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Ethical Leadership: Reframing Moral Complexity and Power through a Philosophical Anthropological Perspective in Organizational Practice

| Research Article |

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Abstract. While ethical leadership has been extensively theorized in Western organizational contexts, its enactment in Muslim educational institutions remains underexplored, particularly in settings where religious authority, communal life, and unequal power relations shape moral practice in ways that normative frameworks struggle to capture. Drawing on philosophical anthropology, especially MacIntyre's tradition-based ethics and Lambek's ordinary ethics, this study examined how ethical leadership is enacted in the everyday institutional life of Pondok Bantan in Southern Thailand, an information-rich critical case where traditional religious authority and modern administrative demands intersect. A qualitative single-site case study was conducted, with data generated from in-depth interviews with 28 participants, twelve months of participant observation, and institutional document analysis. Reflexive thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke, with credibility secured through prolonged engagement, triangulation, member checking, and peer debriefing. The analysis identified five interrelated dimensions of ethical leadership: emergent moral authority, contextual ethics grounded in Islamic tradition, moral negotiation across power relations, embodied ethical practice, and vulnerability-centered leadership. Authority did not flow from formal position but was continuously built through teaching, mentoring, and shura-based interaction, indicating that ethical leadership operates as a relational and context-sensitive practice rather than a fixed code. Single-site interpretive design supports analytical rather than statistical generalization. The study advances an anthropological framework of ethical leadership that moves beyond normative trait-based models by integrating tradition, embodiment, vulnerability, and power, offering implications for leadership development in pesantren, madrasah, and Islamic higher education across Southeast Asia.

Keywords: Ethical Leadership, Philosophical Anthropology, Moral Complexity, Power Relations, Islamic Educational Institutions

INTRODUCTION

Ethical leadership has become a central concern in education and organizational life today. The urgency of this concern is not abstract. Recent meta-analyses and reviews show that ethical leadership shapes student motivation, teacher commitment, organizational citizenship behavior, and the wider learning climate in schools and higher education across diverse settings (Bedi et al., 2016; Hoch et al., 2018; Den Hartog, 2015). Engelbrecht et al. (2017) report that integrity and ethical leadership are positively associated with work engagement. Demirtas and Akdogan (2015) document that ethical leadership reduces

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turnover intention through the mediating roles of ethical climate and affective commitment. In the educational sector specifically, ethical conduct by principals and senior teachers has been linked to improved performance and greater trust (Engelbrecht et al., 2017; Hallinger, 2018). The urgency intensifies in Muslim educational settings, where character formation and spiritual development sit alongside academic outcomes, and where the personal conduct of leaders is read as both pedagogical model and moral standard (Hefner, 2009; Shah, 2006; Egel & Fry, 2017; Syam et al., 2022). For principals, kyai, tok guru, and other institutional leaders responsible for both administration and moral formation, leadership is therefore not a managerial skill alone but an ethical practice with public consequences (Bush, 2020; Syam et al., 2022).

Despite this practical relevance, mainstream ethical leadership scholarships carry important limitations. Three of these limitations matter here. First, dominant frameworks draw on Western traditions that emphasize universal moral standards, individual moral agency, and rational decision-making (Brown et al., 2005; Brown & Trevino, 2006; Trevino et al., 2000; Eisenbeiss, 2012; Lemoine et al., 2019). These frameworks helped establish a measurable construct of ethical leadership and have been refined into widely used instruments (Kalshoven et al., 2011; Yukl et al., 2013; Riggio et al., 2010). Yet they tend to downplay the extent to which ethics is embedded in religious tradition, communal life, and unequal power relations (Resick et al., 2011; Mayer et al., 2012; Schaubroeck et al., 2012). Second, methodological reliance on standardized surveys captures variance but obscures the situated, contested, and shifting character of moral practice (Den Hartog, 2015; Liu, 2017; Tourish, 2019). Third, even in recent qualitative work, studies that examine ethical leadership within Muslim educational institutions remain sparse, and the few that exist tend to operate at a descriptive level rather than develop theory grounded in lived institutional life (Beekun & Badawi, 2005; Possumah et al., 2013).

