Indonesian Journal of Sharia and Socio-Legal Studies
e-ISSN: 3090-8175
Vol. 2, No. 1, 2026, pp. 42-63

Between Religious Authority and Individual Agency: Negotiated Religious Consent in Arranged Marriages at Indonesian *Pesantren*

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.66277/ijssls.2.1.135

Received: 27-12-2025	Revised: 21-04-2026, 22-05-2026	Accepted: 22-05-2026

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Abstract

Debates surrounding arranged marriage in Muslim societies often focus on the ambiguous boundary between consent and coercion, particularly when marital practices involve familial authority, religious leadership, and cultures of collective obedience. This article examines arranged marriage practices at one of the oldest *pesantren salaf* (traditional Islamic boarding school) in Semarang Regency, Indonesia, by analyzing how marital consent is produced and negotiated within socio-religious relationships. Employing a socio-legal approach, this study draws on participatory observation and in-depth interviews with key informants directly involved in *pesantren* matchmaking and marriage practices. The findings reveal that arranged marriage within the *pesantren* functions not merely as a mechanism for family formation but also as a means of reproducing religious authority, patronage networks, and elite *pesantren* structures through endogamous marriage patterns, spouse selection criteria based on lineage (*nasab*) and religious competence, and cultures of obedience toward the *kiai* (Islamic religious leader) and parents. Marital consent is shaped through the internalization of *barokah* (divine blessing), deference to religious authority, and moral convictions regarding obedience as an integral component of *santri*s' (Islamic students) piety. At the same time, contemporary generations of *santri*s increasingly negotiate these practices through reflexivity, personal preferences, and emotional considerations in spouse selection. This article argues that consent in *pesantren* arranged marriages cannot be understood dichotomously as either a fully autonomous choice or absolute coercion. Rather, it constitutes a form of negotiated religious consent while remaining subject to reflexive negotiation by contemporary *santri*s. These findings contribute to broader debates on arranged marriage in Muslim societies and demonstrate that living Islamic law is continuously shaped through interactions among religious authority, local culture, and individual agency.

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[*Perdebatan mengenai perjodohan dalam masyarakat Muslim sering kali berpusat pada batas yang ambigu antara persetujuan dan paksaan, terutama ketika praktik perkawinan melibatkan otoritas keluarga, tokoh agama, dan budaya kepatuhan kolektif. Artikel ini mengkaji praktik perjodohan di salah satu pesantren salaf tertua di Kabupaten Semarang, Indonesia, dengan menganalisis bagaimana persetujuan dalam perkawinan diproduksi dan dinegosiasikan dalam relasi sosial-keagamaan pesantren. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan sosio-legal melalui observasi partisipatif dan wawancara mendalam terhadap sejumlah informan kunci yang terlibat langsung dalam praktik perjodohan dan perkawinan di pesantren. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa perjodohan di pesantren tidak hanya berfungsi sebagai mekanisme pembentukan keluarga, tetapi juga sebagai sarana reproduksi otoritas religius, jaringan patronase, dan struktur elite pesantren melalui pola perkawinan endogami, kriteria pemilihan pasangan berbasis nasab dan kapasitas keagamaan, serta budaya kepatuhan terhadap kiai dan orang tua. Persetujuan dalam perkawinan dibentuk melalui internalisasi nilai keberkahan, penghormatan terhadap otoritas religius, dan keyakinan moral mengenai pentingnya kepatuhan sebagai bagian dari etika kesalehan santri. Pada saat yang sama, generasi santri kontemporer mulai menegosiasikan praktik tersebut melalui refleksivitas, preferensi personal, dan pertimbangan emosional dalam memilih pasangan hidup. Artikel ini berargumen bahwa persetujuan dalam perjodohan di pesantren tidak dapat dipahami secara dikotomis sebagai pilihan individual yang sepenuhnya bebas ataupun sebagai bentuk pemaksaan absolut. Sebaliknya, persetujuan tersebut merupakan bentuk persetujuan agama yang tetap dinegosiasikan secara reflektif oleh generasi santri kontemporer. Temuan ini berkontribusi dalam memperluas perdebatan mengenai perjodohan dalam masyarakat Muslim sekaligus menunjukkan bahwa hukum Islam yang hidup senantiasa dibentuk melalui interaksi antara otoritas religius, budaya lokal, dan agensi individual.*]

Keywords: Arranged Marriage, Individual Agency, Matchmaking, Negotiated Religious Consent, Religious Authority, *Pesantren*.

Introduction

Debates surrounding arranged and forced marriages in Muslim societies have increasingly attracted scholarly attention across the fields of Islamic law, anthropology, and human rights studies.[1] These practices are often linked to familial power dynamics, patriarchal cultures, and forms of religious authority that influence individuals' rights to choose their marital partners.[2] Across various Muslim

1 Mehrdad Rayejian Asli and Mojgan Amrollahi Byouki, "Forced Marriage in Islamic Countries: The Role of Violence in Family Relationships," in *Women and Children as Victims and Offenders: Background, Prevention, Reintegration: Suggestions for Succeeding Generations (Volume 1)*, ed. Helmut Kury, Sławomir Redo, and Evelyn Shea (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2016), 729–53; Jessie V. Ford et al., "Missing Pieces: A Critical Review of Research on Forced Marriage and a Call for Family Scientists to Study Forced Marriage," *Journal of Family Theory & Review* 17, no. 3 (2025): 636–55.

2 Maryam Tariq, "Forced Marriage: An Analysis of Pakistani Culture in Light of Islamic and Human Rights Law," *Legal Transformation in Muslim Societies* 2, no. 2 (2025): 112–26; Shilan Fuad Hussain, "Arranged Servitude: How Forced Marriages Violently Confine Women," *Women's Studies*

contexts—including Pakistan, India, Indonesia, and several regions in the Middle East—marriages involving family intervention remain contested due to the frequently ambiguous boundary between voluntary consent and social coercion.[3] Some scholars view such practices as limiting individual agency, particularly that of women, since equal opportunities to express acceptance or refusal are often absent.[4] However, other studies suggest that family involvement in marital arrangements is not necessarily perceived as coercive. Instead, it may be understood as part of an ethic of collectivism, filial piety, and religious cultures that position the family as a central institution in the formation of domestic life.[5] These debates indicate that consent in Muslim marriage practices cannot be reduced to fully autonomous individual choice; rather, it must be examined within the broader social, cultural, and religious relations through which individuals interpret obedience, authority, and *barokah* (divine blessing) in family life.

