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Transcendental Bond: Rethinking Therapeutic Relationships Through the Lens of *Asambung* in the Indonesian *Pesantren* Tradition

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Abstract

The therapeutic alliance, a central construct of contemporary psychotherapy, rests on largely unexamined ontological assumptions about relational presence. This article reconstructs those assumptions through *asambung* (connection), a Madurese construct of trans-spatial spiritual connection articulated across three generations of *masyayikh* (sheikhs) at Pondok Pesantren Salafiyah Syafi'iyah Sukorejo, Situbondo, East Java. Using systematic conceptual analysis and hermeneutic dialogue between counseling psychology and *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) epistemology, the article develops a four-quadrant typology distinguishing *asanding* (physical co-presence) from *asambung* (spiritual connection) as orthogonal dimensions, alongside the constructs of *nadrah* (the guru's spiritually

attentive gaze), *barakah* (spiritual energy flowing through a valid bond), and community-sustained bonding practices. Three propositions of a "transcendental relationality" model are then formulated, situating *asambung* within the broader spectrum of existential, transpersonal, and indigenous psychotherapies, and specifying safeguards for client agency, informed consent, and rupture–repair within asymmetric mentoring relationships. Findings indicate that relational presence and physical co-presence are independent dimensions, that termination need not entail relational cessation, and that spirituality can function structurally rather than merely as content within the therapeutic bond. Theoretical significance lies in reframing the therapeutic relationship as a potential locus—not merely a medium—of transformation, with implications for distance therapy, therapist formation, and community-based models of termination.

Keywords: therapeutic alliance; Islamic boarding school; transcendental relationality; spiritual presence; *at-tawazun* counseling

A. Introduction

Counseling literature has amassed three decades of research on what happens during the therapy hour, but has little to say about what happens after—when treatment ends and client and counselor part ways. The default answer is assumed rather than argued: the relationship ends, or at best survives as an internal representation. Recent systematic evidence continues to bear this out: a 2025 PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses)-guided review of 67 studies on the termination phase of adult individual psychotherapy found that although termination is theoretically recognized as consequential, it remains comparatively under-researched relative to earlier phases of treatment, and that mutual,

planned endings are still conceptualized primarily around the cessation of contact rather than a transition in the mode of relating¹. In the Indonesian *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) tradition—articulated across three generations of *masyayikh* (sheikhs)² at Pondok Pesantren Salafiyah Syafi'iyah Sukorejo—the bond between mentor and mentored is understood differently. It is not bound by physical presence, nor does it end when formal education ends. When Kiai As'ad Syamsul Arifin asserted that wherever his students are, as long as they remember their teacher, the teacher will remember them, he was articulating an ontology of relation that challenges how the therapeutic alliance has been theorized in mainstream psychology³.

Research on common factors has established relationship quality as among the most consistent predictors of outcome across modalities⁴. Bordin's tripartite model of goals, tasks, and bonds remains canonical⁵; Relational-Cultural Theory has deepened understanding of growth

¹ Y L Rabinowitz, B Yim, and J C Muran, "Termination of Psychotherapy: A Systematic Review," *Cogent Mental Health* 4, no. 1 (2025): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1080/28324765.2025.2535626>.

² Senior spiritual teachers or leaders; in this article, referring specifically to three generations of Pesantren Sukorejo's caretakers (Kiai Syamsul Arifi, Kiai As'ad, Kiai Fawaid)

³ Samsul Arifin, *HIKMAH HATI: Psikologi Di Balik Wejangan Masyayikh Pesantren* (Yogyakarta: Global Press, 2025); Samsul Arifin, *Wejangan Kiai As'ad Dan Kiai Fawaid* (Surabaya: Pena Salsabila, 2014); Syamsul A Hasan, *Kharisma Kiai As'ad Di Mata Umat* (Yogyakarta: LkiS, 2003); Samsul Arifin, *Satria Kuda Putih: Jejak Kiai As'ad Sang Ulama Pahlawan Nasional* (Situbondo: Tanwirul Afkar, 2025).

⁴ B. E Wampold, "How Important Are the Common Factors in Psychotherapy? An Update," *World Psychiatry* 14, no. 3 (2015): 270–77, <https://doi.org/10.1002/wps.20238>; A. O. Flückiger, C., Del Re, A. C., Wampold, B. E., & Horvath, "The Alliance in Adult Psychotherapy: A Meta-Analytic Synthesis," *Psychotherapy* 55, no. 4 (2018): 316–40, <https://doi.org/10.1037/pst0000172>; M. J. Norcross, J. C., & Lambert, *Psychotherapy Relationships That Work (3rd Ed.)* (Oxford University Press, 2018).

⁵ E. S. Bordin, "The Generalizability of the Psychoanalytic Concept of the Working Alliance," *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research & Practice* 16, no. 3 (1979): 252–60, <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0085885>.

through mutually empowering connection⁶; attachment-based approaches highlight the therapist as an internalized secure base, and recent process research continues to refine how attachment classifications actually manifest moment-to-moment within sessions, including in group formats⁷. Yet across this literature, relationships remain conceived as media for change—facilitating conditions for technique—rather than as loci of transformation, and as phenomena whose existence depends on co-presence.

Asambung—Madurese for "connected"—names a mode of relationality operating simultaneously across physical and spiritual, present and absent, temporal and trans-temporal domains. Kiai Azaim Ibrahimy's four-quadrant typology—*asanding*⁸-*asambung*⁹, *asanding-tak asambung*, *tak asanding-asambung*, and *tak asanding-tak asambung*—offers a conceptual vocabulary in which physical proximity and spiritual connection are treated as independent dimensions, not degrees of the same variable¹⁰. One can share a room and remain disconnected; one can be

⁶ J. V Jordan, *Relational-Cultural Therapy (2nd Ed.)*. (American Psychological Association., 2018).

⁷ J Mallinckrodt, B., & Jeong, "Attachment Theory in Psychotherapy," in *Humanistic Psychotherapies: Handbook of Research and Practice (2nd Ed, ed. & S. Rubin D. J. Cain, K. Keenan* (American Psychological Association, 2015), 345–70; A Talia et al., "An Exploratory Study on How Attachment Classifications Manifest in Group Psychotherapy," *Research in Psychotherapy: Psychopathology, Process and Outcome* 25, no. 3 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.4081/ripppo.2022.653>.

⁸ Physical closeness or co-presence; one of two orthogonal dimensions in the four-quadrant typology, referring to bodily proximity between teacher and student.

⁹ Literally "connected" or "united"; the article's central construct, referring to trans-spatial spiritual connection independent of physical co-presence

¹⁰ Samsul Arifin, "Dinamika Perubahan Relasi Kiai Santri Pada 'Ngaji Online' Di Masa Pagebluk COVID-19," *Jurnal Kependudukan Indonesia* 1 (2020): 75–80, <https://doi.org/10.14203/jki.v0i0.538>; Samsul Arifin, *IKSASS Jatidiri Dan Pengembangan Diri Santri Alumni Salafiyah Syafiyah Sukorejo Situbondo [IKSASS Identity and Self-Development of Salafiyah Syafiyah Sukorejo Situbondo Alumni Students]* (Situbondo: Tanwirul Afkar, 2020).

separated by oceans and decades and remain deeply present.

