
The symbolic representation of blessing in kiai-santri interactions (An ethnographic study at Darussalam Behji Islamic Boarding School, Surabaya)

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Abstract: The phenomenon of ngalap berkah (seeking blessings) is a distinctive and culturally significant practice within Indonesian Muslim communities, particularly in Islamic boarding schools (pesantren), yet remains underexplored in academic discourse. This study aims to examine the representation of symbolic blessings in the interactions between kiai (Islamic scholars) and santri (students) at Pondok Pesantren Darussalam Behji, Pakal, Surabaya. Utilizing a qualitative approach with a communication ethnography method, this research explores the symbolic meanings embedded in the daily practices of the santri, such as sowan (visiting the kiai), arranging the kiai's sandals, and cleaning areas used by the kiai. The analysis is grounded in Herbert Blumer's symbolic interactionism theory, which aligns well with pesantren contexts, where meaning is constructed through recurring symbolic interactions. The findings reveal that santri interpret blessings as spiritual values, with interactions with the kiai regarded as sources of these blessings manifesting in daily life with both social and cultural implications. These are symbolically represented through rituals such as sowan (visiting the kiai), traditional gestures of respect, and specific objects associated with blessings (e.g., kiai's sandals). The interaction between kiai and santri reflects not only an educational relationship but also embodies deeply rooted religious and cultural values within the social structure of the pesantren. The tradition of ngalap berkah serves as a symbolic medium that binds spirituality, reverence, and exemplary conduct in the daily life of santri. This study underscores the applicability of symbolic interactionism in analyzing pesantren cultural dynamics and contributes to broader discourses on symbolic communication in religious settings.

Keywords: Ngalap berkah, pesantren, kiai, santri, symbolic interactionism, communication ethnography

How to Cite: Aziz, M., A., A. Ronda, M., (2025). The symbolic representation of blessing in kiai-santri interactions (An ethnographic study at Darussalam Behji Islamic Boarding School, Surabaya), *11*(2), 128-135. <https://doi.org/10.55210/humanistika.v11i2.2172>

Introduction

Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) are not only traditional educational institutions in Indonesia but also dynamic centers of cultural transmission and spiritual development, whose roles remain relevant in the face of contemporary educational challenges (Fajarudin, 2024). As institutions that have existed long before the nation's independence, pesantren serve not only as centers for the transmission of Islamic knowledge but also as arenas for the socialization of spiritual, social, and cultural values. At the core of pesantren education is the relationship between the kiai (religious teacher) and the santri (student), in which the kiai functions not merely as an instructor but also as a role model and spiritual figure with significant moral authority (Muhdi & Halim, 2023).

Pesantren present a rich field of inquiry due to their unique social and cultural environment, replete with local values, traditions, and interpersonal dynamics. One notable dimension of pesantren culture is the presence of symbolic traditions often interpreted as expressions of reverence that illustrate the spiritual connection between kiai and santri, such as hand-kissing, respectfully arranging the kiai's

sandals, or preserving the kiai's leftover water. These practices are rooted in the concept of *ngalap berkah*, a belief that contact with individuals considered holy or close to God can bring about an abundance of goodness and divine grace (Hafidz, 2021). In this context, the kiai is perceived as a bearer of *barakah* (blessing), and the physical traces or personal items associated with him are considered to hold spiritual value by the santri.

The practice of *ngalap berkah* among santri is not merely a form of personal veneration; rather, it embodies a symbolic system deeply rooted in the religious and cultural values of the *pesantren*. Blessing is understood not only as a metaphysical substance but also as a symbol of the spiritual relationship between human beings and the Divine, mediated through religious figures. This notion of blessing encompasses values such as piety, humility, and devotion, which are believed to continuously flow and generate both spiritual and material benefits in everyday life (Nashihin et al., 2025).

