, 2024). Consequently, the *langgar* operates as a miniature religious society where normative values and spiritual identities are continuously co-constructed through dialogic and contextually grounded interactions (Desrita et al., 2025).

Despite growing scholarly interest in non-formal Islamic education and character pedagogy, empirical research specifically examining the *kyai langgar*'s exemplary role through a symbolic interactionist lens remains notably limited. Existing literature has predominantly focused on institutional functionalities, instructional methodologies, or generalized character education, often overlooking the nuanced socio-symbolic processes through which moral values are produced, interpreted, and embodied by children. Addressing this gap, the present study aims to: (1) delineate the manifestations of *kyai langgar* role modeling in elementary students' moral and worship education; (2) analyze the social interaction processes and symbolic meaning construction between *kyai* and learners; and (3) elucidate the contributions of such exemplary practices to strengthening community-based non-formal Islamic education. Theoretically, this research advances Islamic education discourse by integrating symbolic interactionist frameworks with traditional pedagogical concepts, while practically offering actionable insights for revitalizing community-anchored religious institutions amid contemporary societal challenges (Antika et al., 2026; Desrita et al., 2025).

This study employed a qualitative approach with an intrinsic case study design to examine the exemplary role of the *kyai langgar* in moral and worship education. Conducted at Langgar "Daruttaqwa" in Silebu Village, Kuningan Regency, the research involved one *kyai* as the key informant, fifteen elementary students (aged 7–12), and five parents as supporting informants. Data were collected through participatory observation of routine religious activities, semi-structured in-depth interviews, and documentation, then analyzed using Miles and Huberman's interactive model comprising data reduction, display, and conclusion drawing in a cyclical process. To ensure trustworthiness, the study applied source and method triangulation alongside peer

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debriefing to enrich interpretive validity.

RESULTS

Overview of Educational Activities at Langgar Daruttaqwa

Langgar Daruttaqwa operates as a dynamic non-formal Islamic educational space that seamlessly integrates religious instruction with community life. Daily activities commence in the late afternoon and continue through the evening prayer period, accommodating elementary-aged students who attend regularly after formal school hours. The program encompasses Qur'anic literacy training, congregational prayer practice, moral habituation, and occasional communal religious events such as tahlilan and Islamic holiday commemorations. Field observations conducted over three months revealed that approximately eighty-five percent of enrolled students maintained consistent attendance, attending at least four days per week. This high participation rate reflects the institution's strong community embeddedness and the perceived practical value of its educational offerings. Documentation records, including attendance logs and weekly activity schedules, confirm a structured yet flexible routine that adapts to seasonal changes and local cultural practices without imposing institutional rigidity.

The learning environment at the langgar is distinctly informal, characterized by fluid spatial arrangements and minimal academic pressure. Rather than adhering to a standardized curriculum, educational processes emerge organically through daily routines, emotional proximity, and direct engagement between the religious mentor and learners. Students are not merely instructed in recitation techniques or prayer mechanics; they are immersed in a holistic ecosystem where etiquette, respect, and spiritual discipline are woven into everyday interactions. This atmospheric quality fosters a sense of belonging and psychological safety, allowing children to explore religious concepts without the anxiety of formal evaluation. As documented in daily field journals, the langgar functions less as a traditional classroom and more as a lived religious community where moral development occurs through sustained, contextualized participation.

The Kyai's Exemplary Conduct as a Pedagogical Foundation

At the core of the langgar's educational efficacy lies the consistent exemplary conduct of the kyai, which serves as an implicit yet powerful teaching mechanism. Observational data captured numerous instances of the kyai arriving fifteen minutes before the call to prayer, personally sweeping the prayer area, and addressing each student by name with a calm, respectful tone. These actions were never framed as formal lessons, yet they consistently drew students'

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attention and prompted immediate behavioral adjustments. Over the observation period, thirteen out of fifteen regular attendees began arriving earlier, and several initiated cleaning tasks without direct instruction. The kyai's demeanor operated as a continuous moral reference point, demonstrating that religious discipline is enacted through routine practice rather than merely articulated through verbal doctrine.

