# Optimization of Coconut Plantations as a Source of Economic Empowerment for Santri in Islamic Boarding Schools

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#### **ABSTRACT**

This study examines the management of coconut plantations at Pondok Pesantren Wali Peetu in Desa Air Hitam Laut as an effort to strengthen the economic independence of the pesantren while serving as a holistic educational medium for santri (students). A qualitative research method employing a case study approach was used to explore the management processes, economic roles, and social impacts generated by the plantation. The findings indicate that the involvement of santri in all stages of coconut plantation activities not only produces significant income for the pesantren but also shapes the character, life skills, and leadership qualities of the santri in accordance with Islamic economic principles. This management model applies the "learning by doing" approach and context-based character education, integrating spiritual, technical, and social aspects. The coconut plantation management at the pesantren represents an important innovation that fills the gap in the traditional pesantren educational paradigm with a sustainable community-based economic empowerment approach. These findings are expected to serve as a reference for other pesantren seeking to optimize local resources for sustainability and santri empowerment.

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#### 1. INTRODUCTION

Islamic boarding schools (pondok pesantren) are traditional Islamic educational institutions with a long history of shaping the moral, spiritual, and intellectual character of Muslims in Indonesia (Jubba, Pabbajah, Abdullah, & Juhansar, 2022). Their primary function has traditionally focused on religious education; however, their role has increasingly become more complex by incorporating social and economic aspects (Dewi & Febrianto, 2023; Munip, 2024; A. A. Saputra, 2023). In rural areas, pesantren serve not only as centers for religious learning but also as pillars of community empowerment, particularly in the economic domain (Islamic, Ishaq, & Dayati, 2024). Dependence on external funding sources such as government aid or donors poses sustainability challenges for pesantren. They are increasingly required to achieve economic self-sufficiency to support their operational costs and improve the welfare of their students (santri). Economic independence is a crucial issue demanding serious attention because it directly affects the quality of education and the continuity of pesantren institutions.

Utilizing natural resources available around pesantren presents an innovative solution to achieving economic independence. Productive management of agricultural and plantation land offers opportunities to create new revenue streams that strengthen the financial capacity of the institution (Djaja et al., 2023; Kuswanto, Fajanela, & Abidin, 2024). Engaging santri in managing these enterprises simultaneously serves as a medium for teaching life skills beneficial to them after completing their education. Locally based productive enterprises, such as coconut plantations, have become strategic choices widely developed by pesantren (Fajri, Abidin, & Lestari, 2024; Syariah, 2024). Coconut plantations not only provide sustainable economic returns but also reinforce the social foundations of pesantren by involving santri directly in production and marketing processes. This management reflects the integration of Islamic values with productive and ethical economic practices (Ikhlas, Yasmin, Muharramah, & Kuswanto, 2025; Susanto, Putra, & Nisak, 2024).

Pesantren also act as economic development agents in their surrounding communities. Through various productive ventures, they foster entrepreneurial awareness and economic self-reliance among santri and local residents (Devi, Ma'ani, & Wahab, 2023; Nurjali, Nisak, Wulandari, & Mun'amah, 2023). This approach illustrates how pesantren do not merely impart formal religious knowledge but also equip santri with applicable economic skills. Coconut is a high-potential multipurpose commodity. Its derivative products, such as coconut oil, copra, and other processed goods, have broad markets domestically and internationally. This significant economic potential motivates many pesantren to optimize coconut plantations as a sustainable alternative income source (Hidayat, Mubyarto, Ritonga, & Sunarti, 2023; Mustofa, 2023).

Pondok Pesantren Wali Peetu in Desa Air Hitam Laut exemplifies a pesantren that has successfully developed economic self-reliance through managing coconut plantations. The activities related to coconut plantation management serve not only as the primary income source but also embody a holistic educational philosophy that combines religious knowledge with practical life applications. Active involvement of santri in coconut plantation activities—including maintenance, harvesting, and marketing—provides practical skills and business management education that equip them economically for life beyond the pesantren. This approach simultaneously instills values of hard work, responsibility, and trustworthiness, aligned with Islamic economic principles (Ahmad, Qamar, Bhatti, & Bashir, 2023; Yasmeen, 2024).

