BETWEEN TRADITION AND MODERNITY: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF PESANTREN RATIONALITY AMID THE DISRUPTIVE ERA

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Abstract

The *pesantren* is a distinctive Islamic educational institution of the Indonesian archipelago that has played a crucial role in shaping the intellectual and spiritual character of Indonesian society. It embodies a unique form of rationality and religiosity that differs from both secular educational institutions and modern Islamic schools. However, the disruptive era—marked by technological acceleration and the dominance of instrumental rationality—has challenged the ways in which humans understand knowledge, authority, and spirituality, including within the *pesantren* context. Within the framework of secular rationality, *pesantren* are often simplistically perceived as conservative or even feudal institutions. This study seeks to reconsider such perceptions by examining the rationality of *pesantren* through a phenomenological approach. Drawing upon Edmund Husserl's concept of *intentionality* and Alfred Schutz's notion of the *lifeworld*, this research explores the consciously lived meanings experienced by *pesantren* actors—*kiai*, *ustaz*, and *santri*—in their everyday activities such as studying classical Islamic texts (*kitab kuning*), performing *khidmah*, and maintaining the *kiai–santri* relationship. The findings reveal that *pesantren* rationality is rooted in a meaningful consciousness that integrates faith, reason, and tradition—a form of substantive or value-oriented rationality distinct from modern calculative rationality. Activities such as textual study and *khidmah* embody intentional awareness oriented toward truth and blessing (*telos*), rather than mere efficient social compliance. Phenomenological reflection shows that the *kiai–santri* relationship is not an expression of feudal hierarchy but an intersubjective space where knowledge and ethical conduct are practiced existentially. Thus, the *pesantren* can be understood as a religious *lifeworld* that represents an alternative mode of rationality amid digital modernity—one that rejects the dichotomy between faith and reason while offering a harmonious synthesis between tradition and modernity. This study contributes to contemporary Islamic epistemology by reaffirming the relevance of the *pesantren* tradition in reinterpreting the relationship between faith and reason in the disruptive era.

Keywords: Pesantren; Phenomenology; Rationality; Tradition; Disruptive Era

1. Introduction

Pesantren are the oldest and most distinctive Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia. Since their earliest emergence, pesantren have functioned as centers of religious knowledge transmission as well as crucibles for future disseminators of Islam. Historical evidence shows that these institutions were closely tied to the process of Islam's entry and development in the Indonesian archipelago between the thirteenth (Maliki, 2021, p. 1) and sixteenth centuries (Dhofier, 2011, p. 38; Howell, 2014). The Sufi figures who pioneered Islamic preaching established pesantren as centers of spiritual and intellectual cultivation for the Muslim community. Consequently, the pesantren educational model was profoundly shaped by Sufi pedagogical traditions that emphasize the teacher–student relationship, spiritual discipline, and the ethical embodiment of knowledge (Lestari, 2022, p. 191).

For centuries, pesantren have played a crucial role in shaping and preserving the social, cultural, political, and religious life of Indonesian society, particularly in rural areas (Dhofier, 2011, p. 38). However, the rapid advancement of science and technology has brought major changes to various aspects of life, including education (Oey-Gardiner et al., 2017, p. 2). This fast-moving and continuous dynamic is known as *the era of disruption* (Badan Pengembanan dan Pembinaan Bahasa, 2016). According to the Indonesian National Dictionary (Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia / KBBI), disruption is defined as a condition of being "uprooted from its foundation," or as an "interruption to a process or activity that has been taking place continuously." (Badan Pengembanan dan Pembinaan Bahasa, 2016). Within this context, pesantren now face a serious challenge: how to safeguard their scholarly identity and tradition amid the powerful current of digital transformation. The era of disruption not only tests pesantren's resilience as centers for training Muslim scholars and guardians of traditional Islamic teachings, but also demands transformation so that these institutions remain relevant to contemporary needs (Maliki, 2021, pp. 15–17).

