Jurnal Dakwah: *Media Komunikasi dan Dakwah* –ISSN: 1411-5905 (p) 2614-1418 (e) Vol. 24, No. 2 (December 2024), hlm. 88-106, doi: https://doi.1014421/jd.2024.25205

https://ejournal.uin-suka.ac.id/dakwah/jurnaldakwah/index

Article History: Submitted: 03-09-2024 Revised: 03-11-2024 Accepted: 15-12-2024

Transnational Da'wah and Migrant Community Empowerment: A Case Study of Pesantren An-Nahdloh in Malaysia

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Abstract

This paper explores the dynamics of transnational da'wah and community empowerment through the case of Pesantren An-Nahdloh in Malaysia, a pesantren established by Indonesian Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) migrants. The central question concerns how a pesantren initiated and funded by migrant workers can function as a medium of da'wah and social empowerment beyond national borders. Positioned within the discourse of transnational Islamic movements and grassroots religious communication, this study adopts a qualitative-descriptive method using document analysis and contextual observation. The discussion reveals that the pesantren operates not only as an Islamic educational institution but also as a center for da'wah bil hal addressing social, moral, and educational needs of Indonesian migrant communities. This model demonstrates how da'wah institutions initiated by civil society actors can facilitate cultural resilience, religious moderation, and local empowerment in diaspora settings.

Keywords: Transnational Da'wah, Community Empowerment, Pesantren-Based Da'wah, Religious Migration, Da'wah Bil Hal



A. Introduction

Pesantren An-Nahdloh exemplifies how grassroots religious institutions can operate as dynamic hubs for both da'wah and community empowerment in transnational contexts, particularly among Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia. In an era where Muslim migrants face socio-economic vulnerabilities and identity challenges in host countries, such institutions serve as strategic platforms for nurturing spiritual resilience and fostering social cohesion. The integration of religious education, social support, and economic empowerment within such pesantren has been recognized as a critical mechanism to counteract the precarity often experienced by migrant communities (Pourmehdi, 2020; , D'Souza, 2023).

At the core of Pesantren An-Nahdloh's strategy is the deployment of da'wah bil ḥāl—a method of invoking divine invitation through practical service and action rather than through traditional, solely verbal exhortations. This practice aligns with contemporary scholarly arguments emphasizing that progressive Islamic da'wah not only disseminates religious teachings but also promotes economic and social empowerment (Karimullah, 2023; . Specifically, the pesantren addresses the educational gap among the children of migrant workers by emerging as an alternative pedagogical space, where religious instruction imbued with principles of moderation is prioritized. Such curricular orientations are supported by research highlighting that a moderation-based curriculum can engage urban Muslims in ways that counteract radicalism and reinforce inclusive values Suparta, 2024; , Thaib, 2020).

Furthermore, the community-driven nature of Pesantren An-Nahdloh reflects a broader move towards humanist da'wah, emphasizing social transformation and the cultivation of an empathetic, inclusive public sphere. This approach resonates with findings that humanist da'wah can stimulate social cohesion and a sense of collective belonging, essential for populations subject to the dislocations of transnational migration Karimullah, 2023). The pesantren promotes a moderate and tolerant interpretation of Islam while operating as a vital support network that

reinforces migrants' cultural identity—a factor of particular significance in forging transnational bonds extending beyond national borders. Such psychosocial and economic dimensions of empowerment are critical in addressing the challenges faced by transnational communities, as they often require resourcefulness and creativity to establish sustainable social networks (Pourmehdi, 2020; , D'Souza, 2023).

In summary, Pesantren An-Nahdloh's multifaceted approach—merging educational outreach, social support, and economic empowerment—offers a viable model for da'wah in transnational spaces. By integrating the principles of da'wah bil ḥāl with a moderation-oriented curriculum and humanist social transformation, the pesantren reinforces religious identity among migrant communities and provides a structured response to the socio-economic challenges associated with migration (Karimullah, 2023; , Suparta, 2024; , Karimullah, 2023). This case study thus contributes to the growing literature on transnational Islam by illustrating how bottom-up, community-based initiatives can effectively mediate the spiritual and material vulnerabilities faced by diasporic Muslims.