In the Indonesian context, arranged marriage practices involving familial authority and religious leaders remain prevalent in *pesantren*s (Islamic boarding schools), particularly within *pesantren salaf* (traditional) communities, which are characterized by strong traditions of religious patronage. This article focuses on arranged marriage practices in one of the oldest *pesantren* in Semarang Regency, Central Java, Indonesia. In this study, arranged marriage refers to the practice of matchmaking and facilitating marriage through the mediation of a *kiai* (leader in the *pesantren*), whereby one or both spouses may be the children of a *kiai*, *santri*s (Islamic students), or descendants of *pesantren* alumni. Notably, some couples had never met prior to their marriage ceremony and encountered one another for the first time during the marriage contract (*ʿaqd al-nikāḥ*).[6] Although Islamic law

International Forum 116 (May 2026): 103310; Junita Fanny Nainggolan, Ramlan Ramlan, and Rahayu Repindowaty Harahap, "Pemaksaan Perkawinan Berkedok Tradisi Budaya: Bagaimana Implementasi CEDAW terhadap Hukum Nasional dalam Melindungi Hak-Hak Perempuan dalam Perkawinan?," *Uti Possidetis: Journal of International Law* 3, no. 1 (February 2022): 55–82.

3 Dinda Difia Madina, Zezen Zainul Ali, and Mega Puspita, "Aligning Islamic Law and Customary Law: Legal Dialectics in the Tradition of Forced Marriage in Jambi," *Justicia Islamica* 20, no. 1 (June 2023): 1–16; Arif Sugitanata et al., "Violation of Women's Rights: The Kawin Magrib Tradition of the Sasak Muslim Community in Lombok, Indonesia," *Journal of Islamic Law* 4, no. 2 (August 2023): 197–217; Tanya Lamba, "At the Crossroads of Marriage: Experiences of Young Urban Middle-Class Women Negotiating Family and Sexuality Within Heterosexual Intimate Relationships in North India," *Changing Societies & Personalities* 6, no. 4 (December 2022): 965–79; Zainab Amin, "Child Marriage and Sacred Justifications in Pakistan: Cultural Norms, Religious Interpretations, and Conflicts with Child Rights," *Religion & Human Rights* 20, no. 3 (December 2025): 125–64.

4 Muthoifin et al., "The Practice of Paneta Mawinne in The Sumbanese Tribe of East Nusa Tenggara Perspective of Islamic Law," *International Journal of Law and Society* 3, no. 3 (December 2024): 238–54; Maria Barcons Campmajó, "Los Matrimonios Forzados como Violencia de Género: Aspectos Controvertidos Desde los Feminismos," *Cuadernos Electrónicos de Filosofía del Derecho*, no. 41 (December 2019): 28–48.

5 Eva F. Nisa, "Marriage and Divorce for the Sake of Religion: The Marital Life of Cadari in Indonesia 1," *Asian Journal of Social Science* 39, no. 6 (2011): 797–820; Naema N. Tahir, "Understanding Arranged Marriage: An Unbiased Analysis of a Traditional Marital Institution," *International Journal of Law, Policy and the Family* 35, no. 1 (January 2021): ebab005; Mirwan Mirwan et al., "Endogamous Marriages in Kiai Sukorejo's Family: Sufi Social Fiqh Transformation and Implications for Islamic Jurisprudence," *Jurnal Ilmiah Al-Syir'ah* 21, no. 2 (December 2023): 224–41.

6 "Interview with Kiai FT," February 2023.

normatively recognizes consent as an essential component of marriage,[7] most informants accepted such arrangements voluntarily, influenced by the charismatic authority of the *kiai*, norms of obedience toward parents, and beliefs concerning *barokah* in married life.[8] This condition suggests that arranged marriage within *pesantren* extends beyond personal relationships or domestic concerns and functions as a mechanism for reproducing religious values, sustaining *pesantren* social networks, and legitimizing the moral authority of the *kiai*. Consequently, arranged marriage practices in *pesantren* warrant scholarly attention because they illuminate how Islamic family law is enacted, interpreted, and negotiated within the everyday social lives of contemporary Muslim communities.

Existing scholarship on arranged marriage practices in *pesantren* can be broadly categorized into three principal tendencies. First, studies emphasizing coercive models of arranged marriage reveal the dominance of familial and religious authority in determining marital partners, often leaving women with limited opportunities to express acceptance or refusal regarding their marriages.[9] Second, several studies demonstrate that arranged marriage practices in *pesantren* have undergone gradual transformation, shifting from arrangements without *taʿāruf* (premarital acquaintance) toward more participatory mechanisms involving limited interaction, photograph exchanges, and greater individual involvement in spouse selection. These findings highlight ongoing negotiations between traditional *pesantren* authority and the increasing individual agency of *santri* in marital decision-making.[10] Third, endogamous marriage practices within *pesantren* have been interpreted as social strategies aimed at preserving the genealogical continuity of *kiai* families, maintaining *kafāʾah* (equality) in marriage, and reproducing *pesantren* cultural identities. Nevertheless, younger generations of *santri*s have begun to reinterpret these traditions amid expanding educational opportunities, social mobility, and the influence of modernity on Muslim family life.[11] Taken together, these studies suggest that arranged marriage practices in *pesantren* can no longer be understood as singular or static traditions but rather as dialectical

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7 Wahbah al-Zuḥaylī, *Al-Fiqh al-Islāmī wa Adillatuh* (Damascus: Dār al-Fikr, 1989), 6:187–89.

8 "Interview with Gus FH," December 2022.

9 Mhd Rasidin et al., "Analysing the Pesantren Tradition of Arranged Marriages from the 'Kupi Fatwa Trilogi' Perspective," *Al-Istinbath: Jurnal Hukum Islam* 9, no. 1 (May 2024): 285–308; Yusuf Khummaini and Sukron Mamun, "Jodoh dan Perjodohan Santri Jamaah Tabligh di Pesantren Temboro," *Ulul Albab: Jurnal Studi dan Penelitian Hukum Islam* 3, no. 1 (January 2020): 23–48; Afina Amna, "Otoritas Kharismatik dalam Perkawinan: Studi Atas Perjodohan di Pondok Pesantren Al-Ma'sum Tempuran, Magelang," *Al-Ahwal: Jurnal Hukum Keluarga Islam* 11, no. 1 (June 2018): 91–102.