The era of disruption is also commonly referred to as the information era or post-industrial era. It is marked by several positive developments such as the growth of democracy and freedom of expression, easier access to information, and rising innovation and social participation (Fukuyama, 1999, pp. 13–17). Yet on the other hand, this disruption has also produced negative consequences: life patterns that were once stable have changed abruptly; old values have been replaced by new paradigms; and traditional systems have been pushed aside by faster, technology-based methods (Kasali, 2018, p. 12). This era requires every individual and institution—including pesantren—to adapt creatively so as not to be marginalized by the changing times.

The profound shifts brought by the disruptive era are not confined to technology; they also influence how humans understand knowledge, authority, and rationality. In this setting, instrumental rationality has become the dominant mode of thinking in modern society (Dona et al., 2025, p. 285; Lumowa, 2016, p. 57). The value of human life is measured solely through standards of maximum efficiency and effectiveness, reducing the meaning of success to issues

of gain and loss. As a result, human relations are increasingly reduced to pragmatic calculations: the extent to which relationships provide benefit to the individual. The essence of human relations as authentic existential experience is eroded, as every interaction is placed within an instrumental logic that evaluates everything in terms of functional advantage (Lumowa, 2016, pp. 57–58).

This mode of thinking gives rise to a social orientation that prioritizes efficiency, transparency, and cognitive autonomy. Such a pattern often stands in tension with traditional educational systems like pesantren, which are grounded in values of submission, blessing, and respect for scholarly authority. Within the frame of modern rationality, the pesantren model—which is centered on the charisma of the kyai, the hierarchical bond between teacher and student, and an emphasis on the spiritual dimension—is frequently misunderstood as a form of feudalism and irrationality. The issue of feudalism and irrationality within the pesantren milieu has resurfaced, particularly on social media, following the collapse of the prayer hall at Pesantren Al-Khaziny in Buduran and a Trans7 program that highlighted pesantren life and traditions. The hashtag #Feodalisme even became a topic of discussion across various social media platforms ("Membongkar Feodalisme Di Balik Tabir 'Adab' Pesantren," 2025; News, 2025). This issue is not, in fact, a new phenomenon. Several previous studies have already addressed it, including the works of (Masyhudi, 2000). In fact, pesantren epistemology is constructed upon religious rationality that regards knowledge not merely as a tool for achieving efficiency, but as a path toward the formation of holistic moral, spiritual, and human integrity—an alternative rationality distinct from modern instrumental logic.

A phenomenological approach becomes essential in responding to various criticisms directed at pesantren because phenomenology seeks to understand reality as it is, not merely as it appears. Phenomenology aims to grasp phenomena as directly experienced, without interpretations distorted by prior assumptions or theories (Arianto & Handayani, 2024, p. 3). According to Edmund Husserl, understanding a phenomenon requires an attitude of *epoche* or "*bracketing*," namely suspending judgment of pre-existing presuppositions and beliefs so that the meaning of an experience can be revealed with clarity. Through this process of reduction, truth is not determined solely by empirical evidence, but also through the disclosure of essential meaning present within human consciousness (Daulay, 2010, p. 54).

Therefore, the reading of pesantren rationality and authority needs to be approached phenomenologically, by understanding the meaning experienced by pesantren actors from within their own lived experience. This approach opens a space for uncovering pesantren's distinctive rationality rooted in ethical and spiritual dimensions, not solely in material efficiency. Through a phenomenological lens, studies on pesantren can adopt a more balanced stance—neither trapped in the glorification of tradition that obstructs critique, nor dissolved into modern skepticism that negates the Islamic values embedded within it. Thus, phenomenology offers a middle path for reconstructing a more just understanding of the pesantren: as a living space of

knowledge and spirituality that continually negotiates with the changing times without losing its identity.

2. Method

The method employed in this study is a qualitative method using library research techniques. Through this method, the researcher collects various relevant primary and secondary data to serve as references for the discussion. The primary data in this research consist of texts that directly contain the experiences, practices, and values of pesantren, such as adab manuals, student-ethics treatises, classical tarbiyah works, biographies of kyai, as well as narrative documentation concerning practices of *khidmah* and pesantren culture. Meanwhile, the secondary data consist of academic books, scholarly articles, and research findings that examine phenomenology and social studies on pesantren in the era of disruption.