Beyond the Instrumental-Relational Binary

Decolonial psychology rightly warns against universalizing claims that are parochial artifacts of WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) populations¹¹. But it would overstate matters to treat instrumentalist, individualist readings of relationship as the only Western voice. Buber's I-Thou/I-It distinction locates ethical significance in the meeting itself, not its output¹²; Levinas's face-to-face encounter treats the Other as an ethical claim exceeding instrumental use¹³. E. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (Duquesne University Press., 1969).; and Transpersonal Psychology—from Jung's collective unconscious to Wilber's spectrum of consciousness and Grof's research on non-ordinary states—has long theorized connectivity not confined to synchronous co-presence¹⁴.

It is also worth noting that decolonial psychology itself has continued to evolve well past the foundational critiques of the 2010s. A 2025 special issue of *American*

¹¹ A Henrich, J., Heine, S. J., & Norenzayan, "The Weirdest People in the World?," *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 33, no. 2-3 (2010): 61-83, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0140525X0999152X>; H Keller, "Decolonizing Psychology as a Scientific and Ethical Necessity. Online Readings," *Online Readings in Psychology and Culture* 2, no. 1 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.9707/2307-0919.1215>.

¹² Martin Buber and Ronald Gregor Smith, *I and Thou* (Scribner, 1958).

¹³ E. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (Duquesne University Press., 1969)

¹⁴ S Grof, *Realms of the Human Unconscious: Observations from LSD Research* (Viking Press, 1975); C G Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, ed. R F C Hull, 2nd ed. (Princeton University Press, 1969); K Wilber, *The Spectrum of Consciousness* (Quest Books, 1977).

Psychologist, guest-edited by Bhatia and colleagues, explicitly reframes the project not as a wholesale replacement of Western psychology by non-Western alternatives, but as a redirection of the flow of intellectual exchange that has typically moved unilaterally from the Global North to the Global South—an aim closely aligned with the constructive, non-oppositional stance this article takes toward *asambung*¹⁵. The contribution of this article, then, is not the discovery that relationship can exceed instrumental function—that insight has multiple Western lineages, and the decolonial critique of psychology has by now matured well beyond binary East–West framing. It lies in three more specific contributions: (1) an ethnographically and textually grounded articulation of trans-spatial connection transmitted across three generations within a single institutional lineage, rather than an individual philosophical insight; (2) a typology operationalizing physical and spiritual presence as orthogonal dimensions with a precision not yet matched in the transpersonal or dialogical-existential literature; and (3) structured, communally embedded transmission mechanisms—*sanad* (chain of transmitters), *nadrah* (radiance), *barakah* (blessing), and ritual practices such as the events of *Ratibul Haddad* and *Haul Majemuk*—that give the persistence of connection institutional and ritual infrastructure rather than leaving it a private, experiential claim. The relevant question is thus not "How can Western concepts be adapted to local contexts?" but "What might mainstream alliance theory learn from this tradition, and where does it force reexamination of

¹⁵ S Bhatia et al., "Toward a Decolonial Psychology: Recentering and Reclaiming Global Marginalized Knowledges," *American Psychologist* 80, no. 8 (2025): 1097–1108, <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0001644>.

assumptions that persisted even where alternative resources already existed?"

The article proceeds as follows. Section A situates the argument within alliance theory and the *At-Tawazun* (equilibrium) paradigm underlying Pesantren Sukorejo's thought. Section B specifies the conceptual-analytic method. Section C systematically explains *asambung*, formulates three propositions of transcendental relationality, and discusses implications for distance therapy, therapist formation, rupture and repair, and termination, together along ethical safeguards. Section D concludes with the model's scope and limits.

The Therapeutic Alliance and Its Embedded Ontology

Bordin synthesized psychodynamic, humanistic, and behavioral perspectives into a transtheoretical framework in which bond is not an end but a means: it enables treatment adherence¹⁶. This instrumental reading recurs from Freud's technical neutrality to the behavioral view of the therapist as reinforcing agent¹⁷ (—relationship as context, not text. Gelso and Carter's distinction between working alliance and "real relationship" is an important corrective, yet the real relationship remains anchored in observable interaction rather than something operating beyond it¹⁸. Relational-

¹⁶ Bordin, "The Generalizability of the Psychoanalytic Concept of the Working Alliance."

¹⁷ Gerald Corey, *Theory and Practice of Counseling and Psychotherapy* (10th Ed.) (Belmont: Thomson Higher Education, 2021); J.S Flanagan and R.S Lanagan, *Counseling and Psychotherapy Theories in Context and Practice: Skills, Strategies, and Techniques* (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 2004); McLeod, *An Introduction to Counselling* (6th Ed.) (New York: Open University Press, 2019).

¹⁸ J. A Gelso, C. J., & Carter, "The Relationship in Counseling and Psychotherapy: Components, Consequences, and Theoretical Antecedents," *The Counseling Psychologist* 13,

Cultural Theory goes further, treating connection itself as a site of growth through bidirectional, growth-fostering relationships¹⁹—but remains committed to an immanent, interpersonal ontology requiring co-presence and reciprocal resonance; whether relationships persist beyond direct interaction is not a question this framework addresses.

Attachment theory offers the most compelling account of persistence: an internalized secure base continues to function after termination²⁰. Process-level research over the past several years has sharpened this picture considerably: fine-grained coding of therapist and patient communication markers now allows attachment classifications to be tracked across the course of treatment, including in modalities—such as group psychotherapy—where the dyadic assumptions of classical attachment theory do not straightforwardly apply²¹. Yet the explanatory mechanism remains intrapsychic—internalization within the client's working model. In contrast, the *pesantren* tradition, in claiming that a *kiai's nadrah* (Islamic figure's radiance) reaches the student even after the teacher's death, makes a qualitatively different ontological claim: relationship

no. 2 (1985): 155–243, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011000085132001>; J. A. Gelso, C. J., & Carter, "Components of the Psychotherapy Relationship: Their Interaction and Unfolding during Treatment," *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 41, no. 3 (1994): 296–306, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0167.41.3.296>.

¹⁹ Jordan, *Relational-Cultural Therapy* (2nd Ed.); I. P. Miller, J. B., & Stiver, *The Healing Connection: How Women Form Relationships in Therapy and in Life* (Beacon Press, 1997).

²⁰ Bowlby, *A Secure Base: Parent-Child Attachment and Healthy Human Development*. (Basic Books., 1988); L. A. Granqvist, P., & Kirkpatrick, *Attachment and Religious Representations and Behavior*. In J. Cassidy & P. R. Shaver (Eds.), *Handbook of Attachment: Theory, Research, and Clinical Applications* (Guilford Press, 2016).

²¹ Talia et al., "An Exploratory Study on How Attachment Classifications Manifest in Group Psychotherapy."

possessing existential status not reducible to either party's mental state.

Why does mainstream alliance research struggle to think beyond function and co-presence, given that such resources exist elsewhere in Western thought? The answer lies in a functionalist impulse specific to the empirical alliance paradigm: relationships matter because they predict outcomes and enable technique, and outcomes and technique are time-bound. More deeply, the subject presupposed by alliance research is the bounded, autonomous individual—what Connell calls the subject of "southern theory"²². *Asambung* presumes a different subject: a node within relationships extending backward through ancestors, outward through community, and upward through the divine—relationships that constitute identity, not merely experience it. When an alumnus recites *Ratibul Haddad* while holding his teacher's face in his heart, he reactivates a bond that is part of his most fundamental identity²³.