The main sources for this study come from three intersecting bodies of work. The first is the social-scientific literature on ethical leadership in organizations, anchored by Brown et al. (2005), Brown and Trevino (2006), Den Hartog (2015), Bedi et al. (2016), and Lemoine et al. (2019). This literature defines ethical leadership as the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal action and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision making (Brown et al., 2005). The second is educational leadership literature, especially work that takes context seriously: Bush (2020) on theories of educational leadership and management, and Hallinger (2018) on bringing context out of the shadows of leadership. The third is philosophical anthropology, which treats human beings as embodied, socially embedded, and inherently vulnerable creatures whose moral capacities are formed through cultural traditions, institutional contexts, and relations of power (MacIntyre, 2007; Lambek, 2010; Laidlaw, 2014; Mattingly, 2014). MacIntyre's (2007) argument in After Virtue that moral life is intelligible only within a tradition that gives practices their goods and virtues anchors the present analysis. Lambek's (2010) ordinary ethics directs attention to how ethical life is enacted in routine speech and action rather than in moments of dramatic decision. Laidlaw's (2014) anthropology of virtue and freedom shows how moral agency is exercised within, not outside, structured forms of life.

The problem data motivating the study come from the field. During preliminary visits to Pondok Bantan in Nakhon Si Thammarat, the research team observed several recurring patterns that did not fit comfortably into existing measurement instruments. Authority was visibly negotiated rather than simply held. Discipline cases were resolved through extended

consultation that drew on amanah, adab, shura, and maslahah. Junior staff and santri raised concerns about scheduling, finances, and pedagogical decisions through indirect channels that the tok guru took seriously. Vulnerability, openly acknowledged by the leader during shura, appeared to strengthen rather than weaken trust. These observations could not be adequately captured by item scales alone. They required attention to lived practice, language, and the cultural and religious frameworks within which Muslim educational leadership operates. Comparable patterns have been reported across Muslim educational and Islamic boarding school contexts in Southeast Asia (Hefner, 2009; Shah, 2006; Syam et al., 2022), but the theoretical implications for ethical leadership scholarship remain underdeveloped.

The research gap follows directly from these limitations and observations. There is little qualitative work that systematically examines how ethical leadership is constructed within institutions where Islamic principles, hierarchical religious authority, and modern administrative requirements intersect. There is even less work that puts philosophical anthropological resources to systematic use in interpreting such settings. Concepts central to Muslim public life, such as amanah (trust), adab (proper conduct), shura (consultation), and maslahah (public interest), shape how authority is exercised and how decisions are received in practice (Beekun & Badawi, 2005; Possumah et al., 2013; Egel & Fry, 2017; Shah, 2006), yet their operation inside organizational settings is rarely examined as ethical practice rather than as religious doctrine. This study addresses that double gap by combining sustained ethnographic engagement with a philosophical anthropological lens.

The theoretical foundation of the study draws together three threads that will be carried into the discussion. First, the social learning theory underpinning Brown et al. (2005) and Brown and Trevino (2006) treats ethical leadership as transmitted through modeling, reinforcement, and observation. The five dimensions identified at Pondok Bantan align with this theory by showing what constitutes a credible model in a Muslim educational setting. Second, MacIntyre's (2007) practice- and tradition-based ethics frames the institutional life of the pondok as a tradition with its own internal goods, in which character forms through participation in practice. The findings sharpen this frame by documenting which practices carry these goods. Third, the anthropology of ethics (Lambek, 2010; Laidlaw, 2014; Mattingly, 2014) offers tools for examining ethical life as ordinary, embodied, and exercised under conditions of vulnerability. The Pondok Bantan data feeds back into these theories by demonstrating how vulnerability functions as a resource for moral authority rather than as a deficit. These threads will not be merely cited. They will be used in the discussion to develop a theory grounded in the field findings.