Islamic economic principles such as justice, blessing (barakah), and social responsibility position coconut plantation enterprises as forms of worship and dawah (Islamic outreach). By managing these plantations, pesantren integrate spiritual and economic values, thereby supporting the development of independent and productive santri character (Kadarsih, Munip, Aminah, & Rahmy, 2023; Musthofa & Wulandari, 2024; Saryanti, Daud, Kadarsih, Munamah, & Dewi, 2024). This

strengthens pesantren's position as both educational institutions and centers for community economic empowerment. Developing coconut plantations as pesantren business units faces several technical and market challenges. Factors such as unpredictable weather, plant pests, limited production tools, and restricted market access pose obstacles that must be addressed (Fatimah, Devi, Wandi, Mun'amah, & Sarwono, 2024; Musthofa, 2024). Innovation in management and collaboration with external parties, including government and private sectors, are essential to optimizing the potential of coconut plantations (Agustian, Hejazziey, Zen, Sekarini, & Wiwin, 2023).

Data from the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs indicate that over 3,000 pesantren across Indonesia have independently managed agricultural and plantation business units (Sumi, Ahmed, & Alam, 2024). This trend confirms that pesantren increasingly recognize the importance of economic pillars in sustaining and empowering santri. Desa Air Hitam Laut, with its substantial coconut potential, serves as a strategic location for Pondok Pesantren Wali Peetu to implement this management model. The urgency of this study lies in the need to comprehensively understand how coconut plantations contribute to strengthening pesantren's economy and the welfare of santri. This research is expected to provide an in-depth overview of coconut plantation management at Pondok Pesantren Wali Peetu and its economic and social impacts. The findings may serve as a reference for other pesantren seeking to develop their natural resources productively and sustainably. The objectives of this study are to detail the management of coconut plantations at Pondok Pesantren Wali Peetu in Desa Air Hitam Laut and to analyze the role of these plantations in supporting the pesantren's economy. This study aims to offer both scientific and practical contributions toward the development of pesantren-based local resource economies.

#### 2. METHODS

This study employs a qualitative research approach to explore (Tolinggi, Salman, Rahmadanih, & Iswoyo, 2023; Zainol et al., 2023) the management and economic role of coconut plantations at Pondok Pesantren Wali Peetu in Desa Air Hitam Laut. A case study design is chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomena within its real-life context. Data collection involves multiple sources to ensure richness and triangulation, including interviews, observations, and document analysis. Key informants consist of pesantren leaders, plantation managers, and santri directly involved in plantation activities. Interviews are semi-structured, allowing for flexibility to probe deeper into specific issues related to plantation management and economic outcomes.

Participant observation is conducted during various stages of coconut plantation activities, such as planting, maintenance, harvesting, and marketing. This direct engagement enables the researcher to capture practical processes, challenges, and the role of santri as active agents in the enterprise. Relevant documents, such as financial reports, activity logs, and pesantren development plans, are also examined to complement interview and observation data. These documents provide additional insights into the formal structure, resource allocation, and institutional strategies related to the coconut plantation as a business unit.

Data analysis follows thematic content analysis techniques (Humble & Mozelius, 2022; Lochmiller, 2021). Collected data are transcribed, coded, and categorized into themes that address the research objectives: the operational management of the coconut plantation and its economic contributions to the pesantren. Cross-validation of data sources strengthens the reliability and validity of the findings. Ethical considerations are observed by obtaining informed consent from all participants, ensuring confidentiality, and maintaining neutrality throughout the study. This methodological framework is designed to produce comprehensive and trustworthy findings that inform both academic understanding and practical applications in pesantren economic development.

#### 3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Air Hitam Laut Village, located in Sadu Subdistrict, East Tanjung Jabung Regency, has a formation history closely related to Law Number 7 of 1965 concerning administrative regional expansion. Between 1974 and 2000, the village developed from a wilderness into a structured community thanks to the efforts of migrants and local figures, notably H. Ambo Unga from South Sulawesi. Initial settlements began around 1967 when residents started to settle permanently and opened agricultural land, planting commodities such as sugarcane and bananas although the results were not optimal due to the small population. The village's name derives from a medium-sized river flowing from inland toward the sea, whose black-colored water led to the name Air Hitam Laut River. This river played a crucial role in spatial planning and community life within the village.

The socio-cultural composition of Air Hitam Laut Village is predominantly Bugis, with migrants from Javanese, Malay, and Chinese ethnic groups having long blended into the community. Javanese residents mainly arrived through transmigration programs and are dispersed in parts of the village such as Parit 2 and Parit 3. The population growth over nearly five decades has reached thousands, influenced by previously high birth rates and significant migration. The bilateral kinship system deeply rooted in the society facilitates social interaction and mutual support during important family events such as births, marriages, and deaths (Nuri, Junaidi, & Achmad, 2024; Sya'bana, Nisak, Suryaningsih, Rukiyanto, & Hastuti, 2024). This socio-cultural life forms a strong foundation for maintaining community cohesion and solidarity(Munip et al., 2024; Tanjung, Anaswan, & Nisak, 2023).