In analyzing these data, the study employs a phenomenological approach—specifically through the stages of *epoche* (suspending external assumptions) and eidetic reduction (disclosing essential meanings)—in order to understand pesantren rationality as it is lived by its own subjects. All data are read and analyzed descriptively–analytically: the researcher brackets all modern labels such as "traditional," "feudal," or "anti-rational," and subsequently identifies the meaning structures of the santri–kyai relationship, *khidmah* practices, and the socio-communal ethos of pesantren. In this way, pesantren rationality is understood not through the standards of modern instrumental rationality, but as an existential rationality constituted by the intentionality and lifeworld of the pesantren itself.

3. Result

Rationality and Social Action

The term rationality is essentially a concept discussed intensively within the social sciences, especially sociology. Max Weber (1864–1920), a leading German sociologist, is the figure who popularized the use of this concept to explain human action (Khozin, 2006, p. 94; Lee, 2021). For Weber, rationality is the key to objectively analyzing the subjective meaning of social action and becomes the basis for comparing various types of social action (Jochnson, 1994, p. 219). Weber differentiates between two ideal types of society—traditional and rational. Traditional societies are characterized by customs and values transmitted across generations, whereas rational societies make decisions based on systematic calculation to achieve particular goals. The dominance of this rational–instrumental mode of social organization is the hallmark of modernity, where authority is increasingly grounded in rational–legal principles rather than in tradition or personal charisma (Lee, 2021).

Within his theoretical framework, Weber classifies four types of social action: (1) traditional action—spontaneous action performed without reflection because it has become a hereditary habit; (2) affective action—action driven by emotions and feelings; (3) instrumental rational action—action undertaken to achieve specific goals based on efficient calculation; and

(4) value-rational action—action grounded in values deemed right, whether religious, ethical, cultural, or legal, regardless of practical utility (Weber, 1968, p. 23).

Weber argues that instrumental rationality is the most prominent form of rationality in modern society (Lee, 2021). We may indeed acknowledge that this instrumental mode of action plays a key role in shaping the modern world—from bureaucratic organization to market-based economic systems. However, this does not automatically mean that humans always act in accordance with this model. Employing a "*rational*" mode of thinking does not guarantee that one's behavior is genuinely rational. Paranoid individuals, for instance, often believe that their actions are perfectly logical—when in fact they are not rational at all.

Furthermore, we must also understand that instrumental action in various fields does not arise from a single, uniform concept of rationality. Law, economics, education, and other domains of knowledge each possess what Foucault refers to as a "regime of truth"—a set of rules, norms, and procedures that determine what is considered "true" within that domain. Thus, rationality is not singular, but varies according to the epistemic context and the particular social field of practice that shapes it (Hindess, 1991, p. 226).

Phenomenology: Conceptual Framework

The term phenomenology derives from Greek, a combination of *phainomenon* (that which appears or manifests itself) and *logos* (knowledge or discourse). Etimologically, *phainomenon* refers to anything that appears within human conscious experience (Sutrisno & Hardiman, 1992). Etimologically, *phainomenon* refers to anything that appears within human conscious experience. Therefore, phenomenology may be understood as an attempt to study phenomena as they present themselves to the subject who experiences them—not as they are explained by external theories or assumptions (Daulay, 2010, pp. 17–18). Historically, the term *phenomenology* is often associated with the German philosopher Edmund Husserl. However, according to Kockelmans, the term had already been used since 1765 in philosophical discourse and appeared in the works of Immanuel Kant. The idea later acquired a more systematic conceptual form in Hegel's thought, before being refined by Husserl into an independent and highly influential philosophical method in the twentieth century (Daulay, 2010, p. 7).

Phenomenology emerged as a critique of the dominance of positivism and naturalism within modern science (Arianto & Handayani, 2024, p. 5; Wasim, n.d., p. 53). he positivist approach focuses on objective facts that are empirically observable, and therefore tends to view reality solely from its external dimension. As a consequence, subjective meaning and the inner experience of human beings are often neglected. Phenomenology rejects this perspective by emphasizing that meaning cannot be separated from the consciousness that experiences it. Thus, phenomenology seeks to restore human subjectivity as the center of meaning-disclosure of the world (Bashrowi, 2004, p. 59).

