

Contemporary Changes in Islamic Higher Education in Indonesia: Dynamic Encounter between Modernisation and Tradition

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Abstract

The primary mandate of Islamic higher education in Indonesia, upon its establishment, was to preserve Islamic sciences and counter secularism. However, the transformation of IAIN into UIN in 2000 introduced a curriculum that integrated modern sciences, often categorized as secular due to their focus on worldly and nonreligious matters. This study explores how this shift occurred and its implications for Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia. Using historical analysis of institutional legacies, documentary reviews, and the biographies of reformist thinkers, the findings reveal that this transformation was a gradual evolutionary process influenced by alumni educated in Western contexts. The shift in educational orientation from solely religious to broader scientific disciplines is not inherently secularizing but reflects an effort to reconcile modern sciences within an Islamic framework. Challenges in this process include the failure to produce ‘ulamā’, which traditionalist responses addressed by establishing Ma’had ‘Alī, institutions dedicated to Islamic sciences. Consequently, Islamic higher education in Indonesia today manifests in two forms: institutions that integrate modern sciences within an Islamic worldview and those that exclusively preserve traditional Islamic knowledge.

Keywords: Islamic Colleges; Modern University; The West; Islamic Renewal Thought; Ma’had ‘Alī

Introduction

Islamic higher education model in Indonesia known as the State Islamic university UIN (Universitas Islam Negeri), has been in existence for approximately two decades. As of now, Indonesia has 29 UINs out of a total of 58 Islamic higher education institutions.¹ The significant aspect of this model lies in the alteration of educational orientation. Initially, Islamic educational institutions were mainly centered on religious studies aimed at the mastery of religious knowledge (tafaqquh fī al-dīn). However, with the development of UINs, there has been a significant transformation towards a broader inclusion of modern and non-religious sciences. This shift was initiated when these institutions expanded their curriculum to include faculties specializing in non-religious sciences, such as psychology, pharmacy, and medicine.² This was seen by some scholars as an unusual innovation in Islamic education, imitating public universities.

The transformation is presently expected to function as public higher education centres, prioritizing the pursuit of knowledge without regard to religious or cultural distinctions. It shifted from the scope of religious dogmas and doctrines, embracing a more open and secular method to scientific inquiry.³ Woodward also reported a significant challenge faced by Islamic studies as it entered the 21st century. This challenge was due to globalization and the transnational development of academic, religious, and ideological aspects.⁴

From a pragmatic perspective, the transformation from IAIN to UIN signifies a significant change in the core purpose and rationale behind its establishment. Initially, these institutions were founded with the main aim of opposing secularism and providing an alternative educational platform for Muslims in

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¹ Moh. Khoeron, “Lagi, Lima IAIN Bertransformasi Menjadi Universitas Islam Negeri,” *Kemenag RI*, accessed 7 December 2023, 2022, <https://kemenag.go.id/nasional/lagi-lima-iaain-bertransformasi-menjadi-universitas-islam-negeri-g8x8ax>.

² Ronald Alan Lukens-Bull, *Islamic Higher Education in Indonesia: Continuity and Conflict* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

³ Fu’ad Jabali, “An Indonesian Islamic University: How Is It Possible?” *Studia Islamika* 11, no. 3 (2004).

⁴ Mark Woodward, “Challenges and Opportunities for Twenty-First Century Indonesia Department of Religious Studies Center for the Study of Religion and Conflict,” *Journal of Indonesian Islam* 3, no. 1, (2009):1–34; Imran and Ainal Mardhiah, “Revitalizing Islamic Education: Professionalism of State Islamic Religious College Lecturers in Welcoming the Industrial Era 4.0,” *Jurnal Ilmiah Peuradeun* 11 no. 3 (2023): 811-830.

contrast to the prevailing secular higher education system. According to Kraince,⁵ UIN and its various subvariants were designed to serve as Islamic alternatives to the secular institutions of higher education supported by the Ministry of Education.

This study offers a unique perspective on the transformation of Islamic higher education, providing answers to the question left unanswered in previous investigations.⁶ It presents an alternative perspective on the evolution of Islamic colleges into comprehensive universities. The study explores the growing significance of the role of IAIN and pesantren, which are recognized as significant hubs for the development of Islamic civilization in Indonesia.

The main questions are associated with the modernization of Islamic higher education-while striving to preserve Islamic science. The first question evaluates how the process of change occurs and the impact on its mandate. While the second question determines how Indonesian Muslims preserve Islamic science.

Methods

This study employs a qualitative approach combining historical analysis, documentary review, and biographical analysis to investigate institutional legacies. Historical analysis examines the evolution of structures and policies, identifying patterns and shifts.⁷ Documentary review analyzes archival records and reports to uncover mechanisms shaping institutions and verify narratives.⁸ Biographical analysis explores personal experiences of key actors to highlight the interplay between agency and historical events.⁹ By triangulating these methods, the study ensures a comprehensive and reliable understanding of institutional legacies and their dynamics.