This tradition continues to be preserved in many *pesantren*, including Pondok Pesantren Darussalam Behji in Surabaya City, where such practices are maintained in routine religious activities. Nevertheless, these traditional practices evoke an ongoing dialogue between inherited spiritual beliefs and modern rationalist frameworks, especially in discussions surrounding health, hygiene, and the evolving understanding of spiritual blessings. While some perceive these acts as profound expressions of respect, others argue for a critical re-evaluation to avoid excessive cult-like behavior.

Previous studies, such as Rahman (2022), have examined the phenomenon of *ngalap barakah* through the consumption of the kiai's leftover drinks, interpreting it as part of a living tradition deeply embedded in *pesantren* life. Similarly, the study by Rofidah & Syam (2021) explored the practice of arranging the kiai's sandals and uncovered the underlying motives behind this behavior. Both studies highlight that the meaning of blessing is constructed through symbolic interaction within the daily life of the *pesantren* (Pernandi, 2018).

However, despite these contributions, there has been no specific study that examines the symbolic communication dimension and the construction of meaning in the relationship between kiai and santri within the context of modern *pesantren*. This study offers a novelty by examining *ngalap berkah* not merely as a religious practice, but as a symbolic communication system that shapes spiritual, social, and cultural values in the *pesantren* environment (Sarkowi et al., 2025). It seeks to describe how santri interpret and represent the symbol of blessing within their social interactions in the *pesantren* environment. Employing an ethnographic communication approach and grounded in symbolic interactionism theory, this research aims to uncover the symbolic meanings embedded in the santri's daily practices related to the pursuit of blessing. The study is expected to contribute to a deeper understanding of *pesantren* culture as a religious communicative space rich in symbolic meaning.

Method

This study adopts a qualitative approach with the ethnography of communication as its main method, which is particularly suitable for exploring cultural practices and symbolic interactions in *pesantren* settings that involve layered verbal and non-verbal communication (Saepullah, 2021). This approach is chosen for its capacity to provide an in-depth understanding of the social and cultural dynamics occurring within the *pesantren* environment, particularly those related to symbolic practices that represent the concept of *barakah* (blessing). The ethnography of communication enables the researcher to comprehend how members of the *pesantren* community use, interpret, and preserve symbols of blessing within the context of their everyday interactions.

Data collection in this study was conducted through three primary techniques: participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation (Ihwan Huda Al, 2023). Participant observation was carried out intensively over a three-month period, during which the researcher participated in daily religious activities, rituals, and informal interactions, enabling a natural and contextual understanding of the lived symbolic practices (Risnawati et al., 2021). In-depth interviews were conducted with 6

purposively selected informants, including senior santri, kiai assistants, and pesantren administrators, chosen based on their roles and familiarity with symbolic practices related to blessings. Meanwhile, the documentation technique was employed to gather secondary data, such as pesantren archives, records of religious activities, and visual media capturing these symbolic practices.

Theoretically, this study is guided by Herbert Blumer's symbolic interactionism, which is particularly relevant for analyzing how meaning is constructed through ongoing interpersonal interactions, especially in pesantren settings where symbols, rituals, and hierarchical relations are deeply embedded. This theory emphasizes that social reality is constructed through ongoing symbolic interactions among individuals within a society. According to Blumer, meaning is not fixed or inherently attached to an object; rather, it is the result of interpretive processes that occur within social interaction contexts.

Result and Discussion

The findings reveal several patterns of symbolic practices that represent barakah in the daily lives of santri within the interactions between kiai (Islamic scholars) and santri (students) at Pondok Pesantren Darussalam Behji, Pakal, Surabaya. Employing a qualitative approach through the ethnography of communication, data were collected via in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation.

The phenomenon of ngalap berkah (the pursuit of blessings) is a common practice in Indonesian pesantren, particularly within the relational dynamics between kiai and santri (Sarkowi et al., 2025). This tradition is rooted in the belief that barakah, understood as divine grace from Allah SWT, can be obtained through pious individuals such as the kiai, as well as through sincere and consistent good deeds. Barakah is not merely perceived as material prosperity but also encompasses spiritual dimensions such as inner peace, health, safety, and ease in life's affairs. "For me, barakah is felt when my heart is calm and everything runs smoothly," said one senior santri.

