

# Refusing to Forget: Re-Knowing the Tradition of Learning the Yellow Book (*Kitab Kuning*) in Islamic Boarding Schools

Andi Purwanto<sup>1</sup>, Eman Khaaled<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Ampel Surabaya, Indonesia, <sup>2</sup>Cairo University, Egypt  
Email correspondence: [misterandy.edu@gmail.com](mailto:misterandy.edu@gmail.com)

## Abstract

*Learning in Islamic boarding schools can be classified into 4 (four) levels. Within each of these levels, the fields of study and the basis for learning the kitab kuning are different. At the elementary level Islamic boarding schools, the field of study is focused on procedures for reading the Qur'an and daily prayers as well as reading in prayer. Learning at this level is given on a skill-based basis. In Islamic boarding schools at the secondary level I, learning is focused on the study of Arabic grammar (nahwu and sharraf). Similar to the previous level, in this phase learning is carried out on a skill-based basis. At secondary level II Islamic boarding schools, the learning material provided is a study of the yellow book across fields. Learning at this level is carried out based on content understanding. At high-level Islamic boarding schools, students are given more specific subject matter. Learning at this level is in-depth and based on constructivism where students are encouraged to think critically and can understand the epistemological conceptual framework of the author of the kitab kuning.*

## Keywords

Yellow book, Islamic boarding school, learning

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## INTRODUCTION

The yellow book is a book that discusses religious issues that are generally studied in Islamic boarding schools, and is written in Arabic letters without *syakal* in Arabic and local languages and is written with classical systematics. We get this understanding at least if we conclude the meaning of the yellow book put forward by Martin van Bruinessen (1990), Azyumardi Azra (1999), and several other understandings that we get in various scientific journals (Dahlan et al., 1999). If we agree with what Bruinnsen explained, the mention of the 'yellow book' is because the paper is 'yellow' or looks 'mangkak' because it was brought from the Middle East before the 20th century (Bruinessen, 1990). "Called *kuning*, 'yellow,' after the tinted paper of books brought from the Middle East in the early twentieth century." Martin van Bruinessen said in his journal.

In Bruinessen's notes, in his research on the yellow book and Islamic boarding schools in the archipelago, he found that the yellow book as a book that discusses religion studied in Islamic boarding schools is studied in various languages. At first, he quoted Van den Berg who collected fifty titles of the yellow book along with a synopsis of the yellow book which was considered important and studied in the Islamic boarding schools of his time, namely in 1886. Berg obtained this data after he interviewed the kiai of the time. Bruinessen himself in his research (1990) collected more than 900 different titles from the

yellow book that were studied in Islamic boarding schools. The following is the statistical data (Bruinessen, 1990):

**Table 1.** Data on the Use of Language in the Yellow Book in Indonesian Islamic Boarding Schools

Languages Spoken	Estimated Number of Titles	Percentage
Arabic	500	55 %
English/Malay	200	22 %
Javanese	120	13 %
Sundanese	35	4 %
Madurese language	25	2,5 %
Acehnese language	5	0,5 %
Indonesian Language	20	2 %
Sum	905	99 %

The data in table 1 above, shows that the writing of the yellow book in Arabic is the dominant use in Islamic boarding schools when compared to local languages and Indonesian. This is if we agree on the statistical data presented by Bruinessen in 1990. Now the color of the yellow book paper is no longer yellow. And with the development of technology, a yellow book has also been obtained in the form of digital files (pdf, epub, and the like).

The data mentioned above (table 1) also shows the urgency of developing the learning of the yellow book in Islamic boarding schools. This article will specifically discuss the concept of learning the yellow book in Islamic boarding schools on a macro scale in the institutional scope of Islamic boarding schools. This is probably a proposed draft concept. This is so far that it can contribute to the development and development of the Islamic boarding schools system and learning in Indonesia.

Bruinessen's work on the yellow book and the world of Islamic boarding schools, both in his journal "Kitab Kuning: Books in Arabic Script Used in the Islamic boarding schools Milieu", as well as in his book "Kitab Kuning, Islamic boarding schools, and Tarekat" on the one hand, as well as the monumental work of Clifford Geertz, explains that the yellow book is a distinctive feature in the scholastic tradition of Islamic boarding schools that is firmly held. This is in contrast to the Roman-language "white book" used by modernists in an attempt to reinterpret the Qur'an and Hadith. Geertz concluded that traditionalist and modernist students were in two different polarities at least until the 1950s (and until the 1960s, in the Bruinessen version). On the one hand, traditionalists adhere to rigid and rigid scholastic patterns in religion. On the other hand, modernists use religion as an instrumental aspect in dealing with the reality of life (Geertz, 1960). Modernists reject almost all scholastic traditions that are firmly held in the scientific tradition of traditionalists (Bruinessen, 1990).