The Rise of Islamic Colleges

Formal Islamic higher education in Indonesia was established in 1960, driven by a strong commitment to counter the growing influence of secularism.¹⁰ The journey started with the establishment of Islamic high school (STI, Sekolah Tinggi Islam), in Jakarta on July 8, 1945. This initiative was headed by pioneering figures in the struggle of Indonesia for independence, and its name was changed to the Indonesian Islamic University.¹¹ Subsequently, a significant agreement was reached between the Government of Indonesia and the Indonesian Islamic University (UII). This agreement determined that the faculty of Islamic religion would be managed by the government administration, specifically under the Ministry of Religion of the Republic of Indonesia. This faculty was granted state ownership status and officially designated as PTKIN.

The government identified significant weaknesses in human resources within the newly formed PTKIN at that time. Traditional educational institutions like pesantren, which had historically focused on religious studies during the colonial era, were ill-equipped to supply personnel for the Ministry of Religion offices or effectively manage higher education in line with the governance reforms of that period.¹² Therefore, to improve the human resources, the government established the Da'wah Academy and Religious Knowledge (ADIA, Akademi Da'wah dan Ilmu Agama) in Jakarta in 1957. The main aim of this institution was to address the growing demand for personnel with the necessary skills and knowledge to support the development of higher education in the field of religion. ADIA was tasked

⁵ Richard G. Kraince, "Islamic Higher Education and Social Cohesion in Indonesia," *Prospects* 37, no. 3 (2007): 345–56.

⁶ Azyumardi Azra, *Pendidikan Islam: Tradisi dan Modernisasi Menuju Milenium Baru* (Logos Wacana Ilmu, 2015); Azyumardi Azra, "Genealogy of Indonesian Islamic Education: Roles in the Modernization of Muslim Society," *Heritage of Nusantara: International Journal of Religious Literature and Heritage* 4, no. 1, (2002): 85–114; H. M. Amin Abdullah, "Reorientasi Pendidikan Agama pada Era Multikultural dan Multireligius," *Jurnal Pendidikan Islam FIAI Jurusan Tarbiyah* 6, no. 9, (2003); H. M. Amin Abdullah, "Islamic Studies in Higher Education in Indonesia: Challenges, Impact and Prospects for the World Community," *Al-Jami'ah* 55, no. 2 (2017): 391–426; Kraince, "Islamic Higher Education and Social Cohesion in Indonesia,"; Lukens-Bull, *Islamic Higher Education in Indonesia: Continuity and Conflict*.

⁷ John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History: Aims, Methods and New Directions in the Study of History*, 7th ed. (Routledge, 2021).

⁸ Glenn A. Bowen, "Document Analysis as a Qualitative Research Method," *Qualitative Research Journal* 9, no. 2 (2009): 27–40.

⁹ Tosh, *The Pursuit of History: Aims, Methods and New Directions in the Study of History*.

¹⁰ Abror Darul, "Politik Penguatan Institusi Pendidikan Tinggi Indonesia," *Conciencia* 18, no. 2, (2018): 28–42; Ali Munhanif, "Prof. Dr. A. Mukti Ali: Modernisasi Politik-Keagamaan Orde Baru," in *Menteri-Menteri Agama Republik Indonesia (Biografi Sosial Politik)*, 2nd ed. Azyumardi Azra and Saiful Umam (Pusat Lecture Khasanah Keagamaan, INIS, PPIM UIN Jakarta, 2018).

¹¹ Ahmad Mansur Suryanegara, *Api Sejarah: Mahakarya Perjuangan Ulama dan Santri dalam Menegakkan Negara Kesatuan Republik Indonesia*, Jilid 2, revisi, (Surya Dinasti, 2016).

¹² Mansur Suryanegara, *Api Sejarah: Mahakarya Perjuangan Ulama dan Santri dalam Menegakkan Negara Kesatuan Republik Indonesia*.

with educating and training civil servants to achieve academic diplomas, with the aim of becoming secondary school religious education teachers. Meanwhile, PTKIN in Yogyakarta focused on providing higher education religious sciences to undergraduates. Initially, its orientation, curriculum and institutional framework were influenced by Al-Azhar University in Cairo. PTKIN shared a similar orientation with this University,¹³ namely, a scientific method based on Islamic religious traditions and viewed western science as secular and unacceptable.

The main objective behind the establishment of IAIN was to offer quality education and serve as a center for the advancement and in-depth exploration of Islamic knowledge. Therefore, IAIN aimed to improve and advance the training of experts in Islamic religious studies to meet the requirements of both the government and society. This point of view was clearly focused on producing professionals, specifically for white-collar jobs, in the Ministry of Religious Affairs.¹⁴ In subsequent developments, it became increasingly evident that this focus was proven inadequate. Employment opportunities within the Ministry of Religious Affairs were also quite limited, while IAIN continued to annually produce a considerable number of graduates.¹⁵

Learning in the West

In response to the challenges posed by globalization and modernization, PTKIN realized the need to improve the quality of its human resources. To accomplish this, the institution initiated a program to train lecturers abroad, with a particular focus on Europe and America. This effort aimed to foster relationships and strengthen religious knowledge from Al-Azhar University in the Middle East, as well as realized the importance of studying modern science. During this period, the leaders of the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Islamic higher education contemplated looking to the West as they adapted to the evolving global phenomenon and tried to remain competitive.