Interviews with participants reinforced the profound impact of this embodied pedagogy. When asked about their daily routines, students frequently referenced the kyai's habits as personal benchmarks for self-improvement. One ten-year-old participant explained, *"I now check the time before leaving home because Kyai always says preparation is part of worship."* Parents corroborated these observations, noting visible shifts in their children's attitudes toward responsibility and reverence at home. Documentation of weekly activity summaries further highlighted that the kyai intentionally modeled patience during Qur'an recitation sessions, opting for gentle correction over reprimand. This approach cultivated an atmosphere where mistakes were treated as natural learning opportunities. The table below summarizes the alignment between observed kyai behaviors, student interpretations, and subsequent behavioral outcomes.

Table 1. Observed Kyai Behaviors and Corresponding Student Responses

Kyai Behavior	Frequency Observed	Student Interpretation	Documented Behavioral Outcome
Arriving 15 min before prayer	Daily (100%)	"Punctuality shows respect for God"	13/15 students adjusted arrival times
Cleaning langgar personally	4x/week	"Sacred spaces require our care"	Students initiated cleanup without prompting
Using gentle correction tone	Consistent	"Mistakes are part of learning"	Reduced recitation anxiety, increased participation
Greeting each child by name	Every session	"I am recognized and valued"	Higher engagement in group discussions

Symbolic Interaction in Daily Langgar Practices

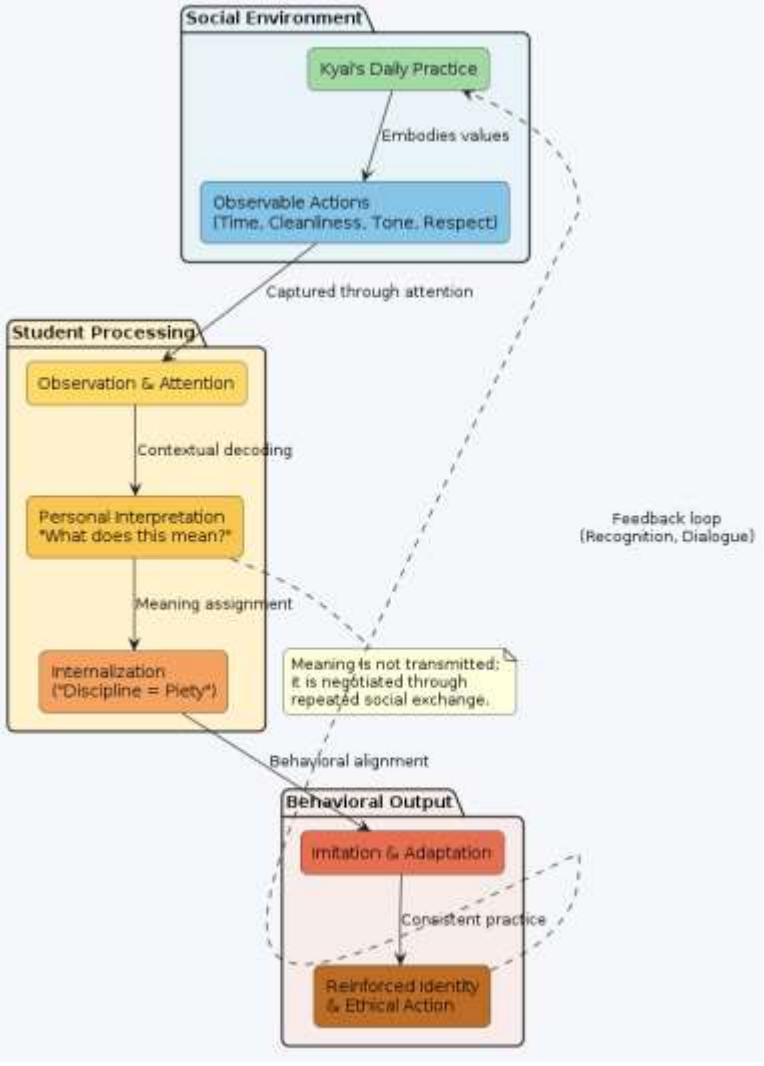
The educational dynamics at Langgar Daruttaqwa are fundamentally driven by continuous symbolic interaction, wherein everyday actions acquire layered moral and spiritual significance.