## METHOD

This research uses a qualitative method. This type of research is a literature research focused on learning the yellow book in Islamic boarding schools which includes data on the books that are the subject matter and the learning methods used. The primary data of this study are books and articles relevant to the research topic.

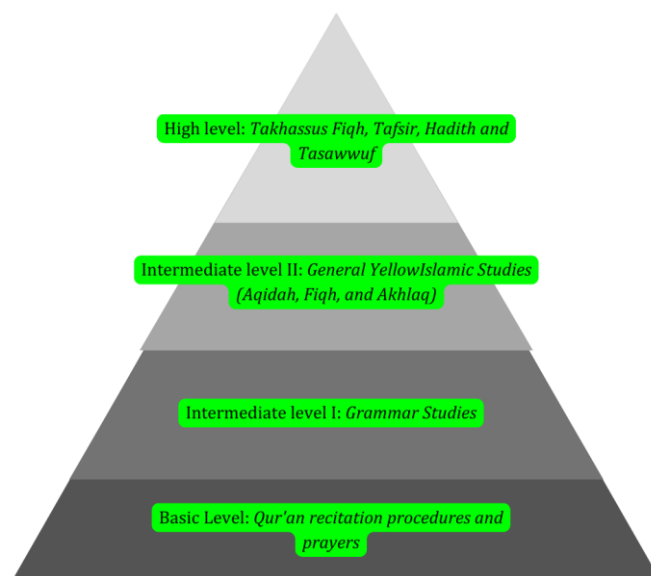
## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This article will probably be part of a form of spirit of what Bruinessen describes as: “*maintenance and continuation*” in the learning tradition in Islamic boarding schools. This paper is basically a step to conceptualize the learning of the Yellow Book in Islamic boarding schools in the context of the continuity of learning in Islamic boarding schools on the one hand, while adhering to the roots of tradition on the other hand. The spirit of the Yellow Book must be maintained, but in terms of its implementation in reality, it must be dynamic. Bruinessen once explained:

*One of Indonesia's great traditions is that of Muslim religious learning as embodied in the Javanese Islamic boarding schools and similar institutions in the outer islands and the Malay peninsula. The raison d'être of these institutions is the transmission of traditional Islam as laid down in scripture, i.e., classical texts of the various Islamic disciplines, together with commentaries, glosses and supercommentaries on these basic texts written over the ages. These works are collectively known, in Indonesia, as kitab kuning, 'yellow books', a name that they allegedly owe to the tinted paper on which the first Middle Eastern editions reaching Indonesia were printed. The corpus of classical texts accepted in the Islamic boarding schools tradition is—in theory at least—conceptually closed; the relevant knowledge is thought to be a finite and bounded body. Although new works within the tradition continue to be written, these have to remain within strict boundaries and cannot pretend to offer more than summaries, explications or rearrangements of the same, unchangeable, body of knowledge. Even radical reinterpretations of the classical texts are not acceptable. The supposed rigidity of this tradition has come in for much criticism, both from unsympathetic foreign observers and from reformist and modernist Muslims themselves. In practice, however, the tradition appears to be much more flexible than the above sketch would suggest (Bruinessen, 1994).*

Following what Martin Van Bruinessen explained, it is explained that Islamic boarding schools at the beginner level is Islamic boarding schools that teach procedures and the ability to read the Qur'an and several prayers in prayer. At the middle level, Islamic boarding schools teaches Arabic grammar consisting of *Nahwu* (syntax), and *tashrif* (morphology). At a higher level, Islamic boarding schools teaches several yellow books on the theme of *aqidah*, *fiqh* and *akhlak*. And at a fairly high level, it offers specialized studies (*takhassus*) in the field of *fiqh*, *tafsir*, and Sufism studies (Bruinessen, 1999). Thus, there are 4 (four) levels (Chart 1). Based on what Bruinessen explained, this paper as explained will try to classify the concept of learning and the basis of its thinking based on the tiering mentioned above.