H.M. Rasjidi, the first Minister of Religion, held a significant influence on Islamic education with an academic prowess that comprised diverse experiences. Despite studying religion in various institutions such as Muhammadiyah and PERSIS (Persatuan Islam) during his childhood, and later attending Cairo University in Egypt, these educational paths led Rasjidi to the West. The minister pursued further studies in Europe, specifically Sorbonne, in France, becoming the first Indonesian to receive a Doctorate from a university in Paris. In 1958, Rasjidi took up a teaching position at McGill University in Montreal, Canada.¹⁶ The academic prowess of H.M. Rasjidi is a typical example of enthusiasm and a progressive learning method for Muslims, showing that pursuing education in the Western world was not considered haram or prohibited and sinful.

The influence of western education continued to progress under the leadership of Mukti Ali, also the former Indonesian Minister of Religious Affairs, served in the 1970s. Mukti Ali introduced an empirical method to reinterpret Islamic thought within the context of Indonesian modernity. His significant contribution included the introduction of the science of comparative religion at IAIN in 1960. Mukti Ali gained recognition as the initiator of dialogue between different groups, advocating tolerance, and fostering multiculturalism.¹⁷ As a lecturer at the IAIN Yogyakarta, his teachings had a significant impact on student activists, specifically those who were members of the study circle. Several students in Yogyakarta, such as Dawam Raharjo, Ahmad Wahib, Johan Effendi, and Syu'bah Asa, became the pioneers of Islamic neo-modernism movement, together with Nurcholish Madjid and Abdurrahman Wahid in Jakarta.¹⁸

¹³ Hiroko Kinoshita, *Islamic Higher Education in Contemporary Indonesia: Through the Islamic Intellectuals of Al-Azharite Alumni*, G-COE Series 81, (Kyoto University, 2009).

¹⁴ Ahmad Suradi, "Analisis Format Ideal Transformasi Institut Menuju Universitas di PTKIN," *Jurnal Pendidikan Agama Islam Al-Thariqah* 3, no. 1 (2018): 1–14.

¹⁵ Ahmad Malik Fadjar, "Pengembangan Pendidikan Islam yang Menjanjikan Masa Depan," in *Quo Vadis Pendidikan Islam: Pembacaan Realitas Pendidikan Islam, Sosial dan Keagamaan*, ed. Mudjia Rahardjo (UIN Malang Press, 2006), 360.

¹⁶ Azyumardi Azra, "H.M. Rasyidi, B.A. Pembentukan Kementerian Agama dalam Revolusi," in *Menteri-Menteri Agama Republik Indonesia (Biografi Sosial Politik)*, 2nd ed. Azyumardi Azra dan Saiful Umam (Pusat Lektur dan Khasanah Keagamaan, INIS, PPIM UIN Jakarta, 1998), 3–29.

¹⁷ Faisal Ismail, "Paving the Way for Interreligious Dialogue, Tolerance, and Harmony: Following Mukti Ali's Path," *Al-Jami'ah: Journal of Islamic Studies* 50, no. 1 (2012): 147–78.

¹⁸ Greg Barton, "Neo-Modernism: A Vital Synthesis of Traditional and Modernist Islamic Thought in Indonesia," *Studia Islamika* 2, no. 3 (1995); Greg Barton, "Indonesia's Nurcholish Madjid and Abdurrahman Wahid as Intellectual 'ulamā': The Meeting of Islamic Traditionalism and Modernism in Neo-Modernist Thought," *Studia Islamika* 4, no. 1 (1997); Greg Barton, *Gagasan Islam Liberal di Indonesia: Pemikiran Neo-Modernisme Nurcholish Madjid, Djohan Effendi, Ahmad Wahib, dan Abdurrahman Wahid*, edited by Nanang Tahqiq and Edy A. Effendi,

When the term as Minister of Religion from 1971 to 1978, Mukti Ali took substantial steps to improve the academic quality of IAIN by facilitating education of young Muslim intellectuals in the Western world. The Department of Religion collaborated with institutions such as McGill University, in Canada, where H.M. Rasjidi had taught¹⁹ and where Mukti Ali had studied.²⁰ The decision to send IAIN lecturers to McGill University was pivotal in modernizing Islamic colleges and transforming them into centers of academic excellence.²¹ McVey stated that the Ministry of Religion under the leadership of Mukti Ali tried to bridge the gap between the santri and the state by providing Islam with a spokesperson who could effectively communicate with the present government and share a common perception.²²

Ten years later, in 1968, Harun Nasution, one of the IAIN lecturers sent to McGill University, obtained his Ph.D. Like H.M Rasjidi and Mukti Ali, Harun Nasution also had a strong religious educational background. His educational journey started at *Moderne Islamietische Kweekschool (MIK)*, modern Islamic secondary school in Bukit Tinggi, West Sumatra, and then continued at *The Muhammadiyah institute* in Solo, Central Java. Subsequently, Harun Nasution continued at *Al-Azhar* and *The American University* in Cairo, Egypt, before completing his Islamic studies at McGill University. After successfully acquiring a Ph. D, he returned to Indonesia and joined IAIN Syarif Hidayatullah in Jakarta, as a lecturer. Harun Nasution proposed a reformation of the curriculum structure and introduced a new course on the history of modernism in the Muslim world.²³

The ideas of Harun Nasution held substantial influence and left a lasting impact on the intellectual thought patterns in religious colleges, specifically at IAIN Syarif Hidayatullah. Harun Nasution had the opportunity to share the idea of modernism in Jakarta, likewise Mukti Ali at IAIN Sunan Kalijaga Jogjakarta. Therefore, from the 1970s to 1980s, both Jakarta and Jogjakarta witnessed the impact of reformers within their respective IAIN institutions (before their appointment as minister of religion). Both Mukti Ali and Harun Nasution, were alumni of Western education, who played significant roles as reformers within their IAIN institutions.