These three theoretical resources are mutually reinforcing rather than alternative. Social learning theory explains how ethical conduct is acquired and transmitted, but it leaves open the question of which conduct counts as virtuous in each community. MacIntyre's (2007) tradition-based ethics fills that gap by treating virtue as intelligible only inside a tradition with its own conception of human flourishing. For Pondok Bantan, that tradition is Islamic, with character formation oriented towards akhlaq, taqwa, and service to the community. Yet MacIntyre's frame, taken alone, can read as too settled, as if virtue were already given by tradition. The anthropology of ethics corrects this by treating ethical life as continually worked out in ordinary speech, gesture, and judgment (Lambek, 2010), exercised amid risk and uncertainty (Mattingly, 2014), and situated within structured forms of life rather than against them (Laidlaw, 2014). Combined, the three resources allow for an account of ethical leadership that is socially learned, traditionally informed, and practiced under conditions of

vulnerability and power. This combination is the conceptual basis for what the study terms anthropological ethical leadership.

Pondok Bantan was selected for this study because the institution actively navigates several competing demands. It operates within a framework of traditional religious authority that values respect, continuity, and inherited norms, while also responding to administrative requirements that demand efficiency, accountability, and formal management. It moves between hierarchical deference and emerging participatory governance: respect for senior figures remains central, yet expectations of inclusion, dialogue, and shared decision making are growing. Communal solidarity continues to organize daily life, and individual moral agency is increasingly recognized, with members encouraged to reason critically and take responsibility for ethical choices. The Patani Malay-Muslim setting, located within a Buddhist-majority state, adds a further layer: leadership negotiates minority identity and policy pressures as it operates (Hefner, 2009; Shah, 2006).

Three focused objectives organize the study. First, it examines how ethical leadership is understood and practiced within the organizational context of Pondok Bantan. Second, it identifies the key processes through which moral authority is formed and sustained in everyday interaction. Third, it analyzes how contextual factors such as Islamic tradition, communal values, and institutional norms shape ethical decision-making. These objectives keep the analytical focus tight and align research questions, methodology, and contribution. Through these objectives, the study contributes to ethical leadership theory by translating contextual ethics into observable practices that can be examined, taught, and refined within Muslim educational institutions.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative single-site case study design, drawing on Yin (2018) and Stake (1995) to examine ethical leadership as a situated and dynamic practice. The single-site choice was deliberate. A multi-site comparison would widen the scope but reduce the depth needed to capture subtle moral negotiations, embodied practices, and shifting power relations as they unfold in everyday life. Focusing on a single setting enabled prolonged engagement and the validation of interpretations through repeated observation (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The research was conducted at Pondok Bantan, a traditional Islamic educational institution in Nakhon Si Thammarat, Southern Thailand. Pondok Bantan was established in 1987 and serves about 850 santri across religious and secular programs. The institution is led by a tok guru whose authority rests on Islamic scholarship and standing within the Patani Malay-Muslim community (Hefner, 2009; Shah, 2006). The site was selected as a critical, information-rich case where traditional religious authority, modern administrative requirements, hierarchical deference, participatory governance, communal solidarity, and individual moral agency intersect in visible ways.

Three triangulated methods were used. In-depth interviews were conducted with 28 participants comprising the tok guru, senior teachers, junior teachers, administrative staff, santri, parents, and community representatives. Inclusion criteria were at least one year of active institutional involvement; direct engagement in leadership-relevant activities such as teaching, mentoring, administration, or student coordination; capacity to articulate experience reflectively; gender and seniority variation; and willingness to give informed consent. Semi-structured interviews ran 60 to 120 minutes and were conducted in Thai or

Malay according to participant preference. All interviews were audio recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim within 48 hours. Malay transcripts were prepared in the original language and then translated using meaning equivalence rather than literal substitution. A bilingual reviewer cross-checked culturally specific terms using back-translation. Participant observation extended over twelve months to three to four days per week, covering meetings, teaching sessions, ceremonies, informal conversations, and critical incidents. Document analysis examined institutional policies, meeting minutes, kitab kuning curricula, and public statements, following Bowen (2009).