**Chart 1.** Islamic boarding schools Education Level and Material/Study Book



In general, there are 3 (three) types of learning concepts that must be developed in learning the yellow book in Islamic boarding schools, namely: (1) skill-based learning; (2) cognition-based learning; and (3) constructivism-based learning. Here's an explanation of each:

### **1. Gramatical concept-based learning and Arabic language skills**

This kind of learning is carried out in Islamic boarding schools that carry out elementary and secondary level recitation I. As explained by Bruinessen (1999) that Islamic boarding schools at the elementary level teach procedures for reading the Qur'an and memorizing prayers. And at a higher level, *nahwu* (syntax) and *sharraf* (morphology) are taught (Bruinessen, 1999). Musyrifah Sunanto said that during the Islamic kingdoms, students at the basic level were taught to memorize short surahs in the Qur'an and memorize readings in prayer for practical purposes in daily prayer (Sunanto, 2005). This skill-based learning also considers that in Islamic boarding schools Islamic studies are presented in the form of a yellow book in Arabic (foreign language). So this requires consideration of language learning which is the mastery of a second language or foreign language (Grabe, 2008). Language mastery at the *lower level* is highly preferred.

The stages of learning on the basis of these concepts and *skills* are important to be carried out in learning in Islamic boarding schools because they are related to at least 2 (two) things, namely: (1) the skill of reading the Qur'an and prayer as worship that must be done in Arabic; and (2) Arabic which is used as the language of instruction in the yellow book. At this stage of learning, basic concepts that are general about the basics of language are given. Concepts on the recognition of Arabic letters (orthographic), pronunciation procedures (phonology), the science of *tajwid*, *nahwu*, and the basic concepts of

translating the yellow book (*ngesai*) were given. Henceforth, the learning is more emphasized on drilling and training practices. The stages of concepts that are introduced, and the skills that must be honed for a student in this learning in order are (1) letter recognition, (2) pronunciation (*makharij al-huruf*), (3) tajweed science in concept and practice; (4) the meaning of Arabic (*ngesai*) and the principles of translation in a *pegon* manner (Kholis & Karom, 2022); (5) learning the basic concepts and practices of Nahwu (Arabic syntax), and (6) learning the basic concepts and practices of *tashrif* (*morphology*). Learning can be carried out in classical and individual methods (Kholis & Karom, 2022). Introduction to letters, pronunciation, and tajweed knowledge are given in elementary level Islamic boarding schools or Al-Qur'an Education Park (TPQ). Meanwhile, the learning of *ngesai*, *nahwu*, and *tashrif* is given at the intermediate level I. In elementary and TPQ boarding schools, referring to what was conveyed by Bruinessen and Musyrifah Sunanto, the students are given material for the recitation of certain surahs in the Qur'an, recitation in prayers and daily prayers. At the first intermediate level Islamic boarding schools, the students have been introduced to the yellow book and practiced reading it.

Table 2. Learning Materials at Elementary and Secondary Level I Islamic Boarding Schools

Islamic Boarding School Level	Materials provided	Concepts introduced	Skills Sharpened
Elementary Level Islamic Boarding School	Certain surahs in the Qur'an, Recitations in prayers, and Daily prayers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Letter recognition</li> <li>• Pronunciation (<i>Makharij Al-huruf</i>)</li> <li>• The science of tajweed in concept and practice;</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pronunciation Practice (<i>Makharij Al-huruf</i>)</li> <li>• tajweed recitation of the Qur'an</li> </ul>
Intermediate Level I Islamic Boarding School	Introduction to the yellow book	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pegon Translation</li> <li>• Nahwu Science</li> <li>• <i>tashrif</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pegon Translation</li> <li>• Nahwu Science</li> <li>• <i>tashrif</i></li> </ul>

## 2. Content-based learning

This content-based learning is carried out at the level of education at the secondary level of Islamic boarding schools. The material and curriculum content provided is Islamic science in general, including the fields of *aqidah*, *fiqh*, and *akhlaq*. The curriculum was given with a specific presentation of the title of the yellow book. For example, for the field of *aqidah* (the science of kalam), the book of *nurudh dholam* by Shaykh Nawawi can be given. The field of *fiqh* study is given the book of *taqrib* by Abi Syuja' and his lecture by Al-Ghazi. For moral subjects, the book *Bidayah Al-Hidayah* by Al-Ghazali can be given. In the field of *tafsir*, it can be given, for example, the book of *Tafsir Al-Jalalin*. Meanwhile, in the field of *hadith* studies, the book *Al-Arba'in An-Nawawiyyah*, the book *Bulugh Al-Maram* and/or *Riyadlus Shalihin* can be given.

The books studied in this phase and level are content-based. This means that learning is provided for understanding the theoretical concepts of each field of study or book

studied. Learning in this phase is carried out by implementing intensive reading class procedures in a *ban-dong* manner (Table 3).