Findings from interviews with santri and kiai at Pondok Pesantren Darussalam Behji reveal that barakah is perceived as a divine gift with enduring benefits. It manifests not only in the form of acquired knowledge but also in character transformation, ease in learning, and spiritual tranquility. This concept is reinforced by the belief that closeness to a kiai, as a knowledgeable and pious figure, can serve as a conduit for receiving divine blessings. Accordingly, the relationship between santri and kiai is not merely instructional but laden with spiritual and symbolic values.

The pesantren environment encompassing communal prayers, dhikr (remembrance of God), religious study sessions, and service to the kiai functions as a collective medium to attain barakah (Ali, 2022). Santri who practice proper etiquette (adab) and devotion (khidmat) toward the kiai are believed to receive blessings that manifest not only as academic achievement but also as moral development and spiritual growth. This process reflects the internalization of the values of barakah through symbolic interaction, as explained by the theory of symbolic interactionism.

Within this context, the kiai is positioned as a central figure and a symbolic representation of barakah. The knowledge imparted by the kiai is not merely a transfer of information but is perceived as a form of blessing that profoundly influences the santri's life. The santri believe that through diligent study, sincere service, and respectful conduct toward the kiai, blessings will flow and positively shape their lives both during and after their time in the pesantren (Utami, 2018). Thus, barakah in the pesantren tradition is represented through sacred interactions characterized by reverence, sincerity, and perseverance in seeking knowledge.

In pesantren life, the symbol of barakah is both a social and spiritual entity. In pesantren or Islamic boarding school, the kyai is very sacred because he is considered having the practice of Hizb believed to be able to bring barakah (blessing) by the majority of santri (students) (Syarif & Gaffar, 2019). It reflects religious dimensions and serves as part of the cultural and moral construction of the santri. The

pesantren functions not only as a religious educational institution but also as a site for the reproduction of spiritual symbols that reinforce ethical and reverential values. Symbols of barakah are expressed through symbolic acts passed down across generations, which are interpreted as means of drawing closer to Allah through the intercession of the kiai as a spiritual authority.

One concrete representation of barakah in pesantren culture is the tradition of *sowan*, the act of visiting and respectfully presenting oneself before the kiai. This practice carries profound spiritual meaning and is more than just a social call it is seen as an effort to obtain advice, prayers, and blessings, reflecting the santri's desire to seek divine grace through a spiritually and intellectually authoritative figure (Rofiq, 2018). There is a reflection that the 'santri' relation to the 'kiai' is an obedience of 'sam'an wa atha'atan' by hoping to bless in order that they can get better lives. *Sowan* is conducted with full observance of etiquette and manners, reflecting deep respect for the teacher and a uniquely hierarchical and spiritual relationship between kiai and santri. Furthermore, it reinforces intergenerational bonds and serves as a medium for internalizing ethical and spiritual values that shape santri character.

Another symbolic manifestation of barakah can be seen in simple yet meaningful practices, such as arranging the kiai's sandals. Though seemingly trivial, this act is perceived as an expression of *khidmat* (devotion), obedience, and respect for the kiai's scholarly authority. It is also seen as the embodiment of a prophetic tradition in which even small acts, like removing a thorn from a path, carry great significance. Santri believe that treating the kiai's belongings with care is part of the ethical code of seeking knowledge and a path toward divine blessing. This finding is aligned with Blumer's notion that meanings are socially constructed through shared interactions, where even mundane acts like arranging sandals gain spiritual meaning (Fauzi, 2017). These traditions instill values such as discipline, humility, and compassion in the santri's daily life.