Since the 1970s, there has been a significant increase in the number of Islamic higher education scholars pursuing advanced studies in the west, mainly due to scholarship programs. When Munawir Syadzali was Minister of Religion, he organized a Lecturer Breeding Program for IAIN prospective lecturers throughout Indonesia. The program aimed to send young IAIN lecturers to study in Western countries, such as Canada, United States, Australia, England, Germany, Turkey, etc. Upon their return from Western university, these scholars played a significant role in developing the academic cultures and traditions within Islamic higher education campuses. These individuals introduced fresh perspectives and innovative ideas that led to an open method to education, inspiring fellow scholars. The concept of renewal and open thought constructs is a new and influential discourse in Islamic higher education, which inspired opinions, statements, works, and anthropological sensitivities of scholars throughout Indonesia.²⁴

Islamic Renewal Thought and Neo-Modernism on Campuses

Sending IAIN alumni to the West fostered academic groups characterized by open-mindedness, rationality, and acceptance of modernism and globalization. Aligned with the neo-modernist Islamic reform movement of the 1970s, particularly in Jakarta and Jogjakarta, these groups flourished. At IAIN Jogjakarta, Mukti Ali encouraged Islamic student activists to openly discuss public issues at his home.²⁵ Meanwhile, Harun Nasution served as rector of IAIN Jakarta, where Nurcholish Madjid, a key neo-modernist figure, had also studied.

Ist ed. (Paramadina, Pustaka Antara, Yayasan Adikarya IKAPI, The Ford Foundation, 1999); Munhanif, "Prof. Dr. A. Mukti Ali: Modernisasi Politik-Keagamaan Orde Baru.

¹⁹ Azra, "H M. Rasyidi, B A. Pembentukan Kementerian Agama dalam Revolusi.

²⁰ Munhanif, "Prof. Dr. A. Mukti Ali: Modernisasi Politik-Keagamaan Orde Baru.

²¹ Azra, *Pendidikan Islam: Tradisi dan Modernisasi Menuju Milenium Baru*.

²² Ruth McVey, "Nation versus State in Indonesia," in *Autonomy and Disintegration in Indonesia*, (Routledge, 2014), 11–27.

²³ Saiful Muzani, "Mu'tazilah Theology and the Modernization of the Indonesian Muslim Community: Intellectual Portrait of Harun Nasution," *Studia Islamika* (1994).

²⁴ Wildani Hefni, "Intelektual Perguruan Tinggi," *Akademika* 23, no. 1 (2018).

²⁵ Ahmad Wahib, *Pergolakan Pemikiran Islam: Catatan Harian Ahmad Wahib*, digital ed. Djohan Effendi dan Ismed Natsir (Democracy Project, Yayasan Abad Demokrasi, 2012).

Greg Barton identified four prominent figures of the Neo-Modernist movement, namely Nurcholish Madjid also known as Cak Nur, a student of IAIN Jakarta who later pursued advanced studies at Chicago University. Djohan Effendi and Ahmad Wahib, students of IAIN and UGM in Jogjakarta, were also recognized for their contributions to the Neo-Modernist discourse. Abdurrahman Wahid, also known as Gus Dur, complemented this four-membered group with his significant role in promoting a progressive interpretation of Islam.²⁶ Eliraz expanded on the list by Barton by introducing additional names such as Dawam Raharjo, Harun Nasution, and Munawir Syadzali, as well as other Islamic neo-modernist figures in Indonesia.²⁷

The strategic influence of Cak Nur and Gus Dur in spreading neo-modernist ideas was strengthened by their roles as organizational figures with many followers.²⁸ Specifically, these two figures were acknowledged as intellectual ‘ulamā’, highlighting their significance as scholarly leaders within the Neo-Modernist movement. Nurcholish Madjid’s ideas about the renewal of Islamic thought, among others, were presented in his book *The True Face of Islam*. This book outlined several ideas about the opportunities and challenges confronting Indonesian Muslims in the context of modernism, including the potential contributions of Islam to modernity.²⁹

Greg Barton identified five key characteristics of Islamic Neo-Modernist thought in Indonesia: (1) a positive attitude toward progress and development, (2) viewing Western modernity as an opportunity rather than a threat, positioning Islam as a contributor to Western civilization, (3) advocating for a specific form of secularism in governance, (4) promoting Islam as open, tolerant, and inclusive, encouraging social and religious pluralism, and (5) urging Muslims to engage in *ijtihad*, offering rational, context-based interpretations.³⁰

The spread of Islamic renewal ideas coincided with the rise of Western-educated alumni, accelerating their adoption across campuses. IAIN played a pivotal role in developing and disseminating these ideas, with the works of influential scholars like Nurcholish Madjid and Abdurrahman Wahid becoming essential reading and discussion materials at IAIN campuses across Indonesia. These ideas significantly influenced Islamic education, particularly in higher institutions.