Data analysis followed reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Open coding generated descriptive labels from transcripts, field notes, and documents. Axial coding clusters codes into broader patterns. Selective coding consolidated five dimensions of ethical leadership practice. Constant comparison and memo writing supported iterative refinement. Five participants representing different roles participated in member checking after the preliminary analysis. They received summarized statements and emerging interpretations and confirmed or revised them through follow-up conversations. Two qualitative researchers conducted a peer debriefing on coding decisions and theme development. Trustworthiness was addressed through prolonged engagement, triangulation, member checking, peer debriefing, thick description, and reflexive journaling (Tracy, 2010; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017). Institutional ethics approval was obtained, and informed consent was secured in participants' preferred languages. Pseudonyms with informant codes (for example, ST03 for senior teacher 3, JT07 for junior teacher 7) were used throughout, and identifying details were carefully managed.

RESULT

Analysis of interviews, observation, and documents identified five dimensions of ethical leadership practice at Pondok Bantan: emergent moral authority, contextual ethics and religious grounding, moral negotiation and power dynamics, embodied ethical practice, and vulnerability-centered leadership. These dimensions did not come from a predefined list. They were generated through iterative coding. Open coding labeled segments of transcripts, field notes, and documents that referred to ethical practice, moral reasoning, power, and authority. Codes were compared across data sources for convergence and divergence. Constant comparison clustered codes into broader categories. Categories were continually checked against the data and against participant feedback in member checking and refined into the five analytically coherent dimensions presented here. Each dimension is supported by multiple data points across roles and incidents, and each is illustrated with specific informant references and contexts.

The first dimension, emergent moral authority, refers to how the tok guru's standing was continuously rebuilt through interaction rather than simply held by office. ST03, a senior teacher with over ten years at the institution who supervises mentoring sessions, described in an interview held in his office after evening teaching: "The tok guru's authority comes not from his position alone, but from how he lives what he teaches. We see him struggle with difficult decisions, acknowledge his limitations, and seek guidance from others. This humility makes his moral authority genuine." Similar accounts were provided by JT07 (junior teacher, six years' tenure), AS02 (administrative staff, three years' tenure), and several santri. Authority was renewed in micro-interactions: the tok guru's habit of arriving early at the morning halaqah, his readiness to revisit decisions when new information emerged, and his

consistent attention to students whose families were experiencing financial difficulty. Observation notes from October recorded a meeting in which the tok guru openly reversed a scheduling decision after a junior teacher raised concerns, and the response among staff was a noticeable rise in initiative and willingness to speak.

The second dimension, contextual ethics and religious grounding, captures how Islamic principles, particularly amanah, shura, maslahah, and adab, provided the moral vocabulary through which decisions were explained and justified. Participants stressed that these principles required interpretation rather than mechanical application. The tok guru, in a conversation following Friday prayers, explained: "Our religious traditions give us guidance, but every situation requires discernment. We must understand both the principles and the circumstances of the people involved." Local Patani Malay-Muslim tradition shaped how these principles were expressed in dress, manners, and everyday interactions, including specific protocols for greeting, expected forms of address between santri and teachers, and the rhythms of communal meals after evening prayers. Several participants drew explicit links between maslahah (public interest) and decisions regarding the admission of santri from low-income families. AS02 described how the financial committee weighed amanah and maslahah together when reviewing scholarship cases, with the tok guru insisting that no single principle could decide the case alone.

The third dimension, moral negotiation and power dynamics, describes how decisions were reached through ongoing consultation, persuasion, and accommodation among actors with different interests. Formal shura sessions with senior teachers and community representatives provided structured deliberation. Informal exchanges in the kitchen, the courtyard, and after lessons did equal work. Power shaped whose voices were heard first. The participatory ethos still allowed contestation from junior positions: JT07 described raising scheduling concerns that the tok guru later acted on after consultation with senior teachers. SN15, a fifth-year santri, described how a group of advanced santri petitioned for adjustments to the kitab kuning curriculum, and how the tok guru convened a special shura where their proposal was discussed alongside views from senior teachers before a workable compromise emerged. Power was visible not only in who spoke, but in who set the terms of speaking. Junior teachers who framed concerns in shared moral vocabulary, particularly by referencing amanah and maslahah, were taken more seriously than those who framed the same concerns as administrative complaints.