One of Husserl's fundamental contributions is the concept of the *intentionality of consciousness*, namely the idea that every act of consciousness is always directed toward something—whether concrete objects, ideas, or emotions. Hence, objects are not understood

merely as material entities, but as anything that is present within human experience. This means that reality cannot be separated from the way it is lived by the subject. This concept becomes the foundation of the entire phenomenological project: understanding the meaning of the world as it is lived, not merely explained theoretically (Arianto & Handayani, 2024, p. 23; Bertens, 2002, p. 111).

In continuity with Descartes' rationalism, Husserl views consciousness itself as the only existence that is always present within the human being. Therefore, every attempt to understand reality must be rooted in pure conscious experience. Phenomenology is thus positioned as a method for attaining the essences of phenomena without interference from prejudice, prior theories, or inherited knowledge. Within this framework, empirical experience is not denied, but is bracketed so that the phenomenon may disclose itself to consciousness. Husserl formulates this principle in the famous motto *zu den Sachen selbst*—"back to the things themselves." (Hardiman, 2003, p. 28).

To uncover the essence of a phenomenon, Husserl introduces the method of phenomenological reduction, namely the process of suspending all assumptions regarding the external world so that attention is directed wholly toward phenomena as they manifest themselves in consciousness. The act of suspending judgment is known as epoche (from Greek: "to suspend decision"), that is, placing all pre–existing beliefs "in brackets," including scientific and religious beliefs, so that knowledge may be built radically and purely. Through this process, the researcher seeks to understand the phenomenon as it is lived, not as it has been conceptually defined beforehand (Arianto & Handayani, 2024, p. 23; Daulay, 2010, p. 20).

The next stage is called eidetic reduction, namely the effort to uncover the eidos—the core meaning or essence of a phenomenon—by stripping away contingent and particular elements of experience. The result of this process is known as *Wesensschau* (essential intuition), that is, the disclosure of the true essence of a phenomenon (Daulay, 2010, p. 20). In addition to reduction, Husserl also provides the principle of the *constitution of consciousness*, the process through which phenomena are "presented" or "constituted" within consciousness. After reduction, phenomena are no longer viewed as external entities that stand independently, but as something constructed within the relation between subject and consciousness (Daulay, 2010, pp. 11–12).

Besides Husserl, Alfred Schutz, an Austrian philosopher, is well known for his contribution in applying phenomenology to the social sciences, particularly in the analysis of social action and human interaction. As Husserl's student and intellectual heir, Schutz sought to develop phenomenological concepts to explain how the subjective experiences of individuals are formed and function within a social context. Through this approach, he bridges individual subjective consciousness with the broader structures of social reality, and shows how social meaning is constructed in everyday life (Arianto & Handayani, 2024, p. 35).

One of Schutz's major contributions is his application of the concept of Lebenswelt or the world of everyday life. In Husserl's thought, Lebenswelt refers to the world that is experienced directly before it is formulated into scientific theory. Schutz developed this idea by emphasizing

that the life–world is the primary arena in which individuals interact, interpret experience, and construct social meaning. This world is not merely a passive background, but a dynamic space where individuals actively negotiate their understanding of themselves, others, and social reality (Arianto & Handayani, 2024, pp. 6–7).

Human consciousness, in Schutz's view, is always intentional—that is, oriented toward something within an intersubjective life–world. This means that the life–world is not experienced privately, but is also shaped through relations and interactions among individuals. Such intersubjectivity enables people to understand one another, because each person assumes that the experiences and meanings they assign to a particular phenomenon may also be shared and understood by others. Thus, social structures are formed through the mutual sharing of meaning within the jointly lived life–world.

Through this approach of social phenomenology, Schutz asserts that understanding social reality cannot be sufficiently achieved merely through objective analysis, but must begin with how individuals live and give meaning to their world. Phenomenology, in this sense, becomes a bridge between subjective consciousness and the intersubjective social order, thereby helping to explain how the social world is constructed, sustained, and understood from within human experience itself (Ahimsa-Putra, 2012, p. 275; Phillipson, 1972, pp. 123–126).