Spiritually integrated psychotherapy has grown substantially over the past two decades, and the evidence base has continued to strengthen. A 2024 multi-level meta-analysis of randomized controlled trials directly comparing religious and spirituality-based (R/S) therapies to standard, non-R/S treatments found that

²² R Connell, *Southern Theory: The Global Dynamics of Knowledge in Social Science*. (Polity Press., 2007); Sunil Bhatia and K R Priya, "Decolonizing Psychology: Toward an Indigenous Psychology from the Global South," *Theory & Psychology* 31, no. 4 (2021): 523–45; W. D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Duke University Press., 2011).

²³ Ahmad Azaim Ibrahimy and Samsul Arifin, *Kiai Fawaid As'ad: Kepribadian, Pemikiran, Dan Perilaku Politik* (Situbondo: Tanwirul Afkar, 2018); Ach. Azaim Ibrahimy, Nur Sari As'adiyah, and Samsul Arifin, *Nadrah Masyayikh: Energi Ruhani Yang Menyalakan Militansi Cinta* (Situbondo: Tanwirul Afkar, 2026).

R/S-adapted approaches performed at least comparably, and in several outcome domains modestly better, than standard treatment—lending empirical weight to the broader claim that spiritually attentive relational frameworks are not merely permissible accommodations but can carry genuine clinical value²⁴. Yet most of this literature—including the R/S meta-analytic tradition itself—still treats spirituality primarily as *content*: a dimension of the client's meaning system, symptom profile, or intervention protocol to integrate into case formulation and measure for effect. Rarely explored is the possibility that spirituality functions as structure—something that characterizes the therapeutic relationship itself, before and independently of either party's explicit beliefs or the intervention's explicit religious framing. Laird comes closest in Islamic counseling, insisting that mercy and trust are constitutive of therapeutic efficacy²⁵. Recent ethnographic work on Islamic Counselling training in Britain similarly documents how trainees are taught to engage relational difference through non-secular notions of the self and its relation to multiple others—training students, in effect, to treat transcendence as a structural feature of the therapeutic encounter rather than an

²⁴ W. -M. Chou and P. A Bermender, "Spiritual Integration in Counseling Training: A Study of Students' Perceptions and Experiences," *Vistas* 11 (2011); Gerald Corey, "Integrating Spirituality in Counseling Practice," *Vistas* 06 (2006), <http://www.counseling.org/>; K. I. Pargament, *Spiritually Integrated Psychotherapy: Understanding and Addressing the Sacred*. (Guilford Press., 2007); E. P. Sperry, L., & Shafranske, *Spiritually Oriented Psychotherapy* (American Psychological Association, 2021); A J Bouwhuis-Van Keulen et al., "The Evaluation of Religious and Spirituality-Based Therapy Compared to Standard Treatment in Mental Health Care: A Multi-Level Meta-Analysis of Randomized Controlled Trials," *Psychotherapy Research* 34, no. 3 (2024): 339–52, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10503307.2023.2241626>.

²⁵ L. Laird, *Islamic Counseling: An Introduction to Theory and Practice* (Routledge, 2020).

optional add-on²⁶. But no existing framework systematically develops what the *pesantren* tradition makes explicit: the relationship as a channel through which something transcendent flows, whose nature—not merely the parties' good intentions—determines what is possible within it.

The *At-Tawazun* Paradigm

The *At-Tawazun* Counseling Paradigm, developed within the Sukorejo tradition, is an epistemological and ontological orientation treating dichotomies common in Western thought—reason/heart, individual/community, physical/spiritual, temporal/transcendent—as illusions of an inadequate mode of thinking²⁷. It is organically intertwined with *tawhidic* (monotheism) grounding: all relationships are rooted in relationship with God as the source of ultimate meaning. Counseling, on this view, is a holistic process of transformation rooted in strengthening *tazkiyah* (spiritual awareness). *Qalbun bi qalbin* (heart-to-heart communication) describes the relational ideal: not information transfer but transmission of spiritual presence occurring only when both parties are present at

²⁶ S Dharamsi and G Liberatore, “Our Therapeutic Direction Is towards Light: Transcendence and a Non-Secular Politics of Difference in Islamic Counselling Training,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 30, no. 2 (2024): 417–35, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9655.14064>.

²⁷ Samsul Arifin, *At-Tawazun: Psikologi Dan Konseling Berbasis Pesantren Untuk Membentuk Karakter Khaira Ummah* [At-Tawazun: Pesantren-Based Psychology and Counselling for Developing the Character of Khaira Ummah] (Malang: Literasi Nusantara, 2020); Samsul Arifin, *AT-TAWAZUN Paradigma Baru Konseling Qur'ani Berbasis Pesantren* [At-Tawazun: A New Paradigm of Qur'anic Counselling Based on Pesantren] (Yogyakarta: Silda Impika, 2025); Samsul Arifin, *AT-TAWAZUN: Paradigma Integratif Komunikasi Dan Konseling Multikultural Di Pesantren* [At-Tawazun: An Integrative Paradigm of Communication and Multicultural Counselling in Pesantren] (Situbondo: Tanwirul Afkar, 2026).

depth²⁸. Kiai As'ad's concept of *tawajjuh* (the whole body led by the heart facing God) extends, in the mentoring context, to the student's readiness to receive transmission from a teacher of such inner integrity²⁹.

Mentor qualities are understood through two interdependent dimensions: *shalahiyyah* (scholarly capability) and *shalih* (moral-spiritual integrity), functioning as a *mutawazin* (balanced) dyad rather than a hierarchy. Earlier work within this same research program has examined precisely this dyad through the lens of *da'wah* (Islamic preaching), arguing that the counselor's personal quality—not merely technique—is what makes counseling a genuinely transformative rather than merely instructive encounter³⁰. *Shalahiyyah* supplies the interpretive and technical apparatus—including *firasah* (spiritual insight), an intuitive-diagnostic sensitivity analogous to clinical attunement—while *shalih* supplies the integrity making intervention trustworthy and receivable. Neither substitutes for the client's own reflection and behavioral change; both condition for such processes to be received as meaningful rather than merely complied with—a qualification developed further in Section C.

²⁸ Samsul Arifin, "Holistic Happiness : Integrating Happiness Based on Risalah Thariqah and the Authentic Happiness Theory," *Esoterik* 11, no. 1 (2025): 99–118, <https://doi.org/10.21043/esoterik.v11i1.31276>.

²⁹ K H R As'ad Syamsul 'Arifin, *Risālah Al-Tauḥīd* (Situbondo: Salafiyah Syafi'iyah Sukorejo, 1973); K H R As'ad Syamsul 'Arifin, *Risālah Thariqat* (Situbondo: Salafiyah Syafi'iyah Sukorejo, 1973).

³⁰ Samsul Arifin, Mokhammad Baharun, and Miftahul Alimin, "Psycho-Sufistic Counseling to Develop Students' Sociocultural Literacy," *Proceedings of the International Conference on Madrasah Reform 2021 (ICMR 2021)* 633, no. Icmr 2021 (2022): 300–307, <https://doi.org/10.2991/assehr.k.220104.045>.

Two levels of claim should be distinguished here and throughout: a portable meta-theoretical proposition—that relational presence and physical co-presence are orthogonal, and that termination need not entail cessation—offered as generalizable; and the context-bound theological architecture, *sanad*; *tawassul*; and *barakah*, through which it is here articulated, functions authoritatively within *Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah* (adherents of prophetic tradition) Sufi's *pesantren* cosmology and is not assumed to transfer intact elsewhere. This distinction is revisited in the conclusion.