The educational sector in Air Hitam Laut Village developed alongside social needs and community empowerment efforts. During the early 1970s, the village faced social issues such as crime and conflicts attributed to limited education and religious understanding. The establishment of madrasahs and pesantren, including Pondok Pesantren Wali Peetu, was a critical response that provided religious and general education for the younger generation. Formal state education facilities remain limited, with only early childhood education and elementary schools available locally, while junior and senior high schools require travel to the subdistrict center (Fia, Musthofa, & Devi, 2024; A. E. Saputra & Susanti, 2024). Pondok Pesantren Wali Peetu plays a vital role as an educational institution equivalent to junior and senior high school levels, focusing on character building and life skills development (Karnadjaja, 2023; Mustari, Mere, Pitri, Wibowo, & Nilfatri, 2024).

The economic life of Air Hitam Laut Village residents centers on the primary sector, dominated by fisheries and coconut farming. The village's coastal location offers access to marine resources which serve as the main livelihood for traditional fishermen using small boats and simple fishing gear. Traditional aquaculture is also practiced in swamp and natural ditch areas. Coconut plantations thrive on peat and tidal lands, producing copra for local markets (Kurniawan, Marwendi, Yusuf, Aiman, & Tauvani, 2024; Lubis, Irfana, Purwatiningsih, Nisak, & Sari, 2024; Rahma, Musthofa, & Fatimah, 2024). Agricultural productivity remains limited due to acidic soil conditions and technological constraints. Household economic activities such as shrimp cracker production and pandan leaf weaving supplement community income. Cooperative support, labor migration, and government assistance programs also contribute to the economic resilience of families in the village (Hidayat, Hardi, Sucipto, & Sunarti, 2023; Kuswanto, Abidin, Pestano, & Ikhlas, 2024).

The management of the coconut plantation at Pondok Pesantren Wali Peetu is conducted using a traditional approach but remains result-oriented. The plantation covers three hectares with local coconut trees that have been productive for over 15 years. Field observations reveal that the santri are divided into work groups based on tasks such as climbing coconut trees, transporting harvested coconuts, cleaning the area, and peeling coconuts. Work division is flexible, adjusting to the santri's free time, and they receive wages upon task completion. Supervision and mentoring by the plantation

manager, Mr. Supriyadi, occur alternately with senior santri groups, ensuring effective learning and oversight.

The santri's experience in the coconut plantation extends beyond economic output and forms part of life education at the pesantren. Ustaz Thalib, the pesantren director, emphasizes that the plantation activities integrate religious knowledge, charity, and independence. He stated in an interview that the main objective is not merely to harvest coconuts but to teach lessons about hard work, responsibility, and gratitude to God for the blessings of nature. Weekly observations show how plantation work has become a routine that fosters discipline and a sense of community, especially on Fridays dedicated to plantation tasks.

Income from the coconut plantation represents an important economic resource for the pesantren, averaging around five to seven million rupiahs every three months during harvest seasons. According to an interview with the pesantren treasurer, Ahmad Fauzi, a portion of this income is allocated to pay wages for the santri who work there (Ismail & Musthofa, 2024). The wages range from one hundred to one hundred fifty thousand rupiahs per day, depending on the type of work performed. This payment system serves not only as compensation but also as motivation for the santri to be more responsible and disciplined in carrying out their duties. Financial documentation of the pesantren shows organized and transparent records of income and expenditure related to the coconut plantation.

The santri also report that working in the plantation positively impacts their daily lives. One santri, Fikri Maulana, expressed that through this work, he can earn his own income without depending on his parents. Fikri explained that his tasks vary, including transporting coconuts, peeling the coconut husk, and harvesting according to the ustadz's instructions. The income earned is often saved to buy school supplies or sent to family in his hometown. This experience teaches the santri the meaning of effort and independence in practical terms, strengthening their mental readiness for the future (Abidin, 2024; Ariyani et al., 2024).

The management of the coconut plantation at Pondok Pesantren Wali Peetu forms a systematic and meaningful work pattern contributing to the santri's overall development. The integration of economic and educational aspects creates an applied and realistic learning environment. The santri not only learn religious theory but also develop social skills, time management, and responsibility through real agricultural activities. The implemented wage system is an effective instrument in training work ethic and discipline, while also providing additional income that promotes independence. These findings demonstrate that the coconut plantation plays a strategic role not only as an economic source but also as a character education medium embedded in pesantren tradition.