10 Kusnadi Kusnadi et al., "Mass Marriage Matchmaking at Pesantren: An Integration of Hadith and Sociological Perspectives," *KARSA: Jurnal Sosial dan Budaya Keislaman (Journal of Social and Islamic Culture)* 33, no. 1 (June 2025): 319–50; Andi Alfian, "Arranged Marriages among Young Educated Muslim Women in South Sulawesi Indonesia," *DINIKA: Academic Journal of Islamic Studies* 7, no. 1 (July 2022): 55–82; Basri Basri et al., "Dating Practices: A Moral Negotiation in Pesantren," *Jurnal Ilmiah Peuradeun* 12, no. 2 (May 2024): 671–94.

11 Abdul Aziz et al., "Endogamous Marriage Among Santri: The Perspectives of Sociology of Islamic Law," *Petita: Jurnal Kajian Ilmu Hukum dan Syariah* 9, no. 2 (November 2024): 700–717; Harry Yuniardi et al., "Between Tradition and Sharia: Endogamous Marriage Practices in the Pesantren Community of Bandung Regency from a Contemporary Islamic Legal Perspective," *MILRev: Metro Islamic Law Review* 4, no. 2 (July 2025): 899–932.

arenas in which religious authority, social reproduction, gender relations, and processes of individualization continuously intersect.

Although previous studies have significantly contributed to understanding arranged marriage practices within *pesantren*, most have primarily focused on gender relations, institutional transformations, or women's roles within marital arrangements. Existing scholarship has yet to adequately explain how male *santri*, *gus* (male descendants of a *kiai*), and other *pesantren* actors interpret, accept, and negotiate matchmaking practices mediated by the *kiai*. Moreover, the complex interplay among symbolic power, religious obedience, *kiai* patronage, and individual agency in shaping marital consent remains insufficiently explored. Addressing this gap, the present article analyzes how arranged marriage practices in *pesantren* are produced through the interaction of symbolic power, religious patronage, and the internalization of *barokah* while simultaneously being reflexively negotiated by contemporary generations of *santri*. This article argues that consent in *pesantren* arranged marriage practices cannot be understood merely as fully autonomous individual choice or as absolute coercion; rather, it constitutes a form of negotiated religious consent—a mode of consent produced through the interaction between religious authority, cultures of obedience, and individual reflexivity within *pesantren* communities. In doing so, this study contributes to broader debates on arranged marriage in Muslim societies by demonstrating that the boundary between consent and coercion remains fluid and is continuously negotiated within complex socio-religious relations.

Research Methodology

This study employs a field research design utilizing a socio-legal approach,[12] which conceptualizes law as a social practice continuously produced, interpreted, and negotiated through cultural relations and power structures within society. This approach was selected because it enables arranged marriage practices in *pesantren* to be examined not merely as normative expressions of Islamic family law but also as social phenomena shaped by religious authority, *kiai* patronage, and cultures of obedience embedded within *pesantren* communities. Fieldwork was conducted over three months, from December 2022 to February 2023, at one of the oldest *pesantren salaf* in Semarang Regency, Central Java, Indonesia. The selected *pesantren* holds historical significance in the development of Islamic education in Indonesia since the late nineteenth century and is widely recognized for its longstanding tradition of hadith scholarship, particularly in the study of *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* and *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*. In addition to producing prominent Muslim scholars and national figures—including KH. Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur), KH. Maimoen Zubair (Mbah Moen), and KH. Arifin Junaidi[13]—the *pesantren* has established extensive alumni networks, some of whom have founded their own Islamic boarding schools while maintaining similar

[12] See: Reza Banakar and Max Travers, *Theory and Method in Socio-Legal Research* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2005).

[13] "Interview with Gus LB," December 2022.

arranged marriage traditions. These characteristics make the *pesantren* a relevant research site for examining arranged marriage as a mechanism for reproducing religious authority and social structures within *pesantren* communities.

The study examines the lived experiences, meanings, and negotiation strategies of actors directly involved in arranged marriage practices within the *pesantren* environment. Primary data were collected through in-depth interviews with nine key informants, including *kiai*, *gus*, and *santri* who had direct experience with arranged marriage practices in *pesantren* settings (see Table 1). To deepen the contextual understanding of the social environment and relational dynamics among participants, intensive participant observation was conducted throughout the fieldwork.[14] The geographical proximity of the *pesantren* to some members of the research team, combined with longstanding personal relationships with several informants, facilitated deeper access to the social practices and subjective experiences under investigation. This condition not only enhanced data collection but also enabled richer and more reflective narratives concerning the meanings attributed to arranged marriage within *pesantren* life. To strengthen the credibility of the findings, all data were validated through source and methodological triangulation. Data analysis followed the interactive model developed by Miles and Huberman, involving iterative processes of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing until consistent interpretive patterns emerged.[15]

Table 1
Characteristics of Informants

Informant	Gender	Position	Interview Date
Kiai FT	Male	*Pesantren* Leader	February 2023
Gus ZK	Male	Male Descendant of a *Kiai*	December 2022
Gus RY	Male	Male Descendant of a *Kiai*	December 2022
Gus FH	Male	Male Descendant of a *Kiai*	December 2022
Gus LB	Male	Male Descendant of a *Kiai*	December 2022
Kang FT	Male	*Santri*	January 2023
Kang AN	Male	*Santri*	January 2023
Kang AL	Male	*Santri*	January 2023
Kang RN	Male	*Santri*	January 2023

Source: Authors' elaboration (2025).

This study adopts a socio-legal approach, understanding Islamic family law not merely as a body of formal norms but as a social practice continuously produced and negotiated through interactions among religious authority, local cultural values, and individual experiences. Accordingly, the analytical framework combines two complementary theoretical perspectives. First, Pierre Bourdieu's concept of

[14] See: Paul Aktinson and Martyn Hammersley, "Ethnography and Participant Observation," in *Strategies of Qualitative Inquiry*, ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, Inc, 20), 248–61.