B. Method

This article adopts systematic conceptual analysis combined with critical interpretive engagement with primary sources from two epistemological traditions—a *constructive conceptual dialogue* premised on partial rather than total incommensurability between traditions, avoiding both epistemological violence through forced synthesis and relativist paralysis. The *pesantren* tradition is represented through the *masyayikh*'s teachings as documented in *At-Tawazun* Counseling texts³¹, the *Risalah al-Tauhid* and *Risalah Thariqat* of K.H.R. As'ad Syamsul Arifin, and related primary texts³²—treated as equal dialogue partners rather

³¹ Arifin, *At-Tawazun: Psikologi Dan Konseling Berbasis Pesantren Untuk Membentuk Karakter Khaira Ummah* [At-Tawazun: Pesantren-Based Psychology and Counselling for Developing the Character of Khaira Ummah]; Arifin, *AT-TAWAZUN Paradigma Baru Konseling Qur'ani Berbasis Pesantren* [At-Tawazun: A New Paradigm of Qur'anic Counselling Based on Pesantren]; Arifin, *AT-TAWAZUN: Paradigma Integratif Komunikasi Dan Konseling Multikultural Di Pesantren* [At-Tawazun: An Integrative Paradigm of Communication and Multicultural Counselling in Pesantren].

³² As'ad Syamsul 'Arifin, *Risalah Al-Tauhid*; As'ad Syamsul 'Arifin, *Risalah Thariqat*.

than ethnographic data to be explained through existing psychological categories.

The counseling psychology tradition is engaged through critical reading of foundational and selective empirical literature—including recent meta-analytic and systematic-review evidence published within the past five years, where available—attending to the ontological assumptions in behind technical formulations. The goal is not to test the *pesantren* tradition's claims against Western empirical standards—which would presuppose the epistemological hierarchy under scrutiny—but to identify what becomes thinkable once different relational ontologies are taken seriously, in the spirit of Battiste's "ethical space of engagement" and Gadamer's fusion of horizons³³. As a conceptual-analytic and hermeneutic study, the propositions in Section C are theoretical hypotheses for further investigation, not empirically tested findings—a limitation addressed in the conclusion.

C. Result and Discussion

The Socio-Spiritual World of Sukorejo: The Ontological Context of *Asambung*

The Salafiyah Syafi'iyah *pesantren* in Sukorejo, founded by Kiai Syamsul Arifin in 1914 and continued by Kiai As'ad, Kiai Fawaid, and Kiai Azaim, is a complete social and spiritual universe with its own hierarchies,

³³ M. Battiste, "Cognitive Pluralism and Ethical Engagement," in *Indigenous Philosophies and Critical Education*, ed. G. J. S. Dei (Peter Lang, 2011), 45–62; G. H. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, ed. Joe Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 2004).

modes of transmission, and conceptions of relation³⁴. Alumni spread throughout Indonesia understand themselves not as having left the *pesantren* but as sent—remaining connected through bonds distance cannot break³⁵. Kiai Fawaid As'ad's diesel-lamp metaphor captures this: the *pesantren* is the engine, students act as the lamps that must remain connected to it; disconnection means loss of transformative power, while a network of connected lamps creates a collective field of light exceeding any single connection³⁶.

In this world, knowledge is a lived reality transmitted through presence, *nadrah*, and blessings flowing in an unbroken *sanad*. Kiai As'ad documented his *tariqah silsila* (unbroken spiritual chain) stretching to Sayyidina Abu Bakr al-Siddiq and the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him)³⁷, holding that *ma'rifah* (true inner knowledge) requires unbroken connection to a living transmission chain—*sirru al-khuṣūṣiyyah* (the secret of specialness), transmitted only through direct teacher–student relationship³⁸. If the deepest self-knowledge is spiritual knowledge that requires a relationship with such a teacher, then the mentoring relationship is not merely a

³⁴ Humas Pondok Pesantren Salafiyah Syafi'iyah Sukorejo, *Profil Pondok Pesantren Salafiyah Syafi'iyah Sukorejo Situbondo [Profile of Pondok Pesantren Salafiyah Syafi'iyah Sukorejo Situbondo]* (Situbondo: Humas, 2026); Syamsul A Hasan, *Kharima Kiai As'ad Di Mata Umat* (Yogyakarta: LKIS, 2003); Ahmad Azaim Ibrahimy and Samsul Arifin, *Risalah Hati: Trilogi Biografi Nyai Zainiyah As'ad* (Situbondo: Tanwirul Afkar, 2019).

³⁵ Samsul Arifin and Akhmad Zaini, "Decision of Implementing Uzlah and Gerbat Techniques in Islamic Boarding School as Preparedness Response for Covid-19 Pandemic," *Unnes Journal of Public Health* 9, no. 2 (July 31, 2020): 126–34, <https://doi.org/10.15294/ujph.v9i2.38107>.

³⁶ Samsul Arifin, *Sang Pelopor: Kisah Tiga Kiai Dalam Mengelola Bekas Bajingan* (Surabaya: Pena Salsabila, 2014); Ibrahimy and Arifin, *Kiai Fawaid As'ad: Kepribadian, Pemikiran, Dan Perilaku Politik*.

³⁷ As'ad Syamsul 'Arifin, *Risālah Thariqat*; As'ad Syamsul Arifin, *Hādihi Ar-Risālah Lidzikrā Bai'ah Wa Silsilah Al-Qādiriyyah Wa an-Naqsyabandiyyah*, 1983.

³⁸ As'ad Syamsul 'Arifin, *Risālah Al-Tauḥid*.

context for growth but its most fundamental condition of possibility.

Four-Quadrant Typology: Orthogonal Dimensions of Presence and Connection

Kiai Azaim Ibrahimy's typology rejects the assumption that physical presence and spiritual connection operate on the same scale³⁹, crossing physical proximity (*asanding/tak asanding*) with spiritual connection (*asambung/tak asambung*) to produce four qualitatively distinct states.

Quadrant I (*asanding-asambung*), the ideal state, is where physical proximity and spiritual connection reinforce each other: *tawajjuh* (transmission of spiritual concentration) can occur with full intensity, and students receive *faidh* (spiritual overflow) through a fully open connection⁴⁰.

Quadrant II (*asanding-tak asambung*) names a tragic possibility the typology does not shy from: students physically present but spiritually elsewhere, whose deeds, per Kiai As'ad, become *mardud* (rejected) when spiritual practice lacks sincere trust in the teacher⁴¹. Physical presence, however frequent, is necessary but not sufficient for connection. This possibility is not merely a

³⁹ Arifin, "Dinamika Perubahan Relasi Kiai Santri Pada 'Ngaji Online' Di Masa Pagebluk COVID-19"; Arifin, *IKSASS Jatidiri Dan Pengembangan Diri Santri Alumni Salafiyah Syafiiyah Sukorejo Situbondo [IKSASS Identity and Self-Development of Salafiyah Syafi'iyah Sukorejo Situbondo Alumni Students]*; Samsul Arifin, Mohamat Hadori, and Yohandi, "Transformation of The Pesantren Community ' S Therapeutic Relationship in Online Learning," in *Conference: The 2nd International Conference on Religion and Education, INCRE 2020* (eai, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.4108/eai.11-11-2020.2308285>.

⁴⁰ As'ad Syamsul 'Arifin, *Risālah Thariqat*.