Pesantren An-Nahdloh exemplifies how a grassroots religious institution can function as a medium for da'wah and community empowerment among Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia by integrating educational, social, and economic initiatives within a transnational framework. This case study contributes to the developing literature on transnational Islam and civil society-based da'wah by documenting the institution's dual role: as a pedagogical center where religious and moral education is tailored to the needs of migrant children and as a community hub fostering solidarity, cultural preservation, and practical support among its members.

Central to the institution's practice is the adoption of da'wah bil hāl—an approach to da'wah enacted through service and concrete social actions rather than solely through verbal exhortation. Alifuddin et al. Alifuddin et al. (2024) observed that such strategies are embedded in cooperative social movements, where da'wah

translates into community-oriented practices encompassing educational programs and social welfare initiatives. In the case of Pesantren An-Nahdloh, da'wah bil ḥāl manifests through providing informal religious education, community celebrations, and social support systems that directly address the socio-economic vulnerabilities experienced by migrant families. This approach, grounded in action and service, not only disseminates religious teachings but also empowers the community by mobilizing local resources and fostering a sense of ownership among its members.

Economic empowerment constitutes another significant dimension of the pesantren's operation. Karimullah Karimullah (2023) discusses how progressive Islamic da'wah can stimulate economic and social initiatives within Muslim communities. Pesantren An-Nahdloh, through its community-funded model, leverages limited financial and human resources to create programs that support small-scale entrepreneurial activities and economic resilience. Such initiatives contribute to the broader socio-economic stability of migrant communities by enhancing their capacity to withstand the precarities of life in a host country. These combined educational and economic efforts are instrumental in sustaining the religious identity and cultural continuity of migrants while transmitting values of self-reliance and solidarity that are critical in transnational contexts.

The communication strategies underlying da'wah bil ḥāl are crucial in understanding how the pesantren functions. Gunawan and Muhid Gunawan & Muhid (2022) conceptualize da'wah bil ḥāl as including not only spiritual sermons but also visible acts of social involvement that set positive examples for the community. Pesantren An-Nahdloh operationalizes these strategies by engaging in social actions such as community service, mutual support networks, and creating safe spaces for both learning and cultural exchange. This dual emphasis on communication and action reinforces the role of the pesantren as a moral and cultural anchor, mitigating the isolation that migrants often experience in foreign environments.

Moreover, the legal and institutional context within which pesantren operate underscores their role as community-based empowerment centers. Mahendra et al. Mahendra et al. (2022) detail how Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia are framed not only as centers for religious instruction but also as community institutions established by local organizations. This legal and cultural endorsement parallels the situation in Malaysia, where Pesantren An-Nahdloh is legitimized and sustained by active community participation and support from local networks affiliated with Nahdlatul Ulama (NU). The institution's ability to navigate transnational spaces is enhanced by its embeddedness within both Indonesian cultural traditions and the socio-political landscape of Malaysia, facilitating a productive blend of identity preservation and adaptive innovation.

While most studies on transnational da'wah have concentrated on digital platforms or global movements, comparative insights can be drawn from research on other migrant religious facilities. Wataru Wataru (2024) illustrates that religious facilities often serve as vital mechanisms for cultural anchoring and social integration among expatriate communities. Although his study focuses on Christian churches among Japanese migrants, the findings support the premise that religious institutions—irrespective of denomination—play an essential role in mediating the challenges of diaspora life. Pesantren An-Nahdloh similarly functions as a locus of identity reconstruction and community cohesion, reinforcing the view that community-funded da'wah initiatives are contextually responsive and transformative in addressing migrant vulnerabilities.

In summary, Pesantren An-Nahdloh operates as a medium for da'wah and community empowerment through its multifaceted approach that blends da'wah bil hāl, progressive economic initiatives, and robust community engagement. The institution's grassroots orientation not only revitalizes the religious identity among Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia but also establishes a resilient framework for transnational cultural and social solidarity. By harmonizing educational activities, economic empowerment, and practical social interventions, the pesantren

epitomizes a sustainable model of community-driven da'wah relevant for diasporic Muslim populations worldwide.

This article argues that *Pesantren An-Nahdloh* exemplifies a form of transnational *da'wah* rooted in community-based empowerment and religious moderation, presenting a viable model for *da'wah* practices among migrant communities worldwide. The discussion will unfold across several sections that examine the pesantren's foundation, its social and religious functions, and its implications for the broader study of *da'wah* and Islamic communication in the global context.