[15] See: Michael Huberman and Matthew B. Miles, *The Qualitative Researcher's Companion* (SAGE, 2002).

symbolic power[16] is employed to explain how the religious authority of the *kiai* operates through the internalization of obedience, *barokah*, and deference toward social hierarchy, thereby shaping the acceptance of arranged marriage practices as morally legitimate. In this context, symbolic power does not function through overt coercion but through mechanisms of legitimation that render relations of domination natural and unquestioned within the social habitus of *pesantren* communities. Second, Anthony Giddens' notion of reflexive modernity[17] is used to examine the emergence of individual agency among *santri*s as they reflect upon and negotiate arranged marriage traditions amid broader processes of social change. This perspective facilitates an analysis of how contemporary generations of *santri* simultaneously maintain religious identities while incorporating personal considerations into decisions concerning marriage and partner selection. Through this analytical framework, the article examines arranged marriage practices in *pesantren* as a dialectical arena between the reproduction of religious authority and the emergence of negotiated religious consent—understood as a form of marital consent produced through the interplay of symbolic power, religious patronage, and the internalization of *barokah*—while remaining subject to reflexive negotiation by contemporary generations of *santri*.

Arranged Marriage Practices in *Pesantren*: Social Reproduction and Religious Authority

Arranged marriage practices continue to be a lived tradition in certain segments of *pesantren* culture, particularly among *kiai* families and *santri*s. Drawing on interviews with several key informants, arranged marriage practices in *pesantren salaf* in Semarang Regency can be organized into three main patterns: marriages between *kiai* families, marriages between *kiai* families and *santri*s, and marriages among *santri*s. Across these patterns, *kiai* generally serve as mediators who arrange marital ties, while many couples meet each other for the first time only at the time the marriage contract is carried out.[18] Such practices are not simply aimed at limiting forms of social interaction that are considered likely to lead to *zinā* (adultery), but they also operate as tools of social reproduction. Through them, religious authority, patronage networks, and the ongoing strength of elite structures within *pesantren* communities are sustained.[19]

The first pattern concerns marriages between *kiai* families. These marriages help both to maintain genealogical continuity and to uphold religious authority within the *pesantren*. Gus RY's experience illustrates that spouse selection is not carried out arbitrarily; rather, it is guided by religious considerations. While he was studying at a *pesantren* in Magelang, Gus RY's father asked Kiai AR to help locate a

16 Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power* (Harvard University Press, 1991), 107–16.
17 Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), 36–45.
18 "Interview with Kiai FT."
19 Aziz et al., "Endogamous Marriage Among Santri," 700–717; Yuniardi et al., "Between Tradition and Sharia," 899–932.

prospective wife with a background in Qurʾanic memorization (*ḥifẓ al-Qurʾān*). As he explained:[20]

> "*RY, awakmu tak golekke calon bojo. Aku wes matur Kyai AR, Magelang. Tak suwunke santri kono seng wes apal Qurʾan. Kyai AR malah maringke putrine. Ngendikane wes khatam anggone ngapalke Qurʾan.*" [RY, I will find you a wife. I have already spoken to Kiai AR in Magelang. I asked for a female student there who had memorized the Qurʾan. Instead, Kiai AR offered his own daughter, who had completed memorizing the Qurʾan.]

This narrative shows that Kiai AR not only approved the arrangement but also acted as the marriage guardian (*wali*) for his daughter when she married Gus RY. A comparable pattern can be seen in Gus FH, who was matched with the daughter of Kiai MN, a *pesantren* leader in Semarang Regency. Gus FH himself was a Qurʾan memorizer and the son of a *kiai langgar* (small mosque) in Ngawi. At present, the couple has four children.[21]

Cases like these suggest that endogamous marriages among *kiai* families are not based solely on personal relationships but are also shaped by ideological and symbolic concerns tied to the continuity of religious authority. In this setting, Qurʾanic memorization is treated as religious capital that carries high social value because it is associated with piety, moral legitimacy, and the ability to preserve the continuity of Islamic education traditions within the family. From a Bourdieusian point of view, these practices demonstrate how symbolic and cultural capital[22] are reproduced through marriage, allowing *kiai* families to maintain their dominant standing in the social structure of *pesantren* life. As a result, endogamous marriage among *kiai* families functions not only to preserve genealogical links but also to reproduce socio-religious authority across generations.[23]

The second pattern involves marriages between *kiai* families and *santri*s. In this arrangement, *santri* who display strong religious competence and deep loyalty to the *pesantren* obtain opportunities to become part of *kiai* families. Kang FT's experience illustrates how mastery of Islamic knowledge and closeness to the *kiai* become key factors in this process. He stated:[24]

> "*Rikolo bade pamit boyongan malah kulo dipun dawuhi kagem nikah kalih Ning. Kulo mboten wantun mbantah nopo malih nolak. Ibarate munggah lincak.*" [When I was preparing to leave the *pesantren* after completing my studies, I was instead told to marry Ning. I did not dare to object, let alone refuse. It felt as though I had gained social status.]

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20 "Interview with Gus RY," December 2022.
21 "Interview with Gus FH."
22 Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," in *Readings in Economic Sociology*, 1st ed., ed. Nicole Woolsey Biggart (Wiley, 2002), 280–91.
23 Aziz et al., "Endogamous Marriage Among Santri," 700–717; Yuniardi et al., "Between Tradition and Sharia," 899–932.
24 "Interview with Kang FT," January 2023.

This shows that the ties between *santri* and *kiai* are constructed not only through educational interactions but also through religious patronage that supports symbolic social mobility. Being chosen as a son-in-law of a *kiai* is understood as both an elevation in social status and an acknowledgment of one's religious ability and loyalty to the *pesantren*. Within the *pesantren* social structure, mastery of Islamic knowledge operates as cultural capital that opens access to networks of religious elites. Consequently, marriages between *santri* and *kiai* families not only create kinship ties but also reproduce patronage networks and reinforce the legitimacy of religious authority.[25]

The third pattern appears in arranged marriage practices among *santri*s that are directly mediated by *kiai*. Kang AN's experience indicates that the *kiai*'s authority does not end with the matchmaking process but continues into married life. He explained:[26]

> "*Kulo rumiyen dinikahke kalih Mbah Kyai... Insya Allah berkah ugi diijabah doanipun kyai...*" [I was married by Mbah Kiai... God willing, the *barokah* and prayers of the *kiai* will be granted.]