⁴¹ As'ad Syamsul 'Arifin.

theoretical caveat; recent critical scholarship on *kiai* (master)–*santri* (student) relations in East Java documents how physical co-presence within a hierarchical *pesantren* structure can coexist with negotiation, resistance, and a felt absence of genuine connection on the *santri*'s part, even while outward deference is maintained⁴². Read alongside the *pesantren*'s own internal category of *amal mardud*, this external, critical literature converges with the tradition's self-understanding: proximity without trust produces a hollow form of the relationship, not a diminished but still-functional one.

Quadrant III (*tak asanding-asambung*) describes alumni who remain connected across vast distance and time through remembrance and ethical loyalty—not fading sentiment but a living, operative bond, captured in Kiai As'ad's assertion that a truly connected *kiai* remains "at one with" his students, with counsel remaining embedded in their hearts⁴³. This quadrant most directly challenges Western assumptions about co-presence.

Quadrant IV (*tak asanding-tak asambung*) is spiritual alienation—connection dried up through neglect or denial—a reminder that even strong bonds remain vulnerable to erosion without nurturing.

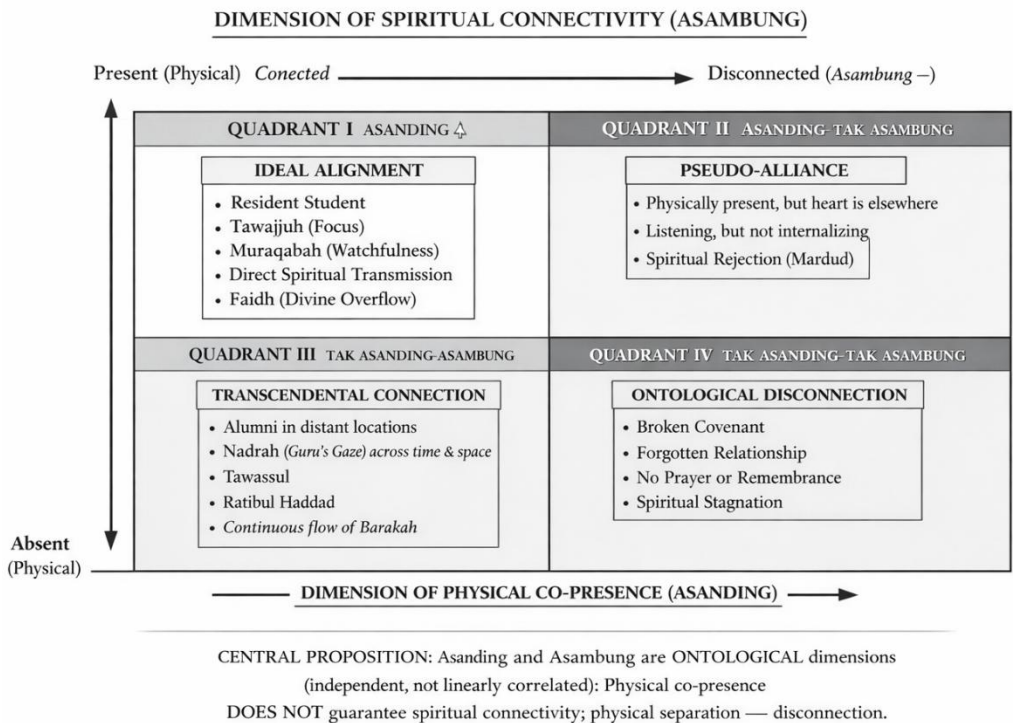
Three implications follow. First, the typology unravels what alliance theory encapsulates in a single, unidimensional concept of "presence." Second, it

⁴² B Z Achmadin et al., "Dismantling the Relationship between Kiai and Santri: A Critical Review of the Social and Cultural Dynamics of Pesantren in East Java," *Journal of Research and Thought on Islamic Education* 7, no. 2 (2024): 153–85.

⁴³ Arifin, Satria Kuda Putih: *Jejak Kiai As'ad Sang Ulama Pahlawan Nasional*; Hasan, *Kharima Kiai As'ad Di Mata Umat*.

implicitly critiques the assumption that relationship quality tracks contact frequency: depth of inner attunement, not quantity, determines quality. Third—most provocatively—the *tak asanding-asambung* mode suggests that distance, under certain conditions, can facilitate closeness difficult to achieve in continuous physical presence.

Figure 1.
The Orthogonal Model of Transcendental Relationality: A
2×2 Matrix of Asanding and Asambung



This model deconstructs the equation of relational presence with physical co-presence or synchrony.

Quadrant I (Ideal Alignment) represents synergistic convergence typical of traditional *pesantren* guidance; Quadrant II (Pseudo-Alliance) illustrates mechanistic entanglement without *amal mardud* (internal resonance); Quadrant III (Transcendental Connection) offers a theoretical basis for the efficacy of post-termination and tele-counseling relationships—subject to a qualification, developed below, regarding periodic ritual reinforcement; Quadrant IV (Ontological Disconnection) marks cessation of both bonds. *Asanding* and *asambung* are postulated as orthogonal: spiritual connection is not linearly dependent on physical proximity.

A person can occupy Quadrant II despite near-daily *pesantren* presence; conversely, a long-departed alumnus can remain in Quadrant III through prayer, collective memory, continued practice, and alumni-network participation—*opening* a possibility rarely articulated in the alliance literature: relationships that survive, even deepen, without ongoing physical interaction.

Nadrah: A Gaze That Transcends Distance

Nadrah—a spiritual gaze irreducible to visual observation or cognitive attention—names the teacher's total presence toward the *student*: with knowledge, mercy, and ongoing prayer⁴⁴. Rooted in Kiai As'ad's Sufi concept of *tawajjuh*—"the whole body, from head to toe, guided by the heart, facing with authenticity toward the

⁴⁴ Ibrahimy, As'adiyah, and Arifin, *Nadrah Masyayikh: Energi Ruhani Yang Menyalakan Militansi Cinta*.

True Essence" ⁴⁵—*nadrah* operates on three dimensions. First, it transcends physical presence: once authentically focused, a teacher's attention continues to reach, guard, and bless even after separation or death. Second, it is a mode of transmission requiring *ṣidqun ṣarīḥ*—sincere, transparent trust in an '*allāmah* (endowed with great wisdom) ⁴⁶teacher—without which the channel cannot open⁴⁷. Third, it is liberating accountability: to be truly seen is to be called to one's authentic self, not surveilled but reminded of who one can become.

Muraqabah (self-awareness under God's gaze) and *musyahadah* (awareness of His presence) provide the theological framework; aware of a teacher's *muraqabah al-hudlur* (*maintaining* mindful heart and mind in the company of Allah)⁴⁸, a student feels cared for in a paradoxically liberating sense—growth without anxious self-presentation, unlike surveillance producing mere performative obedience.

Geller and Greenberg's therapeutic presence—full, emotionally open, moment-to-moment responsiveness—remains confined to the session, subsiding when it ends⁴⁹. *Nadrah* instead points to a persistent presence that,

⁴⁵ As'ad Syamsul 'Arifin, *Risālah Thariqat*.

⁴⁶ An honorific for a teacher of exceptionally deep scholarly mastery (superlative of '*alim*'); in the tarekat context, denotes the scholarly authority required to guide a student toward *ma'rifah*.