The fourth dimension, embodied ethical practice, captures how ethical commitments were communicated through bodily presence, daily routines, and visible behavior. Participants frequently cited the tok guru's modest living arrangements, accessibility to community members, and direct participation in manual labor alongside students. As ST06, a senior teacher specializing in fiqh, observed: "We learn more from watching how he lives than from his formal lessons. His actions teach us what it means to be ethical." Field notes recorded the tok guru participating in repair work after a heavy storm damaged part of the dormitory roof, working alongside santri and laborers without distinguishing his role by dress or position. The materiality of pondok life mattered: the simple meals shared by all members, the modest furnishings of teaching spaces, and the practice of removing shoes before entering classrooms collectively reinforced an ethic of equality before God that participants identified as constitutive of leadership credibility.

The fifth dimension, vulnerability-centered leadership, refers to leaders openly acknowledging human limitations rather than projecting moral perfection. Leaders who admitted uncertainty, asked for help, and showed compassion for others' struggles were seen

as more ethically credible. Public admission of mistakes during shura, support for staff under personal strain, and collective meaning-making after a student crisis were recurring examples in observation notes. ST03 recounted a meeting in which the tok guru publicly apologized for an earlier decision that had unintentionally disadvantaged junior teachers, and described the response as "more trust, not less." After a santri suffered a serious accident, the tok guru convened a gathering that explicitly acknowledged the limits of what the institution could offer, invited collective prayer and reflection, and accepted suggestions for procedural changes. Vulnerability was not weakness in this setting. It functioned as a deliberate practice that opened space for shared responsibility and renewed commitment.

Across the five dimensions, three patterns appeared consistently. First, ethical practice was relational rather than individual, distributed across teaching, mentoring, shura, and informal exchange. Second, moral authority was earned and re-earned, not held in reserve. Third, religious tradition operated as a living resource for reasoning rather than as a fixed code, with leaders interpreting amanah, shura, maslahah, and adab considering specific situations. Table 1 summarizes the dimensions, key features, and field manifestations.

Table 1. Dimensions of Ethical Leadership Practice

Dimension	Key Features	Field Manifestations
Emergent Moral Authority	Earned through demonstrated wisdom, consistency between values and actions, and responsiveness to the community	Open acknowledgment of limitations; seeking collective guidance through shura; gradual trust building over the years
Contextual Ethics and Religious Grounding	Islamic ethical principles (amanah, shura, maslahah, adab); local Patani Malay-Muslim tradition; situational interpretation	Integration of shura into routine decisions; adaptive application of religious teaching; balancing tradition and change
Moral Negotiation and Power Dynamics	Ongoing ethical deliberation; balancing competing demands; power-aware decision making	Formal shura with senior teachers; informal consultation in the courtyard and after lessons; coalition building for difficult decisions
Embodied Ethical Practice	Ethics lived in daily routines; physical presence and accessibility; modeling through behavior	Tok guru participation in communal labor, visible simplicity in lifestyle, and presence during organizational challenges
Vulnerability Centered Leadership	Recognition of human limitations; acknowledgment of uncertainty; care for organizational members	Public admission of mistakes; support for struggling members; collective meaning-making during crises

DISCUSSION

The findings advance understanding of ethical leadership by showing how moral authority at Pondok Bantan is constructed through lived practice. Field evidence indicates that authority is enacted through daily activities such as teaching, mentoring, shura, and informal conversation between tok guru and santri. Authority is not derived from formal position alone but is repeatedly affirmed through consistency, fairness, and attentiveness to santri needs. Participants described how trust grows when leaders show alignment between words and actions in routine activity. This pattern aligns with Bush's (2020) view that educational leadership is shaped by values, culture, and the quality of relationships within an institution rather than by structural position alone, and with Hallinger's (2018) argument that context

must be brought out of the shadows of leadership theory. Recent work on integrity, trust, and engagement in educational settings reaches similar conclusions (Engelbrecht et al., 2017; Toor & Ofori, 2009). The Pondok Bantan case extends these arguments into a non-Western Muslim institutional setting where context is not a peripheral modifier but the very medium through which leadership operates.