This account suggests that the relationship between couples and the *kiai* continues after marriage through practices of seeking prayers and sustaining beliefs in *barokah*. Here, marriage is not understood merely as a bond between two individuals but as a spiritual relationship that connects the couple to the religious authority of the *kiai*. Therefore, the success of married life is interpreted not only as the result of personal effort but also as something that depends on blessings obtained through proximity to the *kiai*. These findings show how the legitimacy of religious authority works by being internalized as *barokah*, shaping forms of obedience that *santri* embrace willingly.

Similar practices were also found in the *pesantren* led by Gus ZK. According to him, the *kiai* arranged marriages for around ten *santri* couples as part of a strategy to expand Islamic proselytization (*da'wah*) and to maintain social solidarity among the *santri*s. He explained:[27]

> *"Mbah Kyai rumiyen asring jodohaken santri-santri mriki... Ngendikane kagem penyebaran dakwah Islam*." [Mbah Kiai often arranged marriages among the students here... He said it was for the spread of Islamic preaching.]

Importantly, patronage relations in these arrangements do not stop after the marriage takes place. The *kiai* continues to provide economic assistance, help with employment, business capital, and spiritual support through prayers believed to bring *barokah* to the household. In some cases, the *kiai* even provides housing for newly married couples as an initial form of support in building family life.[28] These

[25] Aziz et al., "Endogamous Marriage Among Santri," 700–717; Yuniardi et al., "Between Tradition and Sharia," 899–932.
[26] "Interview with Kang AN," January 2023.
[27] "Interview with Gus ZK," December 2022.
[28] "Interview with Kiai FT."

conditions show that arranged marriage practices in *pesantren* simultaneously function as mechanisms for constructing religious patronage networks, thereby strengthening the *kiai*'s position as a central source of moral, social, and economic authority within the *pesantren* community.

Overall, the findings indicate that arranged marriage practices in *pesantren* extend beyond personal choice in marriage and instead operate as mechanisms of social reproduction that sustain religious authority, patronage networks, and the continuity of elite *pesantren* structures. In the context of *pesantren salaf* in Semarang Regency, marriage is used to preserve the *kiai* lineage, maintain ideological uniformity, and strengthen social loyalty within *pesantren* communities. These findings also support earlier studies showing that endogamous marriage practices in *pesantren* culture function not only as forms of social reproduction rooted in genealogical continuity but also as a means of reproducing religious symbolic capital.[29] Accordingly, arranged marriage practices in *pesantren* can be understood as spaces through which relations of power and religious authority are reproduced through the institutions of family and marriage.

Spouse Selection Criteria: Cultural Capital and the Reproduction of Religious Authority

Normatively, Islamic tradition recognizes four principal considerations in spouse selection: wealth, lineage, physical attractiveness, and religious commitment. Among these criteria, piety and religious competence are generally regarded as the most significant.[30] However, within the context of *pesantren salaf* in Semarang Regency, spouse selection operates within a more complex framework. Considerations of religious competence do not stand alone but intersect with lineage (*nasab*), ideological affiliation, *pesantren* family background, and proximity to specific socio-religious networks. Consequently, arranged marriage practices in *pesantren* cannot be understood merely as domestic arrangements between two individuals; rather, they function as social mechanisms that sustain religious authority, moral legitimacy, and the reproduction of *pesantren* elites across generations. These findings extend prevailing understandings of endogamy in *pesantren*, which have often been interpreted primarily through genealogical lenses,[31] by demonstrating that social reproduction within *pesantren* also occurs through the transmission of cultural capital and religious symbolic capital.

This tendency is evident in marriage practices among *kiai* families, as well as between *kiai* families and *santri*, where religious competence plays a central role in spouse selection. The cases of Gus RY and Gus FH illustrate how *pesantren* families deliberately choose partners who are not only descendants of *kiai* but also possess

[29] Aziz et al., "Endogamous Marriage Among Santri," 700–717; Yuniardi et al., "Between Tradition and Sharia," 899–932.
[30] Al-Zuḥaylī, *Al-Fiqh al-Islāmī wa Adillatuh*, 6:12–14.
[31] Aziz et al., "Endogamous Marriage Among Santri," 700–717; Yuniardi et al., "Between Tradition and Sharia," 899–932.

the ability to memorize the Qurʾan.[32] In this context, Qurʾanic memorization is positioned not merely as an individual religious competency but as a symbol of moral legitimacy that reflects both spiritual quality and familial credibility. A similar pattern emerges in the experience of Kang FT, who was selected as the son-in-law of a *kiai* family due to his mastery of *kitab kuning* (classical Islamic texts) and his strong dedication throughout his *pesantren* education.[33] Beyond religious intellectual capacity, mediators in matchmaking also consider everyday expressions of religiosity, including consistency in worship, commitment to religious learning, and the Islamic ethics (*akhlāq*) of prospective spouses.[34] Within the social structure of *pesantren*, mastery of Islamic knowledge and Qurʾanic memorization function as forms of cultural capital that not only enhance an individual's social legitimacy but also strengthen the symbolic standing of families within *pesantren* communities.[35]

In addition to religious competence, this study demonstrates that *nasab* remains a significant factor in spouse selection, particularly in marriages among *kiai* families. The case of Gus RY illustrates that although his father initially requested a recommendation for a female *santri* from Kiai AR, the response ultimately took the form of Kiai AR's willingness to offer his own daughter in marriage.[36] This practice suggests that spouse selection within *pesantren* is influenced not only by personal considerations but also by ideological and symbolic concerns related to the continuity of religious authority. If religious competence is understood as a form of religious capital associated with piety and moral legitimacy, then lineage functions as symbolic capital that preserves the continuity of identity and authority within *pesantren* families. Accordingly, endogamous marriage practices among *kiai* families serve not merely to maintain genealogical ties but also to preserve ideological homogeneity and reproduce religious leadership across generations.[37]

These findings indicate that religious competence and shared family backgrounds are perceived as essential for ensuring the continuity of religious orientation in both domestic life and the future education of children. Meanwhile, marriages between *kiai* families and *santri* create opportunities for symbolic social mobility, whereby *santri*s who do not originate from *kiai* lineages may nonetheless gain access to circles of religious elites through recognition of their scholarly abilities and loyalty to *pesantren* traditions. These findings support the work of Sallom and Syu'aib, who argue that arranged marriage practices in *pesantren* tend to prioritize lineage and the preservation of religious values in spouse selection.[38] Such conditions suggest that the reproduction of religious elites within *pesantren*