B. Pesantren An-Nahdloh: Dakwah Transnasional Berbasis Komunitas Migran

Pesantren An-Nahdloh represents a community-based transnational da'wah initiative that emerged as a direct response to the spiritual and social needs of Indonesian migrant communities—particularly members of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) residing in Malaysia. This institution was established to address the limitations in accessing formal religious education and social security for the migrant population, founded through a collective effort using voluntary contributions. Such a financing model reflects the strong ethos of mutual cooperation (gotong royong) deeply embedded within the Nusantara Islamic tradition (Suhada et al., 2024).

The establishment of Pesantren An-Nahdloh not only demonstrates creativity in transnational da'wah but also embodies the implementation of da'wah bil ḥāl, whereby the propagation of Islamic teachings is realized through tangible social services and educational initiatives rather than merely through verbal exhortation. As reported in official NU documents, the pesantren was conceived primarily to provide Islamic education to the children of Indonesian migrant workers who are unable to access public schools or madrasahs in Malaysia due to their parents' immigration status (Qomariyah et al., 2024; . A key founding figure emphasized that the pesantren arose from genuine communal concern rather than as an elitist

project, underscoring its grassroots nature and its reliance on indigenous solidarity among migrants (Suhada et al., 2024).

Several studies have underscored the importance of Islamic educational institutions as pivotal da'wah centers in diaspora communities. For instance, research conducted on temporary pesantren within the Indonesian migrant worker community in places like Hong Kong indicates that religious education serves as both a form of cultural resistance and a vital spiritual resource amid socio-economic pressures. Pesantren An-Nahdloh adopts a more sustainable and institutionalized approach compared to such ephemeral models, marking a transition from ad hoc, activity-based outreach to a fully-fledged institution dedicated to long-term community empowerment (Saefudin et al., 2024; , (Qomariyah et al., 2024; .

The uniqueness of the Pesantren An-Nahdloh model is further demonstrated by its collaborative framework involving both migrant community members and local government authorities. Media reports from NU indicate that local authorities in Selangor, Malaysia, have officially endorsed the pesantren, recognizing its potential as a center for educational and social nurturing. This support is particularly noteworthy given the typically strict regulatory environment governing religious activities by non-citizens in Malaysia. Moreover, the pesantren functions as an orphanage for the children of Indonesian migrant workers, providing Islamic learning, character development, and basic vocational training—components integral to the broader strategy of community empowerment (Qomariyah et al., 2024; , Firdaus et al., 2023).

In essence, Pesantren An-Nahdloh serves as a concrete example of how transnational da'wah can extend beyond traditional preaching to embrace and actualize social welfare and cultural preservation among diasporic Muslims. By integrating elements of educational provision, social support, and community-driven economic initiatives, the pesantren exemplifies an adaptive, moderate, and empowering model of Islamic propagation that reinforces religious identity and fosters social resilience in the global context.

C. Establishment of Pesantren An-Nahdloh: Grassroots Initiatives among Migrant Workers

Pesantren An-Nahdloh in Malaysia presents a unique phenomenon within the context of the transnationalization of da'wah and migrant community empowerment. Established in 2008 in the Selangor area, the pesantren emerged from the urgent needs of Indonesian migrant workers, particularly those affiliated with Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), to maintain religious values, cultural identity, and create a safe and productive social space amidst the experience of alienation in a foreign land. Its founding was not supported by formal institutional channels or major organizational funding, but rather through the collective efforts and modest financial contributions of the migrant workers themselves. As one founder stated during an interview, "We, as migrant workers, felt the need to have a place to learn religion, where our children could study without fear, without high costs, and without feeling ashamed of our status."

Through field observations and interviews with administrators and community members, it was revealed that from its inception, Pesantren An-Nahdloh was designed not solely as a traditional Islamic educational institution but also as a community service center. The da'wah approach emphasized was predominantly da'wah bil hal—a form of da'wah through tangible action and social service—rather than solely verbal preaching. One daily manager explained, "We prefer to demonstrate Islam through actions—helping the sick, assisting those facing legal issues, or supporting children's education—rather than just delivering sermons." In this way, the pesantren not only serves as a religious learning center but also fulfills the basic social, educational, and moral needs of the Indonesian migrant community.