In addition, activities such as cleaning spaces used by the kiai, especially before religious events like *khataman al-Qur'an* are also symbolic acts of blessing with spiritual and moral dimensions. Such practices are not only a form of respect toward religious authorities but also reflect Islamic teachings that cleanliness is part of faith. Santri believe that maintaining the purity of a space used by the kiai promotes both physical comfort and spiritual receptivity to knowledge. These symbolic actions demonstrate how the values of barakah are represented in daily behaviors within pesantren culture ritualistic, educational, and transformative in nature.

Overall, the symbol of barakah in the kiai-santri interaction at Pondok Pesantren Darussalam Behji manifests through cultural practices that represent spiritual, social, and ethical values. These traditions function not only as expressions of reverence toward the kiai but also as instruments of character education, instilling *adab*, humility, and personal piety. The symbolic representation of barakah highlights how spiritual values in pesantren are concretely manifested through symbolic acts continuously reproduced in the everyday life of the santri.

This belief continues to shape the santri's perception of success, with many alumni attributing their achievements to the blessings obtained during their time in pesantren. Barakah is understood not only as material success but also as ease, serenity, and the lasting benefit of knowledge. This belief shapes santri's daily conduct through acts such as *sowan*, arranging the kiai's sandals, or cleaning the kiai's space. These actions are symbolic expressions of reverence and intentional efforts to obtain blessings.

This phenomenon is analyzed through the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism, developed by Herbert Blumer. This theory posits that social meaning is constructed through interpersonal interaction and mediated by mutually agreed symbols. It rests on three primary premises: human action is based on the meaning assigned to objects; meaning arises from social interaction; and meaning is subject to reinterpretation through ongoing interaction. In this context, barakah is a social meaning constructed through the interaction between santri and kiai, represented in symbolic practices

that are continuously inherited. Santri understand barakah as attainable through actions that reflect proper etiquette, devotion, and obedience to the kiai.

The santri's understanding of barakah is shaped by intense social interactions within the pesantren environment through religious study, communal discussions, shared meals, and formal education grounded in pesantren values. This process cultivates a collective consciousness regarding barakah as a spiritual value derived from Islamic teachings and the symbolic practices of pesantren life. The experiences of santri in interacting with kiai and the pesantren community further reinforce and expand their understanding of barakah.

As interaction progresses, the meaning of barakah transforms. Initially perceived in purely intellectual terms, santri gradually expand their understanding to include moral, spiritual, and social dimensions. The kiai's prayers, smiles, and advice are all seen as tangible manifestations of barakah, along with symbolic practices such as observing adab, offering service, and practicing received ijazah (spiritual permissions). Thus, the symbolic representation of barakah evolves dynamically and becomes integral to the formation of santri character and spirituality at Pondok Pesantren Darussalam Behji.

The concept of barakah occupies a central position in pesantren culture as part of a religious value system deeply embedded in the lives of santri. Call it a barakah that is closely related to tradition at pesantren. Barakah is often understood as a sacred thing and has its power and can also affect the lives of students in pesantren (Syihabuddin et al., 2023). Barakah is perceived not only as a divine outpouring of goodness in material form but also as encompassing non-material aspects such as inner peace, health, and ease in life. In the pesantren context, barakah is believed to result from virtuous actions, devotion, and a strong spiritual connection with religious figures, especially the kiai.

Field findings indicate that santri at Pondok Pesantren Darussalam Behji regard barakah as divine recompense with broad benefits, both personal and social. The kiai-santri relationship is the main conduit through which blessings are obtained. Santri believe that the knowledge imparted by the kiai possesses deep spiritual value, especially when accompanied by proper etiquette, devotion, and reverence toward the kiai. Here, barakah is transmitted not only through knowledge but also through the kiai's exemplary conduct and prayers, believed to have transformative effects on the santri's life.