[32] "Interview with Gus FH."
[33] "Interview with Kang FT."
[34] "Interview with Kiai FT."
[35] Kusnadi et al., "Mass Marriage Matchmaking at Pesantren," 319–50.
[36] "Interview with Gus RY."
[37] Aziz et al., "Endogamous Marriage Among Santri," 700–717; Yuniardi et al., "Between Tradition and Sharia," 899–932.
[38] Dea Salma Sallom and Kholil Syu'aib, "Matchmaking in Pesantren: The Role of Wali Mujbir in Matchmaking with Maqasid Sharia Perspectives," *Al-Risalah: Forum Kajian Hukum dan Sosial Kemasyarakatan* 22, no. 1 (June 2022): 78–91, https://doi.org/10.30631/alrisalah.v22i1.1073.

occurs not exclusively through biological inheritance but also through forms of religious meritocracy grounded in scholarly competence and moral recognition. In other words, religious authority within *pesantren* is transmitted not solely through blood relations but is also produced and legitimized through recognition of intellectual capital and religious piety.[39]

From a Bourdieusian perspective, these practices can be understood as forms of symbolic capital reproduction mediated through the institutions of family and marriage.[40] Status as a member of a *kiai* family, a Qurʾan memorizer, or an individual possessing mastery of Islamic knowledge constitutes symbolic capital that gains value through collective recognition within *pesantren* social structures. Through marriage, such capital is inherited, preserved, and reproduced, enabling *kiai* groups to maintain their dominant position within the socio-religious hierarchy of *pesantren*. Consequently, arranged marriage practices function not merely as ethical principles within Islamic family law but also as mechanisms of social classification that determine who is deemed worthy of entering circles of religious elites. These findings demonstrate that living Islamic law never operates in a socially neutral manner but is always intertwined with social interests, power relations, and cultural structures embedded within *pesantren* communities. Thus, spouse selection criteria in arranged marriage practices simultaneously serve as normative devices that legitimize the reproduction of religious authority and preserve the stability of *pesantren* social structures.[41]

Consent in Arranged Marriage Practices: Symbolic Power and Religious Obedience

Arranged marriage practices within *pesantren* operate through mechanisms of symbolic power that derive legitimacy from religious values concerning obedience, *barokah*, and deference to the authority of both *kiai* and parents. In this context, consent to marriage does not always arise from fully autonomous individual choice but is instead shaped by the internalization of religious values that position obedience as an integral component of ethical piety. These findings suggest that power relations in *pesantren* arranged marriage practices function subtly through moral and spiritual legitimation rather than overt coercion or physical force. From a Bourdieusian perspective, such conditions can be understood as manifestations of symbolic power and symbolic violence[42]—mechanisms of domination accepted as natural because they have been internalized within the social habitus of *pesantren* communities. Consequently, arranged marriage practices in *pesantren* reveal an inherent ambiguity between consent and religious obedience, where marital decisions are accepted not merely as expressions of individual will but as pathways to attaining *barokah* through compliance with religious authority.

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39 Aziz et al., "Endogamous Marriage Among Santri," 700–717.
40 Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," 280–91.
41 Aziz et al., "Endogamous Marriage Among Santri," 700–717; Yuniardi et al., "Between Tradition and Sharia," 899–932; Sallom and Syu'aib, "Matchmaking in Pesantren," 78–91.
42 Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, 107–16.

These dynamics of symbolic power are evident in the experience of Gus RY, who accepted his father's decision to arrange his marriage to the *kiai*'s daughter in Magelang. Although the decision was largely determined by parental authority, Gus RY did not perceive it as coercion but rather as part of a life trajectory to be embraced through obedience. He stated:[43]

> "*Trisno biso amergo jalaran saka kulino*." [Love can grow through familiarity and shared experiences.]

This statement suggests that marital relationships within *pesantren* are not constructed upon the logic of individual romanticism typical of modern societies. Instead, they rely on the belief that marital harmony can be cultivated through obedience, habitual coexistence, and spiritual blessings. Within this framework, love is not considered a prerequisite for marriage but is expected to develop over the course of married life. These findings indicate that arranged marriage practices in *pesantren* are grounded in an ethic of religious collectivism that privileges family stability and moral obedience over individual preference.

A similar perspective is evident in the experience of Gus FH, who viewed obedience to parents as a pathway to attaining blessings in both worldly and spiritual life. He stated:[44]

> "*Insya Allah, menawi nderek tiyang sepuh angsal berkah dunyo akhirat*." [God willing, obeying one's parents brings blessings in both this world and the hereafter.]

This statement illustrates that the authority of parents and *kiai* acquires strong religious legitimacy through its association with the religious moral mandate of obedience to and respect for parents (*birr al-wālidayn*) and beliefs concerning divine approval (*riḍā*). Within *pesantren* culture, obedience to parents and *kiai* is understood not merely as a social obligation but as an expression of piety believed to carry spiritual consequences. Consequently, hierarchical relationships embedded within arranged marriage practices are often accepted voluntarily because they are perceived as part of religious ethics and as a means of attaining *barokah*. This situation demonstrates that the boundary between arranged marriage and forced marriage becomes increasingly blurred, insofar as consent to marriage is shaped by moral pressure and forms of spiritual legitimation operating at the cultural level. In this sense, consent in arranged marriage practices cannot be understood simply as an expression of individual choice but rather as a product of social and religious relations that shape how *santri*s interpret obedience, authority, and blessing.[45]

The operation of symbolic power is also evident in the experience of Kang FT, who married the *kiai*'s daughter after completing his *pesantren* education. He

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43 "Interview with Gus RY."

44 "Interview with Gus FH."