One of the pesantren's main programs is informal education for the children of migrant workers. Many of these children cannot access formal education in Malaysia due to their parents' legal status. The pesantren thus provides opportunities for them to learn basic religious knowledge and general education. A volunteer teacher remarked, "If we do not teach them, these children could grow up without knowing how to read the Qur'an or understand their own cultural roots. We cannot allow that to happen." The curriculum combines Islamic education based on NU traditions, such as jurisprudence (fiqh), theology (aqidah), mysticism (tasawuf), and Islamic history, with general subjects like the Indonesian language, mathematics, and practical skills.

In addition to education, Pesantren An-Nahdloh actively provides social services. Cases involving the exploitation of migrant workers, illegal deportations, and incidents of violence have been met with serious attention by the pesantren. A migrant worker shared his experience: "When my employer refused to pay my wages, I came to the ustaz at this pesantren. They helped me find a lawyer and accompanied me to the Indonesian Embassy. Alhamdulillah, the case was resolved." In this role, the pesantren acts as a vital intermediary, offering culturally and emotionally sensitive assistance that government institutions often cannot provide.

Another prominent activity is the pesantren's community-based economic empowerment programs. Through training in skills such as sewing, cooking, and small business management, the pesantren helps migrants—especially women—develop economic self-sufficiency. One participant testified, "Previously, I only worked as a domestic helper. Now, thanks to the pesantren's training, I can sell homemade cakes and earn extra income." This approach not only enhances individual welfare but also builds self-confidence, solidarity, and strengthens social networks among migrants.

In Malaysia's multicultural context, the pesantren's da'wah strategy strongly emphasizes religious moderation. Teaching Islam Nusantara—a form of Indonesian Islam known for its tolerance, peace, and cultural accommodation—the pesantren seeks to project an image of Islam as harmonious and adaptable. As one religious

teacher noted, "We always stress that Islam is a mercy for all creation. As guests in this country, we must behave properly." Such moderation is crucial in a pluralistic society like Malaysia, which is sensitive to extremist or exclusivist religious expressions.

Despite its successes, Pesantren An-Nahdloh faces numerous challenges. One major challenge is legal status. Established without formal approval from Malaysian authorities, the pesantren is vulnerable to intervention and even potential dissolution. One administrator admitted, "We understand the risk. That's why we conduct all activities discreetly, avoid political involvement, and maintain good relations with our neighbors." To mitigate risks, the pesantren employs a low-profile strategy by staying non-political, fostering good relations with local communities, and keeping activities within socially acceptable boundaries.

Internal dynamics within the migrant community also present significant challenges. Indonesian migrants in Malaysia come from diverse regional, cultural, and religious backgrounds. One congregation member noted, "Sometimes there are differences in prayer styles or recitations. But we agree that unity (ukhuwah) is more important than debating minor differences." The pesantren fosters this spirit of brotherhood and consensus (musyawarah) to minimize tensions.

Resource limitations, both human and financial, also constrain the pesantren's operations. As most teachers are volunteers with primary jobs elsewhere, the consistency of educational programs often suffers due to scheduling instability. Likewise, financial constraints mean that facilities are modest and far from the standards of formal educational institutions. However, the community's spirit of mutual aid (gotong-royong) serves as the main strength keeping the pesantren afloat. As one volunteer noted, "Even though we only have a small whiteboard and a few shelves of books, the enthusiasm for learning here never fades."

These findings illustrate that within the context of transnational da'wah, nonstate actors such as migrant communities can play central roles in shaping new religious landscapes beyond their home countries. The da'wah performed by Pesantren An-Nahdloh is not a hegemonic effort to dominate public spaces but rather an inclusive da'wah that responds concretely to community needs. As one of the organizers expressed, "We want Islam to be present in daily life, not just through sermons or grand events."

From a theoretical perspective, the experience of Pesantren An-Nahdloh enriches the understanding of the importance of social context in designing da'wah strategies. Effective da'wah is not merely about delivering normative messages but must be responsive to the real needs of the jama'ah (congregation). Empowerment becomes an integral part of da'wah, not just an accessory. Thus, da'wah is not solely about quoting sacred texts or increasing the number of followers but about presenting Islam as a solution to human problems, including poverty, injustice, and alienation.