The students who have taken this level are expected to have mastered Arabic grammar at the *lower level* well. The basic concepts of nahwu (especially I'rab) and morphology (*sharraf*) have been well understood. Teachers no longer need to explain the *basics* except for some things that are very detailed.

Table 3. Learning Materials at Intermediate Level II Islamic Boarding Schools

Islamic Boarding School Level	Materials provided	Concepts introduced	Skills Sharpened
Intermediate Level II Islamic Boarding School	Specific study of the yellow book across fields ( <i>aqidah, fiqih, akhlaq, tafsir, and hadith</i> )	Intensive reading classes with <i>bandongan</i> procedures.	Understanding the content and general concepts in <i>the Yellow Book</i> .

### 3. Constructivism-based learning

In this phase, the students have been given specific learning in the field of study (*takhassus*). Students who are interested in the field of fiqh studies (and this is usually the popular one in Islamic boarding schools), study the yellow books that discuss fiqh studies in depth. Likewise, those who are interested in the study of tafsir, hadith, and aqidah. The *books of the matan* of theorists (*muharrir al-ilmi*) that have been studied at the previous level are further deepened through the books of commentary (*syarah* and *hasyiyah*) of the exponents of madzhab. In the field of fiqh studies, for example, the famous one is *Hasyiyah Al-Baijuri 'Ala Ibn Al-Qasim*. A book written by a rector of Al-Azhar in his time, namely Shaykh Ibrahim Al-Baijuri. In the field of tafsir, the book *Hasyiyah As-Sawi* can be mentioned.

Learning is provided by emphasizing constructivism-based learning. This shows that the students are encouraged to think critically and can build the epistemological conceptual framework of the authors of the book. Learning at this level is provided by means of sorogan and deliberation classes. In many cases, students who are proficient and excel at this level will later become community religious leaders, references when arguing (debate), and have a new Islamic boarding schools in their hometown. Students who have taken this level and are declared to have passed will be given a legitimacy in the form of a *sanad diploma*. This is a sign that he has inherited a religious mindset from his teacher to the author of the book, the builder of the madzhab, and the prophet. With the receipt of *the sanad diploma*, the student has thus gained an authority as a religious expert.

Table 4. Learning Materials at Higher Level Islamic Boarding Schools

Islamic Boarding School Level	Materials provided	Concepts introduced	Skills Sharpened
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Higher Level Islamic Boarding Schools	<i>Takhassus</i> fiqh, <i>takhassus</i> tafsir, <i>takhassus</i> hadith, <i>Takhassus</i> Sufism.	Constructivism-based learning in the form of sorogan and deliberation classes.	Critical power, understanding of the epistemological conceptual framework
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All the things from the discussion above, if we map it, will look like in the following chart 2:

Chart 2. Islamic Boarding School Education Level, Field of Study, and Yellow Book Reading Base

Islamic Boarding School Level	Areas of Study and Learning Focus	Concept and Learning Base of the Yellow Book	Implementation in practice
Higher Level Islamic Boarding Schools	<i>Takhassus</i> Fiqih, Tafsir, Hadith, Sufism	Constructivism-based learning	Sorogan and deliberation classes
Intermediate Level II Islamic Boarding School	A study of the yellow book in general (aqidah, fiqh, and akhlaq, tafsir and hadith)	Content-based learning	Intensive reading classes, and deepening of study materials
Intermediate Level I Islamic Boarding School	Arabic Grammar Studies ( <i>Nahwu &amp; Sharraf</i> )		Lembaga Taman Pendidikan Al-
Elementary Level Islamic Boarding School	Procedure for Reading Al-Qur'an, daily prayers and prayers in prayer.	Concept-based and Skill-based Learning	Qur'an, ibtida'iy classes in diniyyah madrassas and inside and outside Islamic boarding schools

## CONCLUSION

Learning in Islamic boarding schools can be classified into 4 (four) levels. In each of these levels, the fields of study and the basis for learning the Yellow Book are different. At the elementary level Islamic boarding schools, the field of study is focused on the procedure of reading the Qur'an and daily prayers as well as recitation in prayer. Learning at this level is provided skill-based. In the first intermediate level Islamic boarding schools, learning is focused on the study of Arabic grammar (*nahwu* and *sharraf*). Similar to the previous level, in this phase learning is carried out skill-based. In the second level of secondary boarding schools, the learning material provided is a cross-disciplinary study of the yellow book. Learning at this level is carried out based on understanding the content. In high-level Islamic boarding schools, the students are given more specific subject matter.

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