⁴⁷ Arifin, *At-Tawazun: Psikologi Dan Konseling Berbasis Pesantren Untuk Membentuk Karakter Khaira Ummah* [*At-Tawazun: Pesantren-Based Psychology and Counselling for Developing the Character of Khaira Ummah*]; Arifin, *AT-TAWAZUN: Paradigma Integratif Komunikasi Dan Konseling Multikultural Di Pesantren* [*At-Tawazun: An Integrative Paradigm of Communication and Multicultural Counselling in Pesantren*].

⁴⁸ As'ad Syamsul 'Arifin, *Risālah Thariqat*; Arifin, *Hâdihi Ar-Risālah Lidzikrī Bai'ah Wa Silsilah Al-Qâdariyyah Wa an-Naqsyabandiyyah*.

⁴⁹ L. S. Geller, S. M., & Greenberg, *Therapeutic Presence: A Mindful Approach to Effective Therapy* (American Psychological Association, 2012).

according to this tradition, does not cease with physical encounter. For many *pesantren* alumni, deceased teachers' presence is reported as lived, psychologically effective daily experience—whether and how this self-report corresponds to observable psychosocial outcomes is the operational question taken up below.

***Barakah*: A Medium of Transformative Connection**

If *nadrah* names the mode of presence, *barakah* names what flows through it—transformative spiritual energy through authentic relational channels, defined in *At-Tawazun* as *jawami'ul khair*, a totality of goodness exceeding tangible resources⁵⁰. Where Western frameworks locate change in identifiable, individually operating mechanisms—insight, skill acquisition, gradual reinforcement—the *asambung* framework locates it in reception of something flowing from teacher to student through a validated connection, which is why physical presence matters without being absolute: reciting *tawassul* or *Ratibul Haddad* while holding the teacher in the heart is understood as active reception with genuinely transformative effect, not mere cognitive remembrance⁵¹.

Barakah differs qualitatively from attachment theory's "internalization": not an internalized image but an orientation continuing to live and develop in contexts

⁵⁰ Arifin, *At-Tawazun: Psikologi Dan Konseling Berbasis Pesantren Untuk Membentuk Karakter Khaira Ummah* [*At-Tawazun: Pesantren-Based Psychology and Counselling for Developing the Character of Khaira Ummah*].

⁵¹ Ibrahimy, As'adiyah, and Arifin, *Nadrah Masyayikh: Energi Ruhani Yang Menyalakan Militansi Cinta*.

never encountered in the original meeting⁵². Two registers of claim should be distinguished. As an *ontological* claim, *barakah* belongs to theological conviction—analogous to grace or providence—and is not offered here as empirically falsifiable; readers need not share this premise to engage the argument. As an operational claim, its reception admits observable correlates—shifts in existential resilience, reduced rumination, value reorientation, sustained behavioral fidelity to counsel even absent conscious recall of when it was given—which can be conceptualized as a form of perceived sacred support. This reframing is consistent with, and arguably strengthened by, the broader R/S outcome literature: the 2024 multi-level meta-analysis of randomized controlled trials discussed above found spiritually integrated approaches performing comparably or better than standard treatment on both psychological and spiritual outcome measures, suggesting that constructs functionally similar to *barakah*—support experienced as sacred rather than merely interpersonal—are not clinically inert even when their ontological status is bracketed⁵³. It is these operational correlates, not the ontological claim itself that this article proposes as the proper object of future empirical study.

⁵² Arifin, *AT-TAWAZUN: Paradigma Integratif Komunikasi Dan Konseling Multikultural Di Pesantren* [At-Tawazun: An Integrative Paradigm of Communication and Multicultural Counselling in Pesantren].

⁵³ K. I. Pargament, *The Psychology of Religion and Coping: Theory, Research, Practice* (Guilford Press., 1997); Pargament, *Spiritually Integrated Psychotherapy: Understanding and Addressing the Sacred*; Bouwhuis-Van Keulen et al., "The Evaluation of Religious and Spirituality-Based Therapy Compared to Standard Treatment in Mental Health Care: A Multi-Level Meta-Analysis of Randomized Controlled Trials."

Sustainable Bonding Practices

Connection persists not as a passive ontological fact but through practices—"technologies of ongoing connection." *Tawassul Batin* and *Ratibul Haddad* (compiled by Sayyid Abdullah bin Alwi Al-Haddad, 1634–1720 CE) function as acts of remembrance orienting practitioners toward the Divine and, through it, the teaching chain; as acts of connection linking reader to *sanad* (chain of transmission); and as acts of active presence renewing rather than merely recalling the teacher⁵⁴ (—resonating with, though not identical to, positive psychology's "rituals of connection." Prayer functions similarly but with an emphasis on reciprocity: when alumni pray for teachers living or deceased, they activate and renew relational channels rather than merely fulfilling obligation, consistent with Kiai As'ad's assertion that his remembering follows his students' remembering him⁵⁵.

IKSASS⁵⁶, as alumni organization, functions as institutional infrastructure for collectively practicing transcendental relationality⁵⁷. *Haul Majemuk*—commemorating the founders' passing—gathers thousands to simultaneously renew bonds with founders and each other, resembling Turner's *communitas*, in which ordinary hierarchy is transcended (Turner, 1969).

⁵⁴ Ibrahimy, As'adiyah, and Arifin, *Nadrah Masyayikh: Energi Ruhani Yang Menyalakan Militansi Cinta*.

⁵⁵ Arifin, *Satria Kuda Putih: Jejak Kiai As'ad Sang Ulama Pahlawan Nasional*.

⁵⁶ *Ikatan Santri Alumni Salafiyah Syafi'iyah* (Association of Salafiyah Syafi'iyah Alumni Students), the alumni organization of Pesantren Sukorejo that functions as communal infrastructure sustaining *asambung* bonds after graduation.

⁵⁷ Arifin, *IKSASS Jatidiri Dan Pengembangan Diri Santri Alumni Salafiyah Syafi'iyah Sukorejo Situbondo [IKSASS Identity and Self-Development of Salafiyah Syafi'iyah Sukorejo Situbondo Alumni Students]*.

Kiai Azaim Ibrahimy described IKSASS as a "spiritual body" whose organs mutually support one another⁵⁸—an image suggesting individual bonds are inseparable from the broader network that mutually strengthens them, and, as elaborated below, keeps asymmetric individual bonds accountable.

Three Propositions: A Transcendental Relational Model

Proposition One—the Duality of Presence. Relational presence has two ontologically distinct, independently operating dimensions: *asanding* and *asambung*. Conventional alliance models, by equating presence with co-presence, foreclose this possibility before the question is asked. Methodologically, alliance research relying on in-session behavioral observation and self-report may capture only one dimension: relationships appearing behaviorally "good" may be *asanding-tak asambung*; ordinary-looking relationships may harbor deeper connection.

Proposition Two—Relationship as a Transcendental Event. The mentor-mentee relationship cannot be adequately understood as a functional bond aimed solely at facilitating intrapsychic change; it can be a transcendental event in which something beyond both parties—blessing, mercy, guidance—flows through the connection and becomes a medium of transformation, not merely a means to it. The mentor's moral-spiritual character is thus constitutive of what is possible, echoing

⁵⁸ Ibrahimy, As'adiyah, and Arifin, *Nadrah Masyayikh: Energi Ruhani Yang Menyalakan Militansi Cinta*.