Experiencing Modern University

Islamic reform and neo-modernism on campus drive the transformation of Islamic higher education institutions. Modernist figures like A. Malik Fajar, Azyumardi Azra, and Amin Abdullah played key roles in this transformation. These scholars are among the many Western-educated alumni, who have significantly contributed to the development of Islamic neo-modernism in Indonesia. The last three names are important because these individuals were instrumental in the transition from IAIN to UIN, marking a critical shift in educational paradigm.

Ahmad Malik Fajar held ministerial positions in the early Reformation Era, serving as the Minister of Religious Affairs from 1998 to 1999 and later as the Minister of National Education from 2001 to 2004.³¹ The initial transformation of IAIN to UIN occurred during his tenure in the Ministry of National Education. However, Ahmad Malik Fajar had previously served as the Minister of Religious Affairs. His academic background contributed to the progressive view of Ahmad Malik Fajar concerning Islamic education. It was stated that Islamic education must be humanist, liberating, integralist, multicultural, and futuristic.³² The thoughts of Ahmad Malik Fajar are comprehensively published in the book “*Holistika Pemikiran Pendidikan*”, which contains personal ideas and visions about Indonesian

²⁶ Barton, “Neo-Modernism: A Vital Synthesis of Traditional and Modernist Islamic Thought in Indonesia.”

²⁷ Giora Eliraz, “Distinctive Contemporary Voice: Liberal Islam Thought in Indonesia,” *Studia Islamika: Indonesian Journal for Islamic Studies* 15, no. 3 (2008).

²⁸ Barton, “Indonesia’s Nurcholish Madjid and Abdurrahman Wahid as Intellectual ‘ulamā’: The Meeting of Islamic Traditionalism and Modernism in Neo-Modernist Thought.”

²⁹ Nurcholish Madjid, *The True Face of Islam: Essays on Islam and Modernity in Indonesia*, ed. Rudy Harisyah Alam and Ihsan Ali Fauzi (Voice Center Indonesia, 2003).

³⁰ Barton, “Indonesia’s Nurcholish Madjid and Abdurrahman Wahid as Intellectual ‘ulamā’: The Meeting of Islamic Traditionalism and Modernism in Neo-Modernist Thought.”

³¹ Abdul Wahib, “Corak Pemikiran A. Malik Fadjar tentang Pengembangan Madrasah pada Era Globalisasi (Studi Pemikiran Tokoh Pendidikan),” (IAIN Walisongo, 2008).

³² Rusniati, “Pendidikan Nasional dan Tantangan Globalisasi: Kajian Kritis Terhadap Pemikiran A. Malik Fajar,” *Jurnal Ilmiah Didaktika* 16, no. 1 (2015): 105; Kamal Hikmat and Abuddin Nata, “Pemikiran Pendidikan A. Malik Fadjar,” *Ta’dibuna: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 6, no. 1 (2017): 49–71.

national and Islamic education, including the transition of IAIN to UIN. He argued that the change from IAIN to UIN was aimed at establishing a Science Reintegration model, fostering the development, improvement, and strengthening of a professionally oriented academic status.³³

Likewise, Azyumardi Azra and Amin Abdullah, are prominent figures. Azyumardi Azra, who held the positions of the 10th rector at IAIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta and the inaugural rector at UIN, started his academic journey by completing the undergraduate studies at the tarbiyah (education science) faculty of IAIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta. With the support of a Fulbright scholarship, Azyumardi pursued advanced studies at Columbia University, specializing in the Department of Languages and Cultures of the Middle East. His academic achievements include earning a Master of Arts (MA) degree in 1988, followed by a Master of Philosophy (MPhil) degree from the Department of History in 1990, and culminating in a Doctorate in Philosophy (PhD) in 1992.

The ideas of Azyumardi Azra on the reform of Islamic education are extensively discussed in various publications, including the book entitled *Islamic Education: Tradition and Modernization Towards the New Millennium*³⁴. In this book, some of the materials discussed are IAIN reform and the advancement of Muslim intellectual development. Azyumardi identified a major weakness in IAIN, stating the poor adaptability to cultural change. He proposed the need for a redefined set of IAIN goals, curriculum restructuring, simplification of course load, decompartmentalization, and liberalization of the learning system.³⁵