Pesantren, Tradition, and Modernity

One of the great traditions in Indonesia is Islamic religious teaching, which is embodied in pesantren institutions across Java, outside Java, and throughout the Malay (Bruinessen, 2012, p. 85). Pesantren is a traditional Islamic educational institution that has grown rapidly in Indonesia and represents a distinctively Indonesian model of *al-tarbiyah al-Islamiyah*. This institution not only plays a role in religious education and dakwah, but also in moral reform and social transformation. Accordingly, pesantren is widely recognized as a multicultural and multifunctional institution that actively contributes to religious and social development, while being simultaneously embedded as an integral component of the surrounding sociocultural dynamics (Hidayat, 2021, p. 139).

Five core elements of pesantren—pondok (boarding dormitory), mosque, students (*santri*), the teaching of classical texts (*kitab kuning*), and the kiai—form the foundation of this tradition (Dhofier, 2011, p. 79). Among these, the figure of the kiai is the most distinctive hallmark in pesantren culture. Although the authority of the kiai is rooted in the paternalistic social structure of Indonesia, the status of "kiai" itself is a title generated through theological recognition rather than administrative legitimization. This title is attached to personal virtues that reflect prophetic characteristics—mastery of religious knowledge, trustworthiness, asceticism, humility, and so forth. Therefore, the kiai becomes the focal reference in various communal concerns: he preaches, teaches, provides healing, and mediates social conflicts (Ilahi, 2014, p. 140).

Within pesantren society, the kiai is the central figure who exerts strong influence both inside the institution and within the wider community. Although most pesantren are located in rural areas, the kiai has historically constituted part of the social, political, and economic elite—

from the era of Islamic kingdoms to colonial times. He is perceived to possess spiritual proximity to God and profound inner experience, thereby being regarded as a mediator of Divine blessing for his followers—as long as he maintains virtue and refrains from moral transgression. In pesantren, the kiai holds dominant power and authority. For the santri, the kiai is the most trustworthy person both in terms of religious scholarship and institutional leadership (Dhofier, 2011, p. 94; Masyhudi, 2000, p. 34). Hence, respect, devotion, and unconditional obedience toward the kiai become a foundational value internalized in every student (Bruinessen, 2012, p. 86).

Many kiai are affiliated with particular Sufi orders, transmitting specific spiritual practices. Their charisma is understood as an emanation of spiritual force that continues even after death; their tombs are still believed to convey blessing. Here lies a sharp distinction from modernist or fundamentalist groups that reject any form of spiritual relation with the deceased and regard it as shirk. Conversely, traditionalists view epistemic and spiritual transmission as unbroken by death. This chain of transmission continues, ultimately reaching the Prophet and God. Hence, the membership of a NU kiai does not dissolve upon death; severing such linkage is seen as undermining the legitimacy of this charisma (Arifin, 2013, p. 165; Bruinessen, 2012, pp. 86–89).

The pesantren tradition also forms a distinctive lifelong teacher–student relationship. Terms such as "former teacher" or "former student" are hardly recognized, because this relationship is embedded within multilayered moral and spiritual horizons. Respect and obedience cover the entire spectrum of a student's life: religion, social interactions, even private matters. The conviction binding this relationship is not grounded in authoritarian coercion, but in the understanding of the teacher as a conduit of knowledge and divine charisma. Severing the relationship is believed to threaten the barakah of knowledge. Culturally, this can have direct implications on legitimacy and practical success—such as future difficulties in establishing one's own pesantren (Dhofier, 2011, pp. 125–126).

Within this perspective, the authority of the kiai does not merely lie in normative-textual knowledge but also in moral-spiritual integrity, which is positioned as a guarantee of the purity of his knowledge transmission. Thus, moral transgression committed by a kiai is considered far more serious than ethical violations in modern education; it is not simply a personal failure, but an event that uproots the very spiritual basis sustaining charisma and authority. This illustrates that *barakah*, charisma, and spiritual authority are not merely symbolic abstractions, but constitute a lived structure of meaning that shapes social relations, knowledge legitimacy, and the acceptance of religious authority within pesantren (Dhofier, 2011, p. 128).