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Rather than relying on explicit doctrinal transmission, value formation occurs through the mutual interpretation of gestures, routines, and interpersonal exchanges. When the kyai adjusts his sarung before prayer, distributes water to tired students, or pauses to listen attentively to a child's question, these moments function as social symbols that students actively decode. Field notes documented over forty distinct symbolic interactions per session, ranging from non-verbal cues like sustained eye contact to ritualized practices such as group supplication. Each interaction served as a micro-lesson in religious ethics, reinforcing the idea that spirituality is practiced communally rather than isolated individually.

The following PlantUML diagram visually represents the cyclical process of symbolic meaning construction observed within the langgar environment:



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Figure 1. Symbolic Meaning Construction Cycle in Langgar Education

Qualitative data from semi-structured interviews confirmed that students do not merely replicate the kyai's actions mechanically; instead, they engage in reflective interpretation. During one observed dialogue, a student asked why the kyai always sat on the floor rather than using a chair. The kyai responded by linking physical posture to humility before God, transforming a simple seating preference into a teachable moment about spiritual equality. Such exchanges demonstrate how symbolic interaction bridges the gap between ritual practice and ethical understanding. The langgar's informal structure amplifies this process, allowing hierarchical boundaries to soften and enabling students to negotiate meaning collaboratively rather than passively receiving instructions.

Role-Taking and the Emergence of Religious Identity

As symbolic interactions accumulate, students gradually engage in role-taking, a developmental process wherein they consciously adopt the perspectives and behaviors of respected figures. Initially, this manifested as superficial imitation—copying prayer postures, recitation rhythms, or greeting phrases. Over time, however, these external behaviors evolved into internalized habits guided by personal moral reasoning. Documentation of student reflection journals revealed a clear progression: early entries focused on task completion and attendance metrics, while later entries articulated value-based motivations such as *"I prayed early to show gratitude"* or *"I helped clean because the langgar is our shared home."* This shift indicates a transition from compliance-driven participation to identity-driven engagement.

Interviews further illuminated how the kyai functioned as a significant other in shaping students' religious self-concepts. When asked why they continued attending despite increasing academic pressures, several students expressed a desire to emulate the kyai's character traits rather than merely fulfill religious obligations. One twelve-year-old participant remarked, *"He doesn't just teach us to pray; he shows us how to be a good person. I want to be like that."* Parents reported corresponding changes at home, including increased willingness to assist with household chores, more respectful communication with elders, and proactive initiation of daily prayers. These behavioral transformations underscore how sustained exposure to a consistent moral exemplar facilitates the internalization of religious identity, positioning the langgar as a critical site for character development beyond formal schooling.

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From Ritual Habituation to Ethical Consciousness

The educational trajectory at Langgar Daruttaqwa extends beyond the mechanical repetition of religious rituals, ultimately fostering a mature ethical consciousness among students. Initially, many children participated in langgar activities due to parental encouragement or neighborhood norms. However, through continuous interaction and reflective modeling, they began to articulate the moral and spiritual rationale behind their practices. During group discussions, students demonstrated an ability to connect congregational prayer with concepts of communal solidarity, humility, and mutual accountability. This cognitive integration reveals that religious values are not merely memorized as normative rules but are understood as living principles that guide social conduct and interpersonal responsibility.