Similarly, Amin Abdullah who served as the 9th rector of IAIN Sunan Kalijaga Jogjakarta and held the honor of being the first rector of UIN Sunan Kalijaga, completed his undergraduate program at the Ushuluddin Faculty, Department of Comparative Religion, IAIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta, in 1982. His academic journey then led him to pursue a Ph.D. in Islamic Philosophy at the Middle East Technical University (METU), Ankara, Turkey in 1990, sponsored by the Ministry of Religion and the Government of the Republic of Turkey in 1985). Subsequently, Amin Abdullah enrolled in a Post-Doctoral Program at McGill University, Canada, during the academic year 1997 to 1998.³⁶ He proposed the integration-interconnection concept as a bridge between science and religion, particularly Islam and science. Rooted in epistemology, it promotes reintegration through dialogue, synergy, and collaboration,³⁷ as outlined in his article Religion, Science, and Culture: An Integrated, Interconnected Paradigm of Science.³⁸

The transition from IAIN to UIN, led by IAIN Jakarta in 2002 and IAIN Jogjakarta in 2004, reflects Indonesia's effort to harmonize science and religion, positioning faith as a progressive force in modernization and globalization. This shift aligns with the historical adaptability of Islamic civilization in Indonesia, which has long integrated external influences and innovation. By combining Islamic principles with modern scientific disciplines, UIN exemplifies how Islamic education can address contemporary challenges while preserving ethical and spiritual values. Yet, this modernization has overlooked its mandate to produce 'ulamā' to guide Indonesian Muslims.³⁹

Traditionalist Responses

During Indonesia's Islamic renewal era, Abdurrahman Wahid, as one of the neo-modernist figures, championed pesantren as resilient institutions capable of modernizing traditional Islamic societies.⁴⁰ He emphasized how Islamic renewal and neo-modernism, shaped by IAIN intellectuals, aligned with

³³ Ahmad Malik Fadjar, *Holistika Pemikiran Pendidikan*, ed. Ahmad Barizi (Raja Grafindo Persada, 2005).

³⁴ Azra, *Pendidikan Islam: Tradisi dan Modernisasi Menuju Milenium Baru*.

³⁵ Achmad Masrur, "Modernisasi Pendidikan Islam (Telaah Pemikiran Azyumardi Azra Tentang Modernisasi Pendidikan Islam di Indonesia)." Thesis, UIN Maulana Malik Ibrahim, 2014.

³⁶ Amin Nasir, "Sintesis Pemikiran M. Amin Abdullah dan Adian Husaini (Pendekatan dalam Pengkajian Islam)," *Fikrah 2*, no. 1 (2014): 141–52.

³⁷ Muhammad Azhar, "Pandangan Murid terhadap Guru," *Jurnal Studi Islam* 15, no. 1 (2014): 28–43; Waston Waston, "Pemikiran Epistemologi Amin Abdullah dan Relevansinya bagi Pendidikan Tinggi di Indonesia," *Profetika: Jurnal Studi Islam* 17, no. 1 (2016): 80.

³⁸ M. Amin Abdullah, "Religion, Science and Culture: An Integrated, Interconnected Paradigm of Science," *Al-Jami'ah* 52, no. 1 (2014): 175–203.

³⁹ Azyumardi Azra, Dina Afrianty, and Robert W. Hefner, "Pesantren and Madrasa: Muslim Schools and National Ideals in Indonesia," in *Schooling Islam: The Culture and Politics of Modern Muslim Education*, ed. Hefner, Robert W. and Muhammad Qasim Zaman (Princeton University Press, 2007), 172–198.

⁴⁰ Barton, "Neo-Modernism: A Vital Synthesis of Traditional and Modernist Islamic Thought in Indonesia; Eliraz, "Distinctive Contemporary Voice: Liberal Islam Thought in Indonesia.

traditionalist reforms in pesantren.⁴¹ Traditionalists in Indonesian Islam refer to groups or movements that prioritize the preservation and transmission of classical Islamic knowledge and practices, primarily through the pesantren system.⁴² Unlike modernists' Western-oriented thinking, traditionalists emphasize foundational Islamic sciences like Qur'anic exegesis, Hadith, and jurisprudence. Central to their philosophy are the values of tauhid (monotheism), moral integrity, and spiritual development.⁴³

The development of pesantren as educational and religious institutions has progressed rapidly, while successfully adapting to change without compromising their identity.⁴⁴ This interaction led to independent pesantren with distinct dynamics in leadership, finances, curriculum, religious ideologies, and involvement in politics and state affairs.⁴⁵ Some pesantren leaders believed IAIN was unable to produce reliable scholars.⁴⁶ As a solution, they established Ma'had 'Alī, a college within pesantren, to train 'ulamā' directly rather than sending students to IAIN. Following persistent efforts, the government has officially recognized and supported pesantren in the establishment of Ma'had 'Alī in 2015.

In government policy, Ma'had 'Alī is acknowledged as a college that specializes in providing academic education focused on the mastery of Islamic religious knowledge (*tafaqquh fi al-dīn*). The instructional method uses Kitab Kuning, Arabic texts central to the Islamic scholarly tradition in pesantren.⁴⁷ Its vision is to produce Muslims who are ready to embrace Islam in its totality (*kāffah*).