The dimension of contextual ethics and religious grounding speaks directly to MacIntyre's (2007) argument that moral life is intelligible only within a tradition that defines its goods and virtues. At Pondok Bantan, Islamic tradition supplies the goods that practices serve: passing on Qur'anic knowledge, forming character (akhlaq), maintaining communal piety, and serving the wider Patani Malay-Muslim community. Within this tradition, virtues such as ikhlas (sincerity), taqwa (God-consciousness), sabr (patience), and tawakkul (trust in God) become recognizable and teachable through participation in pondok practice. The findings sharpen MacIntyre's frame by showing how virtues are not transmitted by exhortation but by participation: santri learn sabr through the long discipline of memorization, ikhlas through repeated acts of service, and tawakkul through observing how the tok guru responds to setbacks. This also aligns with virtue-oriented accounts of organizational life (Cameron et al., 2004). The prominence of these religious frameworks supports broader calls for culturally contextual approaches to organizational ethics (Resick et al., 2011; Beekun & Badawi, 2005). The findings also complicate simple cultural relativism: participants engaged critically with their tradition, drawing on amanah, adab, shura, and maslahah selectively, reinterpreting some elements, and de-emphasizing others as situations required. Cultural ethics function not as deterministic constraints but as resources for moral reasoning that actors deploy strategically (Swidler, 1986; Vaisey, 2009).

Empirical evidence from the field also shows ethical claims serving as practical tools that shape how authority is exercised. Leaders frequently justified decisions on discipline, responsibility, and collective welfare by referring to shared ethical principles. ST03 and the tok guru framed corrective actions as part of moral development rather than punishment. Participants noted that this reduced resistance and increased acceptance, since members saw decisions as grounded in shared values. At the same time, ethical language was used in shura to invite participation rather than to silence dissent. Junior staff and santri were heard when they framed concerns in moral terms accepted by the institution. These patterns confirm that ethical claims are embedded in practice and actively shape how power is communicated, justified, and moderated (Liu, 2017; Tourish, 2019; Hassan et al., 2013; Tu & Lu, 2013). The findings also support relational and political accounts of ethical leadership that locate moral agency within, rather than outside, relations of power. The shura at Pondok Bantan is not a power-free deliberation. It is a structured practice through which power operates but operates in ways that allow contestation and learning. Recognizing this dual character of shura, as both ethical practice and power relation, advances theoretical understanding beyond the assumption that ethical leadership is power-neutral (Liu, 2017; Lemoine et al., 2019; Maak & Pless, 2006).

Embodied ethical practice extends current theory by foregrounding how ethics is communicated through bodily presence, material arrangements, and routines rather than through explicit moral discourse alone. This finding aligns with practice-oriented approaches that treat ethical life as habituated and situated (Lambek, 2010; Nicolini, 2012; Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011). Lambek's (2010) account of ordinary ethics is especially useful here. He argues that ethical life is enacted in the texture of everyday speech, gesture, and judgment, not principally in moments of crisis or formal decision. The tok guru's manual labor during the

storm repair, his removal of shoes alongside students, the modesty of his living quarters, and his accessibility before evening prayers are not symbolic gestures added to leadership. They are the substance of ethical leadership in this setting. The implication for theory is that ethical leadership development cannot be reduced to cognitive moral education or to the articulation of principles. Material arrangements, embodied routines, and habits of attention require equal attention. Ethical leadership development programs for pesantren, madrasah, and pondok institutions can profitably ask not only what leaders should think but how leaders should live, including how they should occupy space, share meals, distribute time, and present themselves bodily.