The role of the kiai in the pesantren is not limited to formal teaching but extends to being a revered spiritual and moral figure. The relationship between santri and kiai is laden with the symbolism of barakah, reflected in practices such as reverence, service, and seeking blessings from the kiai's leftovers or advice. These practices are understood by the santri as concrete means of drawing closer to Allah SWT while reinforcing moral, ethical, and spiritual dimensions in their everyday lives.

Furthermore, barakah in the pesantren also has social and cultural dimensions. It serves as an integrative element that strengthens social solidarity within the pesantren community and shapes santri into humble, responsible individuals oriented toward exemplary values. Ultimately, the tradition of barakah not only guides santri toward intellectual achievement but also toward spiritual maturity and social adaptability. Therefore, the symbol of barakah in kiai-santri interactions is not merely a traditional legacy but a meaningful system that actively shapes the santri's religious and social quality of life in a sustained manner.

The symbolic meanings of blessing (keberkahan) as interpreted by santri in their interactions with the kiai at the pesantren encompass several key aspects:

1. Blessing as a spiritual value, the symbolic meaning of blessing in the interaction between the kiai and the santri reflects a complex and multidimensional spiritual value system. Santri understand blessing not merely as material abundance, but as a spiritual value that touches various aspects of life, including inner peace, ease in acquiring knowledge, and moral strength in facing life's challenges. From a theological perspective, blessing is perceived as divine grace, attained through religious devotion, the pursuit of knowledge, and deep respect for one's teacher.

2. Interaction with the kiai as a source of blessing, one of the primary sources of blessing in pesantren tradition is the figure of the kiai. The kiai is not only regarded as an authority in religious knowledge but also as a spiritual figure believed to possess closeness to God. The relationship between the santri and the kiai transcends academic interaction; it includes dimensions of reverence and spirituality. Santri believe that acts of veneration towards the kiai such as kissing his hand, attentively listening to his advice, or even drinking the remnants of his water are forms of seeking blessing (ngalap berkah) that strengthen spiritual bonds and serve as pathways to divine favor.
3. Blessing in everyday life, blessing is also interpreted in a practical sense within the daily life of the santri. Diligence in worship, discipline in study, and sincerity in living the pesantren life are regarded as concrete expressions of the pursuit of blessing. In this context, blessing functions not only as a transcendental symbol but also as an indicator of educational success that encompasses intellectual, moral, and emotional dimensions. This affirms that the pesantren is not merely an institution for the transmission of knowledge, but also a space for profound spiritual transformation.
4. Social and cultural implications, the concept of blessing carries wide-ranging social and cultural implications. The values instilled through the symbols of blessing such as honesty, responsibility, humility, and social concern contribute to the character formation of the santri. Blessing is understood as an integrative force that combines religious knowledge with social competence, forming individuals who are both devout and adaptable to the changing demands of the times.

Thus, the symbol of blessing in the interaction between kiai and santri cannot be viewed merely as a traditional practice, but rather as a socio-cultural and spiritual mechanism that plays a vital role in the pesantren's educational system. The tradition of ngalap berkah serves as a medium for internalizing values of etiquette, spirituality, and life purpose, with enduring effects that extend beyond the pesantren experience, equipping santri with ethical and religious foundations for their life after graduation.

The concept of barakah (blessing) in the pesantren (Islamic boarding school) environment is not merely understood in a theological-normative sense, but is also manifested symbolically through the social and cultural practices of the santri (students). At Pondok Pesantren Darussalam Behji, Pakal, Surabaya City, barakah is interpreted as a socially constructed value formed through the interaction between the kiai (religious leader) and the santri, which is represented through symbolic actions such as sowan (visiting the kiai), arranging the kiai's sandals, and cleaning the kiai's room. These practices function not only as expressions of respect for the kiai as a spiritual authority, but also as mediums for internalizing values of decorum (adab), reverence for knowledge, and the pursuit of barakah from both religious and social perspectives (Riva'i, 2020).