Kiai As'ad's principle that deeds performed without proper inner qualities are *mardud* ⁵⁹—applied to counseling, interventions technically sound but delivered without integrity may not achieve the most profound effect. As clarified above, this does not displace client agency: cognitive reframing, behavioral change, and client self-insight remain indispensable, co-constitutive elements, with mentor integrity functioning as the relational condition under which such processes are received as meaningful rather than merely complied with.

Proposition Three—Ontological Sustainability of the Relationship. The relationship need not end when physical co-presence ends; it can continue ontologically through prayer, remembrance, value fidelity, and community participation—not a residual effect of prior internalization, but a distinct, equally real mode of relational existence. Termination is thus a transition between modes of relational existence, not an ending. Clients who continue to feel a therapist's presence and internally "consult" with them long after termination may not be failing separation; they may be demonstrating a relational possibility existing theory has not yet learned to name. This reframing gains further support from the 2025 systematic review of psychotherapy termination noted above, which found that termination research has historically treated the ending of contact and the ending of the relationship as functionally synonymous, and called for future work to distinguish more carefully between the

⁵⁹ As'ad Syamsul 'Arifin, *Risālah Al-Tauḥīd*; Samsul Arifin, *TAUHID COUNSELING : Syarah Integratif Atas Karya Kiai As'ad Tentang Jiwa, Makna, Dan Ketuhanan* (Yogyakarta: Global Press, 2026).

two⁶⁰—precisely the distinction Proposition Three proposes to formalize.

The four-quadrant typology, as originally formulated, maps relatively stable states rather than micro-dynamics of rupture and repair. This article proposes reading temporary movement from Quadrant I toward Quadrant II after misattunement or disagreement as the *pesantren* tradition's functional counterpart to rupture-repair: *tawassul* (act of drawing closer to God), sincere apology, and renewed *niat* (intention) function as repair mechanisms that restore Quadrant I alignment. This reframing has a close, if independently derived, parallel in the contemporary rupture-repair literature, where rupture is understood not as a failure state to be avoided but as a routine, even clinically useful, disruption whose resolution—rather than its absence—predicts good outcome⁶¹. Framing ruptures as reversible quadrant-transitions rather than evidence of Quadrant II fraudulence avoids pathologizing ordinary relational friction and creates room for negotiation, disagreement, and boundary-setting within the bond.

Ethical Boundaries in Asymmetric Relational Structures

The *kiai-santri* dynamic presupposes *taslim* (deference), *sami'na wa atha'na* (hierarchical trust), and *sanad* (sacred authority). Any translation of this dynamic

⁶⁰ Rabinowitz, Yim, and Muran, "Termination of Psychotherapy: A Systematic Review."

⁶¹ C F Eubanks, L W Samstag, and J C Muran, *Rupture and Repair in Psychotherapy: A Critical Process for Change* (American Psychological Association, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1037/0000306-000>.

into contemporary counseling must reckon with the risks of such asymmetry. In the tradition's normative self-understanding, *taslim* is trust voluntarily extended to a teacher whose integrity has been tested over time within an accountable community—not unconditional submission owed automatically to the role. This self-understanding should not, however, be taken uncritically at face value. A 2024 critical review of *kiai-santri* relations in East Java *pesantren*, drawing on both historical and contemporary case material, found that the relationship—while genuinely built on shared religious and cultural values—also exhibits patron–client features, with *santri* sometimes occupying a subordinate structural position that they negotiate and resist rather than accept, even while continuing to perform outward deference⁶². This external, critical perspective does not contradict the tradition's own internal safeguards; it reinforces the case for making those safeguards explicit and structurally binding rather than relying solely on the goodwill of individual mentors, since the same hierarchical structure that enables *taslim* can also enable its abuse where communal accountability is weak.

Three safeguards are proposed for any clinical adaptation of *nadrah*-informed relational depth: (1) explicit informed consent regarding the spiritual and relational character of the work, preceding its use, so clients retain standing to decline or renegotiate; (2) a mechanism of communal accountability, analogous to IKSASS and fellow *masyayikh* overseeing a *kiai*'s conduct, so no mentor's authority goes unwitnessed; and (3) the

⁶² Achmadin et al., “Dismantling the Relationship between Kiai and Santri: A Critical Review of the Social and Cultural Dynamics of Pesantren in East Java.”

client's non-negotiable right to end or revisit the relationship at any time without spiritual or relational sanction. Client autonomy and non-maleficence are boundary conditions that hold even within this model's most relationally deep applications, not considerations to be weighed against it.

Differentiating Transcendental Connection from Pathological Dependency

Quadrant III's emancipatory description risks obscuring a genuine clinical concern: felt, persistent post-relational connection can index either healthy transcendental connection or unresolved transference, codependency, spiritual bypass, or failed termination/individuation. Five provisional markers, offered as a heuristic rather than a validated instrument, may help differentiate them. Growth-oriented connection tends to (1) support rather than substitute for the client's autonomous functioning; (2) remain reversible without precipitating an identity or meaning crisis; (3) manifest chiefly as internalized value and orientation rather than anxious preoccupation with the absent figure; (4) strengthen rather than crowd out other relationships, paralleling how IKSASS expands rather than narrows an alumnus's network; and (5) carry affect more often gratitude and equanimity than anxiety, guilt, or compulsive need.

Rethinking Distance Therapy

The COVID-19 pandemic forced experimentation in distance therapy with surprisingly positive results: alliances formed and were maintained through screens,

with outcomes comparable to face-to-face therapy in many contexts⁶³. The *asambung* tradition suggests practitioner anxiety about what a screen cannot capture may rest on a flawed premise: one can be physically present but spiritually absent (Quadrant II), or physically absent but spiritually present (Quadrant III). The more useful question is not whether video therapy equals face-to-face—which still treats physical presence as the standard—but what conditions allow spiritual connection across different mediums.

This orthogonality claim requires qualification, since the *pesantren* tradition itself relies on periodic physical gathering—*Haul Majemuk*, communal recitation, proximity to founders' sites—even while affirming that *asambung* can persist without *asanding*. This is not a hidden admission of dependence on co-presence; it is better read as evidence that periodic physical and ritual gatherings function as compensatory, reinforcing technologies renewing a bond that can otherwise persist at lower, non-zero intensity. Prolonged absence of both *asanding* and ritual renewal risks drift toward Quadrant IV—not because *asambung* structurally requires *asanding*, but because affective memory benefits from periodic reinforcement. By analogy, distance therapy may similarly benefit from occasional synchronous or ritualized touchpoints; the task is not to replicate physical co-presence as closely as possible, but to develop

⁶³ D. K Norcross, J. C., VandenBos, G. R., & Freedheim, *The COVID-19 Pandemic and Mental Health: Impacts and Interventions*. (American Psychological Association., 2020); C. Simpson, S. G., Richardson, L., Pietrabissa, G., Castelnovo, G., & Reid, "Videotherapy and Therapeutic Alliance in the Age of COVID-19," *Clinical Psychology & Psychotherapy* 28, no. 2 (2021): 409–21, <https://doi.org/10.1002/cpp.2521>; Arifin and Zaini, "Decision of Implementing Uzlah and Gerbat Techniques in Islamic Boarding School as Preparedness Response for Covid-19 Pandemic."

practices that nurture connection across modes of presence.

Spirituality as Structure, Not Just Content

Spiritually integrated psychotherapy predominantly treats spirituality as content clients bring to be integrated into case formulation. The *asambung* tradition suggests a more radical possibility: spirituality as structure, characterizing the relationship itself regardless of whether therapy's explicit content is religious or secular. On this site, something beyond both individuals may be encountered. Practically, practitioners might ask not only about clients' beliefs but whether the therapeutic bond itself is experienced as spiritually significant—without requiring the therapist to hold particular faith commitments or make spirituality an explicit theme.