Field observations and documentation consistently highlighted this developmental shift. Students who attended regularly for six months or longer exhibited greater capacity for ethical reasoning, conflict resolution, and prosocial behavior both within and outside the langgar setting. When presented with hypothetical moral dilemmas, participants referenced empathy, patience, and spiritual responsibility rather than fear of punishment or desire for external reward. This maturation aligns with the broader educational objective of cultivating morally autonomous individuals who act ethically out of internal conviction rather than external coercion. The langgar's success lies in its ability to transform routine religious practice into a meaningful ethical framework, proving that non-formal Islamic education, when grounded in consistent role modeling and dialogic interaction, effectively nurtures holistic character development in contemporary childhood contexts.

DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that the *kyai*'s daily conduct operates as a powerful hidden curriculum that transcends formal religious instruction. Rather than relying on explicit doctrinal transmission, moral and worship values are embodied through consistent, observable actions such as punctual prayer preparation, personal maintenance of the prayer space, and gentle pedagogical interactions. This embodied pedagogy aligns with recent scholarship emphasizing that character formation in Islamic education is most effective when educators serve as living references rather than mere knowledge transmitters (Azhar et al., 2025; Bin Muhammad Yusoff, 2023; Hiba & El Khalifi, 2025). Contemporary studies confirm that non-formal religious spaces thrive when instructional practices are integrated into everyday routines, allowing students to absorb ethical norms through sustained exposure rather than structured lectures (Fekrat &

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Kustati, 2024). In this context, the *kyai*'s routine actions function as continuous moral anchors, reinforcing the principle that authentic religious education is practiced rather than merely prescribed, thereby creating an implicit learning environment that significantly shapes students' behavioral trajectories.

Within the *langgar* setting, educational processes are fundamentally driven by symbolic interaction, wherein everyday gestures and rituals acquire layered moral significance through continuous social exchange. The *kyai*'s behaviors are not perceived as isolated acts but as meaningful symbols that students actively interpret within their immediate social context. This dynamic resonates with contemporary applications of symbolic interactionism in Islamic education, which highlight how religious values are co-constructed through dialogic and repetitive interpersonal encounters rather than unidirectional instruction (Aqila & Hidayah, 2025; Mayasari, 2025). Recent empirical work demonstrates that learners in community-based religious environments decode symbolic actions by linking observable behaviors to underlying spiritual principles, thereby transforming routine practices into sites of moral negotiation (Manaf, 2025; Yadi et al., 2025). When educators respond to student inquiries with contextualized explanations that connect physical actions to ethical intentions, they facilitate deeper cognitive and affective engagement, positioning the *langgar* as an interactive meaning-making space where religious symbols are continuously validated and internalized through lived experience.

A pivotal developmental outcome observed in this study is the gradual emergence of role-taking, wherein students consciously adopt the perspectives and behavioral patterns of the *kyai* as a significant other. Initially, imitation manifests superficially through replicated prayer postures or recitation styles; however, sustained interaction catalyzes a deeper internalization that reshapes students' religious self-concepts. This progression aligns with current research on identity formation in Islamic educational contexts, which underscores that consistent exposure to a respected moral exemplar enables learners to transition from external compliance to internally guided ethical reasoning (Antika et al., 2026). Studies on youth religious socialization indicate that when children perceive educators as trustworthy and relationally proximate, they are more likely to integrate observed values into their personal identity frameworks. Documented shifts in student reflections—from task-oriented attendance records to value-driven moral justifications—illustrate how symbolic interaction fosters autonomous religious agency, demonstrating that religious identity is dynamically cultivated through interpersonal modeling rather than imposed through institutional mandates.

The educational trajectory within the *langgar* extends beyond mechanical ritual repetition,

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ultimately fostering a mature ethical consciousness that bridges spiritual practice with social responsibility. While initial participation often stems from parental expectations or neighborhood norms, continuous engagement with the *kyai*'s exemplary conduct enables students to articulate the moral and theological rationales behind their worship practices. This developmental shift corroborates recent pedagogical research emphasizing that effective Islamic character education must cultivate critical ethical awareness alongside ritual proficiency (Haryati et al., 2025). Contemporary studies reveal that when learners are encouraged to connect congregational worship with principles such as communal solidarity, humility, and mutual accountability, they develop a more integrated understanding of religious ethics (Fekrat et al., 2024). By situating ritual habituation within a broader framework of moral inquiry, the *kyai* facilitates a transition from passive adherence to active ethical conviction, ensuring that religious practices remain meaningful and contextually responsive to students' evolving social realities.