The management of the coconut plantation at Pondok Pesantren Wali Peetu reveals a strong synergy between education and economic empowerment. The santri (students) do not merely act as passive learners but as productive agents who actively contribute to the sustainability of the pesantren's economy. A flexible participatory approach, adapted to the santri's spare time, allows plantation activities to proceed without disrupting formal learning processes. This finding reinforces John Dewey's "learning by doing" theory, which asserts that the most effective learning occurs through direct experience. By involving santri in the entire plantation management process—from maintenance to harvesting—the pesantren provides a holistic and contextual learning space that integrates technical, social, and spiritual aspects.

The hands-on experience in the coconut plantation not only develops technical skills but also serves as an essential vehicle for character formation. Traits such as responsibility, discipline, cooperation, and social concern grow alongside these productive activities. This learning model aligns with Muslich's concept of context-based character education, emphasizing the importance of relevant activities in shaping students' character. The coconut plantation thus becomes a life laboratory where religious values and work ethics are practically integrated. This represents a novel breakthrough in

pesantren education management, which has traditionally focused more on spiritual and textual aspects, thereby adding a more applied and holistic dimension to education.

The pesantren director emphasizes that the coconut plantation serves as a life training medium that does not separate spiritual and material aspects. This perspective strengthens the framework of integral Islamic education, which prioritizes the balance between ta'dib (moral character formation) and tarbiyah (comprehensive nurturing). The plantation management process concretely trains santri to manage natural resources responsibly and productively, beyond merely learning the theoretical religious texts. This approach offers an innovative model that fills the gap in the traditional pesantren education paradigm with grounded and relevant practices. Consequently, the coconut plantation is not only an economic resource but also a medium for integrated mental and spiritual development.

The role of senior santri as group coordinators in plantation management also highlights a dimension of participatory leadership. Senior santri engage not only in physical labor but also practice essential soft skills such as time management, coordination, and collective responsibility. This is part of practical and sustainable leadership education that provides crucial preparation for their independence after graduation. These findings indicate that the pesantren produces graduates who are not only academically and religiously competent but also socially and economically ready to compete, equipped with leadership skills honed from an early stage.

Economically, the coconut plantation functions as a productive asset that generates significant revenue for the pesantren. The income ranging from IDR 5,000,000 to 7,000,000 every three months demonstrates that this plantation management is a stable funding source for pesantren operations as well as incentives for the santri. The fair distribution system aligns with Islamic economic principles, particularly the concepts of maslahah (public benefit) and distributive justice, emphasizing collective benefit and equity in profit-sharing. This practice differs from traditional economic systems that can be exploitative, as here the santri work voluntarily with flexible hours and receive commensurate wages, fostering a healthy and just work culture.

The wages paid to the santri based on the type and volume of work serve as an effective mechanism to instill the value of 'adalah (justice) and an Islamic work ethic encompassing sincerity and gratitude. Santri like Fikri Maulana use their earnings to save, purchase school supplies, and assist their families, marking a positive shift in their economic mentality. The coconut plantation indirectly strengthens the microeconomy of the santri's families while also fostering a mentality of independence and social responsibility as a foundation for the future. These findings confirm that institution-based economic empowerment can proceed in tandem with character building and social integrity development.

Finally, the management of the coconut plantation as a form of community-based economic empowerment represents an innovative model integrating educational, economic, and social aspects. Empowerment that not only increases income but also builds a work mentality, discipline, and collective responsibility is a significant novelty worthy of reference for pesantren development and similar educational institutions. The concept of amal shalih in Islamic economics, which prioritizes social benefit and life blessings, is practically realized in this coconut plantation. Thus, the plantation is not merely a productive asset but also a vehicle for character and economic education that reinforces the pesantren's role as an adaptive and progressive institution in a modern context.

### 4. CONCLUSION

this study reveals that the management of the coconut plantation at Pondok Pesantren Wali Peetu effectively strengthens the pesantren's economic independence while simultaneously serving as a holistic educational platform that integrates spiritual, technical, and social learning for santri. The

research findings demonstrate a strong synergy between productive economic activities and character education, validating Dewey's "learning by doing" theory and Muslich's context-based character education framework. The novel approach of involving santri as active participants in plantation management not only fosters essential life skills, leadership, and work ethics but also generates a stable income aligned with Islamic principles of justice and social benefit. This study's innovation lies in bridging traditional pesantren education with practical, community-based economic empowerment, filling a gap in pesantren sustainability models. The implications suggest that pesantren can adopt similar agricultural enterprises as effective means of supporting operational costs, empowering students socioeconomically, and reinforcing pesantren's role as both religious and community development institutions, contributing to more resilient and adaptive Islamic educational systems in contemporary contexts.

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