45 Mirwan et al., "Endogamous Marriages in Kiai Sukorejo's Family," 224–41; Muhammad Sibawaihi et al., "The Role of Kyai and the State in Regulating Child Marriage: A Study in Cirebon Regency," *Jurnal Ilmiah Mizani: Wacana Hukum, Ekonomi dan Keagamaan* 12, no. 2 (November 2025): 667–79; Kusnadi et al., "Mass Marriage Matchmaking at Pesantren," 319–50.

acknowledged that he lacked the courage to refuse because he regarded the *kiai* as a spiritual parental figure endowed with moral authority over his life. He explained:[46]

> "*Kulo namung ngugemi engkang dipun ngendikaaken kyai. Kulo mboten wantun mbantah, nopo malih nolak*." [I simply followed what the *kiai* instructed. I did not dare to object, let alone refuse.]

Within the social structure of the *pesantren*, the *kiai* is positioned not only as a teacher of religious knowledge but also as a moral figure believed to possess spiritual proximity to God.[47] Accordingly, obedience to the *dawuh* (instruction) of the *kiai* is understood both as an act of religious reverence and as a means of obtaining *barokah*. Significantly, Kang FT did not interpret marriage as a form of subordination but rather as an elevation in social status, as it granted him entry into the *kiai*'s family. These findings demonstrate that symbolic power within the *pesantren* operates through the production of religious meanings that transform hierarchical relations into forms of voluntary obedience. In other words, social domination does not manifest through overt repression but through the internalization of religious values that render structures of power morally legitimate and spiritually meaningful.[48]

The findings of this study both align with and diverge from previous scholarship on arranged marriage practices within Muslim communities. Several studies suggest that arranged marriage in *pesantren* functions as a mechanism for reproducing familial traditions and religious authority,[49] while other research critiques these practices as potentially marginalizing individual rights—particularly those of women—to express consent in marital decisions.[50] However, the findings presented here reveal a more nuanced reality: consent to marriage cannot be fully categorized as either autonomous choice or absolute coercion. Instead, consent is produced through the internalization of *barokah*, deference to religious authority, and the belief that obedience constitutes an essential dimension of piety. In this regard, the study contributes to broader debates on arranged marriage in Muslim societies by demonstrating that the boundary between consent and coercion is fluid and socially negotiated through relations of religious power.[51] Consequently,

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46 "Interview with Kang FT."

47 Hamdanah Hamdanah et al., "The Role of Kiai Leadership and Service Quality in Shaping the Reputation of Pesantren," *Munaddhomah: Jurnal Manajemen Pendidikan Islam* 6, no. 4 (December 2025): 695–709; Armyn Hasibuan et al., "Sufistic Approach of Character Education in an Indonesian Islamic Boarding School," *MIQOT: Jurnal Ilmu-Ilmu Keislaman* 49, no. 1 (June 2025): 184–204; Muhammad Anas Ma`arif et al., "Kiai's Leadership Strategies in Strengthening Religious Moderation in Islamic Boarding Schools," *Jurnal Ilmiah Peuradeun* 13, no. 1 (January 2025): 23–48.

48 Mirwan et al., "Endogamous Marriages in Kiai Sukorejo's Family," 224–41; Aziz et al., "Endogamous Marriage Among Santri," 700–717.

49 Mirwan et al., "Endogamous Marriages in Kiai Sukorejo's Family," 224–41; Aziz et al., "Endogamous Marriage Among Santri," 700–717.

50 Rasidin et al., "Analysing the Pesantren Tradition of Arranged Marriages from the 'Kupi Fatwa Trilogi' Perspective," 285–308; Sallom and Syu'aib, "Matchmaking in Pesantren," 78–91.

51 Aisha K. Gill and Sundari Anitha, "Exploring Victim-Survivors' Lived Experiences of Coercion and Coercive Contexts in Forced Marriage," *International Journal of Law, Crime and Justice* 83 (December 2025): 100794; Sundari Anitha and Aisha Gill, "Coercion, Consent and the Forced Marriage Debate in the UK," in *Marital Rights* (London: Routledge, 2017), 20.

arranged marriage practices in *pesantren* are more appropriately understood as a form of negotiated religious consent—that is, a mode of marital consent produced through the interplay of symbolic power, religious patronage, and the internalization of *barokah*, while remaining reflexively accepted and negotiated by individuals within *pesantren* communities.

Negotiating Religious Authority and Individual Agency in Arranged Marriage Practices

Arranged marriage practices within contemporary *pesantren* reveal increasingly complex dynamics between religious authority and the growing individual agency of *santri* in selecting marital partners. The findings indicate that modernity does not necessarily erode arranged marriage traditions within *pesantren*; rather, it encourages the reinterpretation of obedience, *kiai* authority, and prevailing ideals of marriage. In this context, *santri* no longer occupy entirely passive roles in decisions made by families or *kiai*, although religious values—such as *taʿẓīm* (reverence toward teachers), filial respect, and beliefs concerning *barokah*—continue to serve as powerful moral frameworks. Consequently, arranged marriage practices in *pesantren* operate within a dialectical space between the reproduction of collective traditions and the emergence of more individualized orientations toward marital relationships. Importantly, these findings suggest that consent in *pesantren* arranged marriage practices is not static but is continuously produced and renegotiated through interactions among religious authority, *kiai* patronage, and the reflexivity of contemporary generations of *santri*.

These dynamics are reflected in the experiences of several *santri*s who have begun negotiating recommendations for prospective spouses offered by *kiai*, considering personal preferences and emotional factors. For example, Kang AL chose not to continue the *taʿāruf* process with a female *santri* recommended by a *kiai* because he felt that the prospective partner did not align with his personal preferences. He explained:[52]

> "*Lha kulo ganteng je, tasih kepingin istri engkang ayu...*" [Well, I am handsome, so of course I still want to have a beautiful wife.]

This statement suggests that some *santri*s have begun incorporating elements of romantic attraction, physical appeal, and personal compatibility into their considerations when selecting a spouse. These findings are further supported by Kiai FT, who expressed no objection to preferences regarding physical appearance, provided that such considerations remain balanced with *akhlāq* and religious piety.[53] Within traditional *pesantren* culture, spouse selection has generally emphasized piety, religious competence, and *nasab*.[54] However, these findings indicate that processes of individualization are increasingly shaping how *santri*s conceptualize

[52] "Interview with Kang AL," January 2023.
[53] "Interview with Kiai FT."
[54] Sallom and Syu'aib, "Matchmaking in Pesantren," 78–91.

ideal family life and marital relationships. Marriage is therefore no longer understood solely as a socio-religious obligation but also as a space for fulfilling emotional needs and personal preferences. This condition suggests that *santri*s are developing more reflexive engagements with arranged marriage traditions without wholly rejecting the moral legitimacy of *pesantren* authority.[55]

A similar pattern emerges in the experience of Kang RN, who emphasized that selecting a life partner is a long-term decision that should be carefully considered through independent reflection and the practice of *istikārah* (prayer for divine guidance). He stated:[56]

> "*Istri itu bagi saya teman hidup selamanya, jadi ya harus dipikirkan dan diistikharohi sendiri hingga yakin.*" [For me, a wife is a lifelong companion, so the decision must be carefully considered and reflected upon through *istikārah* until one feels certain.]