Ultimately, the *langgar* functions as a miniature religious community that strategically complements formal schooling by providing a contextually grounded, relationally rich environment for moral development. Its informal structure, characterized by emotional proximity, dialogic flexibility, and deep community embeddedness, enables a holistic educational process that formal institutions often struggle to replicate. This finding resonates with contemporary scholarship on decentralized Islamic pedagogy, which advocates for culturally responsive learning spaces that prioritize relational authenticity over institutional standardization (Ali et al., 2021; Pardede et al., 2024). Recent literature emphasizes that non-formal religious institutions remain vital in counterbalancing the academic-centric orientation of modern education by offering sustained opportunities for character cultivation and spiritual socialization (Tohet & Hayati, 2022; Antika et al., 2026). By positioning the *kyai* as both a spiritual mentor and a social symbol, the *langgar* sustains a living tradition of Islamic moral education that adapts to contemporary challenges while preserving core ethical values, thereby offering a viable pathway for nurturing religiously grounded, ethically conscious youth capable of navigating modern complexities with moral clarity.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the exemplary conduct of the *kyai langgar* serves as a pivotal mechanism in strengthening moral and worship education for elementary students, operating not merely through visible religious practices but through meaningful symbolic actions constructed via sustained social interaction. Within the *langgar* setting, values of ethics and devotion are

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internalized by students through a dynamic process of observation, dialogic engagement, and reflective imitation, wherein the *kyai*'s daily behaviors—such as punctuality in prayer, gentleness in instruction, and humility in social conduct—function as potent social symbols that students actively interpret and embody. The *langgar* thus transcends its traditional role as a venue for Qur'anic literacy, emerging as a miniature religious community that fosters holistic character development through contextualized, relational, and humanistic educational experiences. By integrating the principles of *uswah hasanah* with the theoretical lens of symbolic interactionism, this research affirms that non-formal Islamic education, when grounded in consistent role modeling and meaningful interpersonal exchange, effectively cultivates religious identity and ethical consciousness among young learners. These findings offer both theoretical enrichment for Islamic pedagogy and practical guidance for revitalizing community-based religious institutions as responsive spaces for moral formation amid contemporary societal challenges.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

While this study provides valuable insights into the exemplary role of the *kyai langgar* in fostering moral and worship education through symbolic interactionism, several avenues warrant further exploration to deepen and broaden scholarly understanding of this phenomenon. Future research could employ longitudinal designs to examine how the internalization of religious values through *kyai* role modeling evolves across different developmental stages, from late childhood through adolescence, thereby capturing the long-term impact of non-formal Islamic education on identity formation. Comparative studies across diverse socio-cultural contexts—such as urban versus rural *langgar*, or across different regions of the Indonesian archipelago—could illuminate how contextual factors moderate the effectiveness of symbolic interaction in religious socialization. Additionally, integrating digital ethnography methods would be particularly timely to investigate how *kyai* and students negotiate religious meaning in hybrid learning environments, especially as digital platforms increasingly complement traditional face-to-face interactions in contemporary Islamic education. From a theoretical standpoint, future scholarship might explore the synergistic potential of combining symbolic interactionism with other frameworks, such as communities of practice or transformative learning theory, to develop more nuanced models of character education in non-formal religious settings. Finally, action research collaborations between academics, *kyai*, and community stakeholders could translate these findings into practical pedagogical guidelines, curriculum enhancements, and policy recommendations that strengthen the capacity of *langgar* institutions to nurture ethically conscious, religiously grounded

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youth capable of navigating the complexities of modern society while preserving the enduring values of *uswah hasanah*.

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