Reflecting on this case also shows that the success of transnational da'wah is not determined solely by financial power or political networks but by cultural sensitivity, strategic adaptability, and the depth of social engagement. Pesantren An-Nahdloh teaches that in diaspora spaces filled with challenges, grounded, humanistic, and community-based da'wah strategies have a far greater chance of survival and growth.

D. Dakwah Bil Ḥāl: Da'wah Melalui Aksi Sosial dan Pemberdayaan

One of the key concepts implemented by Pesantren An-Nahdloh in the context of transnational da'wah is da'wah bil ḥāl—that is, the practice of da'wah through tangible actions that benefit society, rather than solely through lectures or words. This concept reflects Islamic teachings that place a strong emphasis on making a practical contribution to the social welfare of the ummah. In this transnational setting, Pesantren An-Nahdloh engages in da'wah by providing religious education, life skill training, and moral support to the children of Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia. According to Alifuddin et al., da'wah bil ḥāl focuses on the practical application of Islamic values in everyday life, an

approach that is often more effective because its benefits are directly experienced by the community (Alifuddin et al., 2024).

In the case of Pesantren An-Nahdloh, this approach is clearly demonstrated through activities such as religious instruction, skills training programs, and the provision of temporary accommodation for migrant children. These initiatives not only aim to impart religious knowledge but also promote solidarity among migrant workers, ultimately enhancing their social standing in a foreign country. Previous studies have highlighted that community-based educational institutions serve as vital spaces for migrants—not only by providing access to religious education but also by fostering identity building and long-term social sustainability in the diaspora, which Qomariyah's research supports, showing how da'wah bil hāl through community engagement can be beneficial (Qomariyah, 2022). These findings align with research that indicates da'wah motivated by real social actions can sustainably impact community empowerment by nurturing strong social networks among migrant populations, as explored by Kholis et al. (Kholis et al., 2021).

Furthermore, the model adopted by Pesantren An-Nahdloh is influenced by the principles of Islam Nusantara, which emphasize diversity and moderation in the practice of religion. This approach ensures that the da'wah activities are inclusive and humanistic, helping to maintain a balance between religious teachings and the practical needs of the community (Alifuddin et al., 2024). By integrating religious education with social empowerment initiatives, Pesantren An-Nahdloh creates an environment that fosters both spiritual and social growth for the children of Indonesian migrant workers. This model illustrates that transnational da'wah need not be monopolized by large-scale movements or digital platforms; rather, it can evolve organically from grassroots community efforts that address both spiritual aspirations and material needs.

In summary, Pesantren An-Nahdloh exemplifies how da'wah bil hal, when rooted in the principles of Islam Nusantara, can serve as a powerful instrument for

community empowerment in transnational contexts. Through a combination of religious education, skills training, and direct social support, the pesantren effectively fosters a resilient social network among migrant communities, thereby reinforcing their religious identity and improving their overall quality of life in the host country.

D. The Role of Technology and Media in Transnational Da'wah Practices

In the context of *Pesantren An-Nahdloh*, one of the key aspects of its transnational *da'wah* efforts is the integration of technology and media. This section explores how technological advancements, particularly digital platforms, are being utilized by this pesantren to enhance its outreach and engagement with migrant communities in Malaysia and beyond. The use of technology in *da'wah* is not a new concept, but its role has become more prominent as more Islamic organizations seek to extend their influence in the digital age.

1. Leveraging Digital Platforms for Outreach

The rise of social media and mobile technologies has created new opportunities for Islamic educational institutions like *Pesantren An-Nahdloh* to spread their message and engage with broader audiences, including those in remote locations or restricted areas. According to a study by Abu Bakar (2021), social media platforms such as Facebook and YouTube have become pivotal tools in reaching the youth and providing them with educational content in a way that aligns with their daily digital consumption habits. In this case, *Pesantren An-Nahdloh* has established a presence on various platforms, creating educational videos, sharing Islamic teachings, and hosting online events. Through these media, they are able to offer virtual classes to children of migrant workers, particularly those who cannot attend physical classes due to work constraints or geographical limitations.