The literature of pesantren education—such as Ta'lim al-Muta'allim—reinforces this model by placing adab as the fundamental foundation of knowledge acquisition (Dhofier, 2011). Consequently, the kiai–santri relationship develops two basic modalities: first, the formal teacher–student model as in ordinary schooling; second, the paternalistic father–child model. In the traditional view, students are not simply learners, but members of a spiritual family linked through sanad. This indicates that pesantren retains a traditional rationality that differs from

modern approaches which tend to reduce value to efficiency or legal-formal procedure. Hence, any epistemic understanding of pesantren must acknowledge spirituality and saintly relationality as inherent to its authority structure and knowledge production (Siswanto & Yulita, 2019, pp. 98–99).

In addition to the kiai–santri relationship, the teaching of classical texts (kitab kuning) is inseparable from pesantren life. Alongside Sufi practices, litanies (wirid), supplications (tawassul), and symbolic rituals, the study of these classical texts constitutes the backbone of knowledge transmission (Lukens-Bull, 2001, p. 361). The deepest objective is to form cadres of scholars who master multiple branches of Islamic sciences—from basic to intermediate to advanced levels. In larger pesantren, advanced works are even taught according to particular scholarly specializations developed within the institution (Dhofier, 2011, pp. 86–88).

According to Dhofier, the motivation to study kitab kuning is the strongest force that encourages students to leave home, reside in pesantren, and endure difficulties. They come not only to deepen religious knowledge under the guidance of the kiai, but also to gain life experience—through learning processes, organizational involvement, social networking with other pesantren, and focusing their study without domestic burdens. Thus, studying in pesantren is not only oriented toward intellectual achievement, but also toward habitus formation—ethics, social relations, and a distinctive disciplinary lifestyle.

The teaching of kitab kuning generally employs two principal systems: sorogan and bandongan (Dhofier, 2011, p. 87). In practice, beyond textual reading, the kiai also provides interpretation and explanation—addressing both the substantive content and linguistic structure of the text (Dhofier, 2011, p. 86). Significantly, the uniformity of texts taught and the relatively similar teaching methods across many pesantren in Indonesia has produced a certain homogeneity of intellectual tendencies, ethos, and religious practices in the classical pesantren tradition. On one hand, this homogeneity demonstrates the continuity of tradition; on the other hand, it shows that pesantren generates a relatively consistent configuration of religious thought across various regions, while maintaining a living and sustainable network of traditional knowledge (Dhofier, 2011, p. 88).

4. Discussion

To understand pesantren rationality through a phenomenological approach, the first essential step is *epoché*, namely the suspension of all external assumptions (theological, sociological, economic, ideological) regarding pesantren so that the phenomenon may appear as it is within consciousness. At this stage, the researcher is not permitted to perform pre-justification: pesantren may not be prematurely positioned as "traditional," "feudal," "irrational," or "backward." If the researcher enters with modern categorical frameworks from the outset, then phenomenology has already failed at the very first step, because its essence will never be disclosed through prejudice. Essence can only be made present if the researcher enters as a subject who experiences the phenomenon, rather than as a subject who *imposes* an external

theoretical categorization. In other words, phenomenology teaches that reality is only knowable when one enters the actor's horizon of meaning.

The second stage is eidetic reduction — the effort to disclose the innermost essence of the phenomenon as experienced by the subject. At this stage, the researcher seeks to discover the structure of meaning that makes an experience what it is. In the context of pesantren rationality, eidetic reduction helps reveal how actions that appear "irrational" from a modern standpoint actually possess coherent, systemic, and intentional meaning structures for the actors involved.