Therapist Formation beyond Technical Competence

If the therapeutic relationship is a mode of being developed through long-term formation, not simply a trainable skill, therapist education must address what might be called the formation of the therapist as a person. Kiai As'ad stipulated that becoming a *murshid* requires fulfilling inner requirements developed only through serious, lengthy spiritual practice, alongside mastery of exoteric knowledge⁶⁴—formulated in *At-Tawazun* as the balance of *shalahiyyah* and *shalih*, with integrity functioning alongside, not substituting for, client agency

⁶⁴ As'ad Syamsul 'Arifin, *Risālah Thariqat*.

and technical skill⁶⁵. This poses a real challenge for contemporary psychology education's emphasis on measurable, certifiable competencies. Mainstream counseling psychology has begun to address a structurally similar gap: a widely cited 2022 formulation of spiritual and religious competencies in professional psychology explicitly argues that attentiveness to a client's spiritual and religious life is a core competency comparable to other multicultural competencies, not an optional specialization, and that most practitioners currently receive little to no formal training in it.⁶⁶ The *asambung* tradition sharpens this claim further: it is not only the client's spirituality that requires competence, but the practitioner's own formation as a person of integrity, since the tradition holds that a technically sound intervention delivered without such integrity may not achieve its full transformative effect. A deeper formative pedagogy may require ongoing reflective practice, mentorship from senior practitioners, engagement with a value-forming community, and cultivation of personal disciplines not easily reduced to curricular modules—especially pressing in the Indonesian context, where *pesantren* traditions of spiritual formation have operated for centuries.

Community as a Container for Sustainable Bonds

Bonds in this tradition do not depend on individual effort alone; they are maintained within a community,

⁶⁵ Arifin, *At-Tawazun: Psikologi Dan Konseling Berbasis Pesantren Untuk Membentuk Karakter Khaira Ummah* [At-Tawazun: Pesantren-Based Psychology and Counseling for Developing the Character of Khaira Ummah].

⁶⁶ C Vieten and D Lukoff, "Spiritual and Religious Competencies in Psychology," *American Psychologist* 77, no. 1 (2022): 26–38, <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000821>.

giving them continuity individual effort cannot sustain. IKSASS provides infrastructure within which bonds are nurtured, celebrated, and transmitted across generations⁶⁷. This raises a question for contemporary practice: might therapy be usually reimagined beyond the dyad as the sole unit of analysis—periodic alumni groups for former clients, broader therapeutic communities, communal rituals that create rhythms for maintaining connection over time? Such possibilities remain largely unexplored in a literature treating therapy as a bounded episode, and the 2025 termination review cited above explicitly identifies the absence of community-level or post-termination relational models as a gap in the field⁶⁸. The *asambung* tradition invites imagining termination not as an ending but as transition to a different, still accountable, mode of participation.

Table 1
Paradigmatic Comparison between Conventional Alliance and Transcendental Relationality (Asambung)

Dimension		Conventional Therapeutic Alliance	Transcendental Relationality Model
Ontological Basis		Individualistic-instrumental: relationship as tool for intrapsychic change	Interconnected-ontological: relationship as potential locus of transformation
Nature of Presence		Synchronous co-presence, reliant on physical/sensory feedback	Orthogonal presence: <i>asambung</i> independent of physical/temporal distance

⁶⁷ Arifin, “Dinamika Perubahan Relasi Kiai Santri Pada ‘Ngaji Online’ Di Masa Pagebluk COVID-19.”

⁶⁸ Rabinowitz, Yim, and Muran, “Termination of Psychotherapy: A Systematic Review.”

Dimension	Conventional Therapeutic Alliance	Transcendental Relationality Model
Remote Therapy	Simulative approximation of face- to-face interaction	Substantive, medium secondary to bond, supported by periodic ritual renewal
Role of Spirituality	Content-based: client's belief system to be respected	Structural-constitutive: potential underlying fabric of the encounter
Rupture and Repair	Rupture as a process risk to be resolved within-session	Rupture as reversible quadrant-transition, repaired through <i>tawassul</i> , apology, and renewed <i>niat</i>
Therapist Formation	Competency-based: standardized skills and certification	Character-and-competency or <i>adab: shalahiyyah-shalih</i> dyad, not a substitute for client agency
Termination Model	Episodic-separative endpoint; successful individuation	Continuous-communal transition, with explicit client- autonomy safeguards
Relational Unit	Dyadic: therapist- client pair as isolated unit	Communal/ecological, with communal accountability as ethical safeguard

D. Conclusion

The therapeutic alliance has served counseling psychology well: it provides a common language, a robust evidence base, and clinical focus. But its limits show where relationality resists its categories—not because such forms are less real, but more complex. The *asambung* tradition offers one such form: a relationship potentially constitutive rather than merely instrumental, potentially enduring rather than merely temporal, and, within its own theological register, transcendental. Kiai As'ad's *Risalah al-Tauhid* and *Risalah Thariqat* offer not merely guidelines for students but an ontology of relation pressing on foundational assumptions in contemporary psychotherapy.

This article does not claim that *asambung*—with its specific vocabulary of *nadrah*, *barakah*, and *sanad*—is directly transferable to secular or non-Islamic clinical settings. Two levels of claim remain distinct: a portable meta-theoretical proposition, that relational presence and physical co-presence are orthogonal and that termination need not entail cessation, offered as generalizable across spiritual and secular idioms; and the context-bound theological architecture through which it is articulated here, which should not be assumed to travel intact into other traditions. The decolonizing contribution lies in the first register—demonstrating that a non-WEIRD relational ontology can destabilize a taken-for-granted alliance-theory assumption, in keeping with the redirected, non-oppositional flow of exchange that recent decolonial scholarship in psychology itself now calls for—not in asserting that Sukorejo's theological apparatus is itself a universal clinical technology. Relatedly, *barakah* and constitutive mentor integrity are not offered as substitutes for client agency, differentiation from pathological dependency, or the ethical safeguards proper to any asymmetric helping relationship, including the safeguards that a critical, externally grounded reading of *kiai-santri* power dynamics makes newly visible; these are integral to the model, not external constraints upon it.

The proposal is neither wholesale adoption of this tradition—which would produce shallow assimilation frustrating both traditions—nor abandonment of insights built over a century of research and practice, but a dialogue taking their different relational ontologies without assimilating one to the other. A client who continues to feel a therapist's presence long after termination, relying on that relationship as a living resource, may not be failing to

terminate; they may be revealing something about relation that existing theory has not yet learned to name. Future research could develop and validate instruments for the operational correlates proposed here (existential resilience, value reorientation), explore these constructs' resonance across Indonesian and other non-Western contexts, empirically test the five markers proposed for differentiating healthy transcendental connection from pathological dependency, and examine interventions fostering ethically bounded, ongoing post-termination bonds—building on the explicit call in the recent termination literature for models that treat the end of contact and the end of relationship as conceptually distinct. Dialogue with other non-Western relational traditions—Ubuntu, Japanese *amae*, the guru-student relationship in Hindu and Buddhist traditions—would further enrich this inquiry: not as exotica attached to a finished edifice, but as interlocutors capable of reshaping the questions the field asks.

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