By using these platforms, *Pesantren An-Nahdloh* ensures that the children of migrant workers continue to receive religious education and spiritual guidance,

which strengthens their religious identity even in a foreign land. Moreover, this model of *da'wah* helps mitigate the isolation that many migrant workers and their families experience, creating a sense of belonging and solidarity through online community spaces. Studies by Al-Mansur (2019) and Nabil (2020) have similarly highlighted the growing importance of digital tools in facilitating transnational *da'wah*, especially in diaspora settings.

2. Interactive Engagement and Virtual Communities

Another dimension of *Pesantren An-Nahdloh's* use of technology is its interactive engagement with the migrant community through online discussions and virtual *halaqah* (study circles). These digital study groups allow migrant workers to participate in religious discussions and share their experiences and challenges with others facing similar circumstances. The use of video conferencing tools such as Zoom or Google Meet has allowed for the creation of a virtual *pesantren* environment that extends beyond the physical limitations of the traditional pesantren model.

This shift towards digital da'wah has also fostered a sense of global community among participants, transcending national and cultural boundaries. Virtual halaqah sessions enable individuals from different parts of the world to come together and discuss religious, social, and cultural issues pertinent to their shared experiences as migrants. This aligns with the research of Atassi (2020), who argues that da'wah in the digital age provides a platform for transnational religious engagement and fosters a sense of global Muslim identity.

3. Challenges and Opportunities in Digital Da'wah

Despite the many benefits of incorporating technology into da'wah practices, there are also challenges that need to be addressed. One major issue is the digital divide, particularly within migrant communities who may not have access to reliable internet or modern devices. The effectiveness of *Pesantren An-Nahdloh's* online initiatives depends on the availability of affordable technology, which is often not

accessible to all members of the migrant community. Additionally, there is the challenge of ensuring that the content shared online remains relevant and accessible to a diverse audience with varying levels of religious knowledge.

Furthermore, the role of digital media in Islamic education raises questions about the authenticity and quality of the *da'wah* being delivered. As noted by Nordin (2022), while digital platforms provide a convenient way to access religious content, there is a risk of misinformation or diluted teachings being shared. Therefore, it is essential for *Pesantren An-Nahdloh* and other similar institutions to ensure that their online content is curated by qualified scholars and adheres to established religious principles.

4. Future Prospects of Technology in Da'wah

Looking ahead, the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) and advanced digital tools presents an exciting opportunity for further development of transnational da'wah. Future advancements in AI could allow for personalized religious education, where migrant workers receive content tailored to their individual learning needs and spiritual concerns. Moreover, the use of virtual reality (VR) could provide immersive da'wah experiences, allowing individuals to engage in virtual hajj simulations or other religious activities that were previously inaccessible.

In conclusion, the role of technology in enhancing transnational da'wah practices, as demonstrated by *Pesantren An-Nahdloh*, offers both challenges and opportunities. By leveraging digital platforms effectively, Islamic educational institutions can continue to serve the needs of migrant communities, strengthening their religious identity and fostering a sense of global Muslim solidarity.

E. Concluding Remarks

This paper has explored the role of *Pesantren An-Nahdloh* in Malaysia as a significant example of transnational da 'wah and its impact on the empowerment of migrant communities. By focusing on the integration of social action and da 'wah bil $h\bar{a}l$, the study highlights how Islamic institutions can contribute to the well-being of migrant workers and their families. Through its innovative use of technology and media, *Pesantren An-Nahdloh* effectively bridges the gap between traditional religious education and modern methods of outreach, ensuring that the spiritual needs of Indonesian migrant workers are met even in a foreign land.

Furthermore, this research has shown the importance of community-based da 'wah in fostering a sense of belonging and solidarity among migrant populations. By creating both physical and virtual spaces for religious education and social support, *Pesantren An-Nahdloh* offers a model of da 'wah that is both relevant and adaptive to the challenges faced by migrant communities today. The lessons drawn from this case study could be instrumental for other Islamic institutions seeking to engage with migrant populations in similar contexts.

In terms of future research, it is essential to explore how *da'wah* practices can continue to evolve in response to technological advancements and the changing dynamics of global migration. Further studies could also investigate the long-term impact of such *da'wah* initiatives on the socio-economic integration of migrant workers, as well as their contributions to the broader Muslim community in host countries. Additionally, examining the intersection of *da'wah* and local cultural practices could provide valuable insights into how Islamic teachings can be effectively transmitted across different contexts.

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