The kiai–santri relationship is a clear example. Outside pesantren, this often gets misinterpreted as feudalism or a patron–client relation that paralyzes reason. Yet through *epoché*, we suspend that labeling. Through eidetic reduction, we then find that the core meaning-structure of this relation is not power, but spiritual–epistemic relationality sustained by the experience of barakah. Within pesantren tradition there is an adage: *bil khidmah tunālu al-barakah* — "through service, blessing is obtained." The kiai is not merely a "social elite," but *al-murshid* — a spiritual guide who is close to God. Many kiai undertake strict Sufi discipline (*riyadhah*) and tarekat ethics. Because of this piety, the kiai is believed to function as a medium of divine blessing. Santri believe that maintaining closeness to the kiai (even post-mortem) affects the benefit of knowledge and the success of life.

Here the key principle of phenomenology operates: consciousness is always intentional always directed toward an object. Santri obedience is not merely emotional compliance; it is action directed toward an existential telos: the pleasure of the kiai as the pathway toward *the pleasure of God.* That motive is the "core of meaning" that only becomes intelligible through epoché + eidetic reduction.

Thus, pesantren is not merely an educational institution, but a space for the reproduction of spiritual and social value. The practice of collective work (*ro'an*) is not a servant-style command, but habituation toward social–communal ethos, collective responsibility, and the ethics of service. Cleaning toilets, yards, or prayer halls is not irrational action, but a praxis of self-formation. In many pesantren, students who serve the kiai are exempted from tuition or supported in daily meals. Such details are often missed by external media that never perform epoché. Accordingly, respect toward the kiai is not the death of reason, but a form of existential rationality — honoring the source of knowledge as an existential pathway toward God. The santri relationship to the kiai and to texts is not merely cognitive; it is ontological.

At this point, Alfred Schutz's phenomenology further strengthens the analysis. His concept of the *lifeworld* indicates that social meaning is formed through intersubjective experience. Pesantren constitutes a lifeworld with its own meaning-system — radically different from the technological and instrumental rationality of the modern *lifeworld*. Within the pesantren lifeworld, practices such as *khidmah* are not mere labor, but a medium for collective identity formation and the preservation of existential meaning.

To explain this, Schutz uses the term *stock of knowledge* at hand — knowledge that is inherited and animated in daily practice. Pesantren rationality is intersubjective because it arises

from encounters of meaning between santri and kiai, and between text and experience. Thus, pesantren rationality is neither "traditional" in the romantic sense, nor "modern" in the technological sense; it is a distinctive configuration of meaning with its own claim to rationality.

Therefore, a critique must be emphasized: if phenomenology is forced to follow the definition of modern rationality which is instrumental hen phenomenology has already been distorted. Phenomenology is not a verification tool for modern rationality; it is a pathway to perceive the wholeness of meaning as experienced by the subject. Thus, it is inappropriate to measure pesantren rationality with the criteria of technical–efficiency rationality characteristic of modernity.

5. Conclusion

In the era of disruption, when knowledge, authority, and social imagination are increasingly governed by the logic of speed, simplification, and algorithmic visibility, pesantren is repeatedly pushed into the binary of either "traditional–irrational" or "modern–rational." Such categorization reflects the dominance of instrumental rationality in the modern lifeworld a rationality that measures reason exclusively through indicators of efficiency, output, standardization, and optimization. In this frame, values that do not contribute toward measurable productivity tend to be dismissed as obsolete or feudal.

Phenomenology shows that such reading is epistemically premature. Through epoché, all external presuppositions regarding pesantren must be suspended; only then can its essence be disclosed. Through eidetic reduction, the researcher sees that practices within pesantren including obedience to the kiai, khidmah, ro'an, and ritual discipline are not residues of pre-modern culture, but intentional acts grounded in a coherent horizon of meaning. For pesantren actors, service to the kiai is not submission to power, but orientation toward barakah a form of existential rationality where knowledge, moral formation, and proximity to the sacred are not separated.

Therefore, pesantren rationality is neither anti-modern nor anti-reason; it is a distinct mode of rationality rooted in spiritual intentionality and intersubjective meaning. Modern rationality is not rejected it is relativized. Phenomenology allows us to see that pesantren is an alternative knowledge-order where rationality is configured not by algorithmic efficiency, but by the telos of spiritual formation. In a disrupted world that suffers from the crisis of meaning, this horizon offers a counter-epistemology: rationality is not only about accuracy and output, but about orientation of the self toward transcendence, community, and ontological purpose.

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