Historically, the first Ma'had 'Alī was established in 1990 within the Salafiyah Syafi'iyah Pesantren at Situbondo in East Java.⁴⁸ This establishment coincided with the rapid development of modern Islamic thought and neo-modernism on IAIN campuses, which deeply unsettled traditionalists in Pesantren. Their concerns about IAIN's ability to preserve the authenticity of Islamic thought and da'wah fueled efforts to seek alternatives that could safeguard Islamic civilization from Western influences. Guided by the kyai's charisma, the pesantren became a center for scholarship and the development of professionals equipped to address both religious and social challenges.⁴⁹

The name of K.H.R. As'ad Syamsul Arifin, leader of Pesantren Salafiyah Syafi'iyah Sukorejo, is central to the founding of Ma'had 'Alī. He emphasized the centrality of tauhid (monotheism) as the foundation of education and the importance of revering the al-Qur'ān while maintaining sincere intentions in seeking knowledge. He envisioned pesantren as institutions for producing morally and intellectually capable leaders, fuqaha (Islamic jurists), and waliyullah (close allies of God), rather than just employees. He criticized modern education for its lack of spiritual and moral grounding, particularly the neglect of tauhid.⁵⁰

Unlike IAIN, the Ma'had 'Alī curriculum emphasizes an in-depth study of the al-Qur'ān, Ḥadīth, and Kitab Kuning. Its primary goal is to produce alumni equipped to meet the community's religious needs, whether as preachers delivering da'wah or as scholars addressing legal and social issues.⁵¹ The academic focus centers on Fiqh and Uṣūl al-fiqh, with the *Baḥth al-Masā'il* bulletin serving as a concrete

⁴¹ Abdurrahman Wahid, *Pesantren Masa Depan: Wacana Pemberdayaan dan Transformasi Pesantren* (Pustaka Hidayah, 1999); Hasyim Muzadi, *Nahdlatul Ulama di Tengah Agenda Persoalan Bangsa* (Logos Wacana Ilmu, 1999); Muhammad A.S. Hikam, *Islam, Demokratisasi, dan Pemberdayaan Civil Society* (Erlangga, 2000).

⁴² Andrée Feillard, "The Constrained Place of Local Tradition: The Discourse of Indonesian Traditionalist Ulama in the 1930s," in *The Politics of Religion in Indonesia: Syncretism, Orthodoxy, and Religious Contention in Java and Bali*, ed. Picard, M. and Madinier, R. (Taylor and Francis, 2011), 48-70; Greg Barton, Ihsan Yilmaz, and Nicholas Morieson, "Authoritarianism, Democracy, Islamic Movements and Contestations of Islamic Religious Ideas in Indonesia," *Religions* 12, no. 8 (2021): 641.

⁴³ Muhammad Ahmad Ibrahim AlJahsh, "Science and Islamic Ethics: Navigating Artificial Womb Technology Through Quranic Principles," *Heliyon* 10, no. 17 (2024); Natana J. DeLong-Bas, "Islamic Theology and Extraterrestrial Life," in *New Frontiers in Science and Religion*, ed. Malik, S. A. and Determann, J. M. (IB Tauris, 2025), 1-3; Imam Mustofa et al., "The Authority of Texts in the Dynamics of Ijtihad on Fiqh Mu'amalah Among Santri in Indonesia," *El-Mashlahah* 14, no. 2 (2024): 381-408.

⁴⁴ Azra, *Pendidikan Islam: Tradisi dan Modernisasi Menuju Milenium Baru*.

⁴⁵ Ronald Alan Lukens-Bull, "A Peaceful Jihad: Javanese Islamic Education and Religious Identity Construction," *ProQuest Dissertations and Theses* (1997); Mujamil Qomar, *Pesantren: Dari Transformasi Metodologi Menuju Demokratisasi Institusi* (Erlangga, 2005).

⁴⁶ Azra, Afrianty, and Hefner, "Pesantren and Madrasa: Muslim Schools and National Ideals in Indonesia."

⁴⁷ Kementerian Agama Republik Indonesia 2015, *PMA 71 2015*, Indonesia.

⁴⁸ Abu Yazid, "Pendidikan Tinggi di Pesantren: Studi Kasus Ma'had 'Ali Situbondo," *EDUKASI: Jurnal Penelitian Pendidikan Agama dan Keagamaan* 8, no. 2 (2010).

⁴⁹ Ahmad Humaidi, Nurul Fadhliyah, and Sufirmansyah Sufirmansyah, "The Centrality of Kyai in Establishing Moderate Understandings in Salafiyah Pesantren," *Nazhruna: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 7, no. 3 (2024): 554-569.

⁵⁰ Erlin Margareta Urfatul Umami, *Pemikiran K.H.R. As'ad Syamsul Arifin Situbondo dalam Pendidikan Islam* (Institut Agama Islam Negeri Jember, 2018), 1-10.