Vulnerability-centered leadership challenges idealized images of leaders as confident moral authorities. The data suggest that ethical credibility derives, in part, from honest acknowledgment of moral difficulty, uncertainty, and limitation. This connects with discussions of moral humility, authentic leadership, and authentic leadership development (Owens et al., 2013; Walumbwa et al., 2008; Hannah et al., 2011; Avolio & Walumbwa, 2014; Gardner et al., 2011). It also engages Mattingly's (2014) anthropological work on moral laboratories and Laidlaw's (2014) anthropology of virtue and freedom. Mattingly (2014) shows how ethical life is exercised under conditions of uncertainty and exposure, with moral agents experimenting under risk rather than applying settled principles. The Pondok Bantan findings extend this by demonstrating that vulnerability, when openly acknowledged by leaders, becomes a distributed resource: it lowers the cost of admitting error for others, opens space for shared responsibility, and rebuilds rather than diminishes trust. Laidlaw (2014) reminds us that moral agency is exercised within structured forms of life rather than despite them. The tok guru's vulnerability is intelligible because it sits inside an Islamic tradition that recognizes human limitation (insan as a fallible creature before Allah) and structures responses to it through dua, taubat, and shura. Outside that structure, the same gestures might be read differently.

These observations support an anthropological ethical leadership framework that reconceptualizes ethics as contextual practice embedded in power relations. Two levels of contribution should be distinguished. The conceptual contribution is theoretical. The framework integrates human vulnerability, moral agency, and power into one lens for interpreting leadership across lived settings. It clarifies how ethical meaning is constructed through interaction, shared values, and cultural context, providing a coherent foundation for further analysis. The empirical contribution is observational. The field data document specific patterns at Pondok Bantan: how moral reasoning is used in discipline, how trust is built through consistency, how reflection guides action, and how religious tradition operates as a living resource. These do not propose abstract ideas. They provide grounded evidence that the framework can be interpreted. Distinguishing the two levels makes clear what the study observed and what it offers as an analytical resource for future research and practice.

The framework can be specified more concretely as a set of practices that can be examined, taught, and refined in Muslim educational institutions. Power relations within the organization can be mapped by attending to who speaks first, who frames issues in moral terms, and whose concerns receive sustained shura. Forms of human vulnerability among members can be recognized and supported rather than concealed. Structured ethical reflection can be embedded in routine decision-making, drawing on amanah, adab, shura, and maslahah as living resources. Leadership decisions can be assessed for sensitivity to context, attentiveness to marginalized voices, and transparency. These specifications translate the framework from a theoretical claim into an institutional practice. They also align directly with

the focus and scope of Leadership in Muslim Societies, which calls for innovative, comparative, and interdisciplinary research linking Islamic principles to contemporary organizational and societal challenges.

Tensions are visible across the case. Leaders navigated ongoing conflict between religious ideals and pragmatic necessity, participatory consultation and efficient decision making, and institutional tradition and adaptive change (Maak & Pless, 2006; Trevino & Brown, 2014). Effective practice involved sustained navigation that acknowledged competing legitimate claims and sought workable accommodation rather than overriding principles. The work of Brown et al. (2005) on social learning, Mayer et al. (2012) on the antecedents of ethical leadership, and Schaubroeck et al. (2012) on embedding ethical leadership across organizational levels all take on new texture when read through the lens of the Pondok Bantan case. Social learning at Pondok Bantan does not flow only top down. It flows laterally among santri, among teachers, and between teachers and santri, with the tok guru modeling but not monopolizing the moral example. Antecedents and embedding are visible, but they pass through religious tradition and embodied practice rather than through formal codes alone.

Synthesizing the three theoretical threads outlined in the introduction, the discussion supports a shift from ethical leadership as a measurable individual trait to ethical leadership as a tradition-shaped, socially learned, embodied practice exercised under conditions of vulnerability and power. Social learning theory remains useful for explaining transmission, but it must be supplemented by tradition-based ethics that specifies what is being learned and by the anthropology of ethics that locates learning in lived practice. The five dimensions identified empirically at Pondok Bantan operate as descriptive markers for this combined theoretical position. Emergent moral authority operationalizes the social learning of credibility in tradition-specific terms. Contextual ethics and religious grounding identify the tradition that supplies internal goods and virtues. Moral negotiation and power dynamics name the conditions under which ethical practice is exercised. Embodied ethical practice records the ordinariness of ethical life. Vulnerability-centered leadership marks the human conditions under which moral authority is forged. Together, these dimensions move ethical leadership scholarship beyond a focus on the individual leader as moral agent and towards a focus on institutional life as the medium in which leadership is enacted.