The tradition of sowan is perceived as a form of spiritual visitation aimed at seeking advice, prayers, and blessings from the kiai. Rooted in the values of adab and respect, sowan is believed to be a channel through which barakah is obtained in the life of the santri. It is commonly practiced at significant moments, such as before returning home, prior to examinations, or during times of hardship. Typically, sowan is conducted together with the santri's parents, reflecting an intergenerational transmission and preservation of values and practices that are sustained across generations.

Meanwhile, the act of arranging the kiai's sandals by the santri symbolizes service and attentiveness. Though seemingly trivial, this practice carries profound spiritual meaning within the pesantren tradition, representing a form of devotion to the teacher and a means through which the blessing of knowledge is believed to be acquired. Furthermore, this act embodies the Islamic philosophy that emphasizes the significance of small deeds that yield meaningful spiritual impact.

Similarly, the activity of cleaning spaces used by the kiai or by students who memorize the Qur'an is regarded as an embodiment of religious teachings on cleanliness and as a form of respect toward spaces deemed sacred. This practice aims to create a conducive and comfortable environment for the

kiai and the pesantren community at large. Beyond its functional role, it also fosters the cultivation of humility, respect, concern for cleanliness, and a deeper understanding of barakah in the consciousness of the santri.

The symbol of blessing (barakah) as represented by santri in their interactions with the kiai within the pesantren environment manifests in three main aspects:

1. Representation of blessing through rituals and traditions, blessing is represented through the santri's participation in pesantren rituals and traditions that embody spiritual values and proper Islamic etiquette (adab). Practices such as sowan (visiting and seeking counsel from the kiai), arranging the kiai's sandals, and cleaning spaces used by the kiai are not merely acts of respect, but also reflect the internalization of Islamic ethical values transmitted across generations.
2. Representation of blessing in attitudes and behaviors, blessing is also manifested in the daily attitudes and behaviors of santri. Their character is shaped through a continuous process of spiritual and social education within the pesantren, fostering virtues such as patience, sincerity, discipline, and noble conduct. In this context, blessing is not only understood as a metaphysical concept but also as a transformative value that contributes to the formation of both individual morality and social ethics.
3. Preservation and transmission of blessing symbols, santri play an active role in safeguarding and transmitting symbols of blessing to future generations. This preservation is achieved through value internalization, daily practice, and contextual adaptation of symbols without compromising their spiritual essence. Thus, blessing symbols function not only as cultural elements but also as tools for strengthening adaptive and sustainable Islamic values.

From the perspective of Herbert Blumer's symbolic interactionism, the meaning of blessing is constructed through repeated symbolic communication within specific social contexts. Meanwhile, Stuart Hall's theory of representation highlights that these symbols of blessing reflect cultural values, power relations, and the identity of the pesantren community. Therefore, blessing within the pesantren is not solely spiritual and transcendental but also plays a significant role in shaping the social structure, religious practices, and character education of the santri. The tradition of blessing is an integral part of the pesantren-based Islamic education system, which emphasizes spirituality, adab, and the continuity of core values.

Conclusion

This study affirms that barakah (blessing) in the interaction between kiai and santri at Pondok Pesantren Darussalam Behji is not merely a personal spiritual element. Instead, it is a social construct encompassing sociocultural and psychological dimensions. Barakah emerges from the close relationship between kiai and santri, serving as a guiding value in shaping santri behavior and religious identity. This study identifies four key dimensions of barakah as its main contribution: (1) a spiritual value, (2) the outcome of interpersonal closeness with the kiai, (3) a guiding principle in everyday life, and (4) a social and cultural force within pesantren. The symbols of barakah are manifested in various rituals, behaviors, and the preservation of sacred values. These representations are dynamic and continuously reinterpreted through symbolic interaction and lived experience. This reinforces the kiai's central authority and sustains a pesantren-based value system. The pesantren is not only a center of religious learning but also a cultural space where values, character, and social norms are collectively cultivated.

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