⁵¹ Muhammad Ramadlon Himam Al Haroki, "Implementasi Kurikulum Ma'had Aly." Thesis, Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Ampel Surabaya, 2019.

manifestation of this scholarly effort.⁵² The teachers and staff at Ma'had 'Alī also differ from those at IAIN as they are graduates of Middle Eastern higher education institutions, bringing proficiency in Arabic and expertise in classical texts.⁵³ Their shared background in Islamic boarding schools and a unified focus on nurturing the next generation enhance their interaction with students. The primary goal is to deepen students' understanding of Islam. This cohesive environment fosters collaboration and creates a supportive learning atmosphere, effectively minimizing potential challenges.⁵⁴

Through consistent efforts, the government formally recognized and supported Ma'had 'Alī in 2015, leading to the establishment of 35 institutions. Among them, Ma'had 'Alī Salafiyah Syafi'iyah Situbondo stands out, receiving operational approval for a master's degree program in 2017. Ma'had 'Alī offers nine concentrations in Islamic sciences: Al-Qur'ān wa 'Ulūmuh (al-Qur'ānic Studies), Ḥadīth wa 'Ulūmuh (Ḥadīth Studies), Tafsīr wa 'Ulūmuh (al-Qur'ānic Exegesis), 'Aqīdah and Islamic Philosophy, Taṣawwuf wa Ṭarīqah (Sufism and Tariqah), Fiqh and Uṣūl al-fiqh (Islamic Jurisprudence and Principles), Islamic History and Culture, Lughah 'Arabiyyah wa Adabuh (Arabic Language and Literature), and Falak Science (Islamic Astronomy). Additionally, these institutions have collaboratively formed the Association of Ma'had Aly Indonesia (AMALI).

The government's recognition of Ma'had 'Alī reflects the achievements of traditionalists, paralleling the modernists' success in transforming IAIN into UIN. While UIN embodies modernist progress through the integration of religious and non-religious sciences, Ma'had 'Alī represents traditionalist advancements by cultivating scholars within the pesantren environment. This development arises amid declining public confidence in IAIN's ability to produce 'ulamā', prompting traditional Muslims to establish Ma'had Aly as a solution.⁵⁵

Now, Ma'had 'Alī nurtures well-rounded Islamic scholars ('ulamā') equipped with intellectual, moral, and practical skills for societal leadership.⁵⁶ It also serves as an advanced pesantren promoting Islamic moderation rooted in the heritage of kitab kuning.⁵⁷ This reflects the contribution of pesantren in maintaining and advancing Islamic civilization.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the transformation Islamic Higher Education was a process complexly linked to the maturation of the Muslim community. It started with the awareness of the necessity to keep up with Muslims amid modernization and globalization. The engagement with western education, the rise of Islamic thought reform, and the emergence of the Indonesian Muslim middle class collectively constituted a preparatory phase for the establishment of modern Islamic university. In its traditional form, IAIN successfully performed its mission of preparing government personnel within the Indonesian Ministry of Religion Affairs and sharing ideas for the renewal of Islamic thought. Presently, Indonesian Muslims encountered no difficulties in viewing modernization and globalization, and actively participated in nation-building activities.

Despite its success, many observed the failure of IAIN and UIN in producing 'ulamā' cadres. This weakness stemmed from systemic issues in the education system, unlike the flexible methods of pesantren in religious education. Pesantren have proven effective in nurturing santri with profound knowledge of religion. In response, pesantren leaders established Ma'had 'Alī to further their role in preserving Islam in Indonesia.

⁵² Abu Yazid, "Pendidikan Tinggi di Pesantren: Studi Kasus Ma'had 'Ali Situbondo.

⁵³ Mulyani Mudis Taruna, "Manajemen Pendidikan Ma'had Aly di Lingkungan Pondok Pesantren: Kasus Ma'had Aly Hasyim Asy'ari Tebuireng, Jombang." *Edukasi: Jurnal Penelitian Pendidikan Agama dan Keagamaan* 11, no. 2 (2013): 245–57.

⁵⁴ Mudis Taruna, "Manajemen Pendidikan Ma'had Aly di Lingkungan Pondok Pesantren: Kasus Ma'had Aly Hasyim Asy'ari Tebuireng, Jombang.

⁵⁵ Azra, Afrianty, and Hefner, "Pesantren and Madrasa: Muslim Schools and National Ideals in Indonesia.

⁵⁶ Fatah Syukur, Abdul Wahib, and Mahfud Junaedi, "Islamic Higher Education and Human Capital Development (The Study of Ma'had Aly as Education Training for 'ulamā')," (EAI Proceedings, ACHITS 2019, July 30–31, 2019), 1–12.

⁵⁷ Abdul Djalal et al., "Two Sides Moderation of Islamic Religiosity and Education in High Pesantren Education (Ma'had Aly) in Indonesia," (INCRE Proceedings, 2021), 1–12; Syahrin Nasution, Hasan Asari, and Haji Al-Rasyid, "Kitab Kuning and Religious Moderation: A Study on State Islamic Universities in Indonesia," *Journal of Al-Tamaddun* 19, no. 2 (2024): 73–88.

It is clear now, that the role of creating ‘ulamā’ was taken over by Ma’had ‘Alī, a high school developed within pesantren environment. They are perceived as guardians of Islamic tradition, while IAIN and UIN prioritize general or non-religious sciences. This development represented the latest stage in the continuity and change process of Indonesian Islamic education, marking a synthesis of the conflict of thoughts between modernists and traditionalists.

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As this article uses biographies of important figures in Islamic Education Reform in Indonesia, the authors would like to thank all those whose names are mentioned in the text. Their roles and thoughts are briefly described in accordance with the purpose of this article. Other education reformers who have not been mentioned in this article are the subject of further research.

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