Limitations should be acknowledged. As a single-site case, the findings provide depth within one organizational setting but do not support statistical generalization. Pondok Bantan's religious educational mission, traditional authority structures, and Patani Malay-Muslim location shape what was observed. Readers should exercise judgment about analytical transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The interpretive method involves the researcher's subjectivity. The findings represent one careful reading that other researchers might extend or revise. Future research can compare cases across pesantren, dayah, surau, and pondok, track ethical leadership longitudinally across leadership succession, and combine interpretive depth with quantitative reach.

Table 2. Traditional and Anthropological Approaches to Ethical Leadership: A Comparison

Aspect	Traditional Ethical Leadership	Anthropological Ethical Leadership
Ontological foundation	Ethics as an individual trait or behavior; a leader as an autonomous moral agent	Ethics as relational practice; leader as embedded within social and power structures
Source of moral authority	Position, knowledge, or inherent character	Emergent through interaction; demonstrated through vulnerability and consistency
Ethical decision making	Application of universal principles to specific situations	Contextual negotiation among competing values and interests
Role of power	Background factor or enabler of ethical action	Constitutive element shaping what counts as ethical and whose ethics prevail
Cultural context	Modifier of universal principles	Generative source of moral frameworks and leadership legitimacy
Image of an effective leader	Morally confident, principled, consistent	Morally reflective, open to learning, comfortable with ambiguity
Research approach	Standardized instruments: trait, behavior, and outcome measurement	Interpretive inquiry into processes, meanings, and practices

CONCLUSION

This study reconstructed ethical leadership through a philosophical anthropological lens grounded in the everyday life of Pondok Bantan, a Patani Malay-Muslim educational institution in Nakhon Si Thammarat. Field evidence shows that ethical leadership in this setting is enacted through five interrelated dimensions: emergent moral authority constructed through demonstrated wisdom and consistency; contextual ethics rooted in Islamic principles of amanah, shura, and maslahah and shaped by local Malay-Muslim tradition; moral negotiation across competing interests, voices, and power positions; embodied ethical practice expressed in the tok guru's lifestyle, accessibility, and visible participation in communal labor; and vulnerability-centered leadership where honest acknowledgment of human limitation builds trust rather than weakening authority. These dimensions emerged through iterative coding of interview transcripts, field notes, and documents, and through repeated comparison across participants and incidents. Moral authority in this case was earned through engagement, not inherited from a title. The framework distinguishes empirical findings from conceptual contributions: it treats vulnerability as a resource for trust, power as a constitutive feature of moral life that requires careful navigation, and context as central to ethical judgment.

The study contributes to the focus and scope of Leadership in Muslim Societies in three connected ways. In educational and institutional leadership, it offers an empirically grounded account of how leadership is practiced in a pondok setting where religious authority, character formation, and modern administrative demands meet, with practical implications for madrasahs, pesantren, and Islamic boarding schools across Southeast Asia (Syam et al., 2022). Leadership development programs can embed structured ethical reflection, open shura, and participatory decision making into routine institutional life. In Islamic leadership theory and practice, the framework links Qur'anic and Prophetic concepts (amanah, adab, shura, maslahah) to observable practices that can be discussed, taught, and refined, responding to the gap left by Western models that often assume an autonomous moral agent (Shah, 2006; Egel & Fry, 2017). In comparative and cross-cultural studies, the Patani Malay-Muslim case

extends the conversation on leadership across diverse Muslim contexts and demonstrates how ethical leadership simultaneously negotiates minority identity, traditional authority, and policy pressure. For organizational and business leadership beyond education, the framework provides usable indicators: mapping power relations, recognizing human vulnerability, integrating structured ethical reflection, and assessing decisions for context sensitivity, attentiveness to marginalized voices, and transparency. Future research can test this framework across pesantren, dayah, surau, and pondok in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand, and beyond educational institutions.

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