This statement indicates that some *santri*s have begun to establish more reflexive relationships with *pesantren* authorities. Recommendations from *kiai* continue to be regarded as expressions of moral and religious concern, yet they are no longer accepted as absolute mandates. From Giddens' perspective, this condition reflects the development of reflexive modernity[57]—a situation in which individuals increasingly reflect upon inherited traditions and construct life choices based on personal considerations without entirely relinquishing their religious identities. Within this context, arranged marriage practices in *pesantren* appear to be shifting from patronistic arrangements toward more dialogical relationships, wherein religious authority remains recognized but becomes increasingly subject to negotiation through individual agency. Consequently, consent is no longer understood as passive acceptance of decisions made by families or *kiai* but rather as the outcome of ongoing negotiation between religious obedience and personal reflexivity.

Nevertheless, the growing agency of *santri* does not imply a comprehensive weakening of *pesantren* authority. Informants consistently emphasized piety, *barokah*, and religious values as foundational considerations in selecting marital partners. Even as personal preferences become increasingly salient, religious considerations continue to function as ethical frameworks that both constrain and guide individual choices. In this sense, modernity within *pesantren* does not manifest as secularization that separates religion from social life; rather, it operates as a process of value adaptation that enables *pesantren* traditions to persist amid broader social transformations. Therefore, arranged marriage practices within *pesantren* cannot be understood through a binary opposition between tradition and modernity but rather as arenas of negotiation demonstrating how religious authority, Islamic law, and individualization interact to shape new configurations of

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55 Yuniardi et al., "Between Tradition and Sharia," 899–932.
56 "Interview with Kang RN," January 2023.
57 Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford University Press, 1991), 33.

marital relations among *santri*s. These findings support the conclusions of Yuniardi et al., who argue that younger generations increasingly negotiate arranged marriage traditions through contemporary reinterpretations of *kafāʾah* in marital relations.[58]

From a socio-legal perspective, these findings demonstrate that Islamic family law practices within *pesantren* are inherently dynamic and continuously reinterpreted in response to changing social contexts among younger generations of *santri*. The authority of the *kiai* and the legitimacy of arranged marriage traditions remain morally significant; however, their implementation no longer relies solely on coercive mechanisms, as greater space has emerged for individual participation and personal consideration.[59] Accordingly, arranged marriage practices within a *pesantren* reveal a gradual transformation from patterns of absolute obedience toward more reflexive forms of religious negotiation without dismantling the foundational collectivism and moral authority embedded in *pesantren* life. These findings reinforce the article's central argument that consent in arranged marriage practices is produced through the interplay of symbolic power, religious patronage, and the internalization of *barokah*, while remaining subject to reflexive negotiation by contemporary generations of *santri*. In this sense, consent does not emerge as a category that is either wholly autonomous or entirely coerced; rather, it constitutes a form of negotiated religious consent produced through the complex interaction between religious authority and individual agency.

Conclusion

Arranged marriage practices within *pesantren*s (Islamic boarding schools) should not be understood merely as religiously grounded marital traditions or as forms of absolute coercion. Instead, they represent social arenas where power relations, religious patronage, and individual agency interact to shape marital decisions. The findings demonstrate that arranged marriage in *pesantren* functions as a mechanism of social reproduction, sustaining religious authority, patronage networks, and *pesantren* elite structures through endogamous marriage practices, spouse selection criteria based on religious competence and lineage (*nasab*), and cultures of obedience toward *kiai* (leaders in *pesantren*) and parents. Within this context, consent to marriage is produced through the internalization of *barokah* (divine blessing), deference to religious authority, and moral convictions regarding the importance of obedience as part of the ethical formation of *santri*s' (Islamic students) piety. At the same time, this study reveals that contemporary generations of *santri* do not accept such practices entirely passively. The growing significance of individual reflexivity, emotional considerations, and personal preferences in spouse selection indicates the emergence of new spaces for negotiation between traditional *pesantren* authority and individual agency in marital relations.

[58] Yuniardi et al., "Between Tradition and Sharia," 899–932.
[59] Sibawaihi et al., "The Role of Kyai and the State in Regulating Child Marriage," 667–79; Yuniardi et al., "Between Tradition and Sharia," 899–932.

From an academic perspective, this article contributes to the development of Islamic family law and socio-legal studies by advancing ongoing debates on arranged marriage within Muslim societies. The findings demonstrate that the boundary between arranged marriage and forced marriage in *pesantren* arranged marriage practices is fluid and cannot be understood through rigid dichotomies, as marital consent is produced through the interplay of symbolic power, religious patronage, and the internalization of *barokah*. Building on these findings, the article advances the concept of negotiated religious consent to explain how consent in *pesantren* marriage practices is simultaneously produced and negotiated within complex socio-religious relations. These findings further affirm that living Islamic law continuously interacts with cultural structures, power relations, and broader processes of social change within Muslim communities. Although this study focuses on a single *pesantren salaf* community in Semarang Regency, the findings open avenues for future research on arranged marriage practices across different *pesantren* typologies and urban Muslim communities to better understand transformations in religious authority, the dynamics of consent, and evolving practices of Islamic family law in contemporary Indonesia.

Acknowledgments
The authors would like to thank Universitas Islam Negeri Salatiga for their support of this work.

Data Availability
The data supporting the findings of this study are not publicly available due to privacy and ethical considerations. However, anonymized data may be obtained from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Disclosure Statement
No potential conflicts of interest were reported by the authors.

Ethics Statement
This study was conducted in accordance with established research ethics principles. Informed consent was obtained from all informants, and all identifying information was anonymized to ensure confidentiality.

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