



Cultural Barriers and Challenges of *Ma'had Aly*: The Path towards a Competitive Islamic Higher Education Institution

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Received: 01-05-2025

Revised: 11-08-2025

Accepted: 12-09-2025

Abstract

The dominance of the local realm and traditional values in Ma'had Aly has been deemed irrelevant in light of the recent need for modern education. Despite its significant potential, Ma'had Aly faces critical cultural challenges that hinder its transformation into a competitive and sustainable Islamic higher education institution. Accordingly, this article examines the cultural factors that influence governance, curriculum development, and technological integration within the context of *ma'had aly*, a *pesantren*-based model of Islamic higher education. Utilizing a qualitative case study approach, this research gathered data from interviews with participants, documents, and observations. It was also supported by web scraping techniques—drawing from news outlets, websites, and social media platforms relevant to *ma'had aly* discourse. The findings revealed that Ma'had Aly faced cultural barriers in several key aspects. First, the dominance of conservatism is signified by the educational orientation that relies on classical texts, Islamic teachings, organisational structure, and institutional management that is not based on modernisation-administrative principles. Secondly, there is a traditional management approach that tends to be less adaptive, characterised by a centralised organisation, an alum majority in the staff structure, centralised policy, and central decision-making. Finally, this research identified curriculum decontextualization in the areas of curriculum composition, orientation, and implementation, which is considerably inflexible in the context of globalization and technological enhancement. Thus, this research highlights the need for visionary leadership that is responsive to change and for comprehensive institutional reform.

Keywords: Competitiveness, Cultural Challenges, Educational Competitiveness, Islamic Higher Education, Ma'had Aly.

INTRODUCTION

The development of *ma'had aly* as a *pesantren*-based model of Islamic higher education in Indonesia reflects the evolving efforts of the *pesantren* community to respond to the growing demands for Islamic-oriented higher education. Despite this progress, the transformation of *ma'had aly* into a competitive university faces significant challenges—chief among them, cultural in nature. Spatially, *ma'had aly* remains embedded within local contexts dominated by traditional values, which are increasingly perceived as misaligned with the imperatives of contemporary education (Azra, 2021). Temporally, the institution grapples with aligning itself to a rapidly changing era shaped by technological advancement and global interconnectedness (Hefner, 2009). In this landscape, Islamic education must compete with general universities that possess greater access to resources, advanced infrastructure, and international networks (Zarkasyi, 2020). This issue is particularly pressing given *ma'had aly*'s potential to play a strategic role in preserving and reinforcing Islamic identity amid the cultural homogenization often associated with modernity (Malisi, Sulasman, & Mohad, 2024; Rofiq, Fahmi, Rokhman, & Khamim, 2024; Ubaidillah & Faiz, 2025; Umar, S, Ma'arif, Ismail, & Rahman, 2025). Therefore, understanding and addressing the cultural barriers that hinder this transformation is essential for ensuring the long-term viability and competitiveness of *ma'had aly*.

The body of scholarship on Islamic education in Indonesia has extensively examined the role of *pesantren* as traditional institutions capable of adapting to socio-cultural change. Research by Abdullah (2017) underscores how *pesantren* have evolved to meet the demands of modern education while maintaining a commitment to Islamic values. Nevertheless, studies specifically addressing *ma'had aly* as a transitional form of *pesantren* within the framework of higher education remain scarce. Hasan et al. (2023) draws attention to the disjuncture between the pedagogical vision of *pesantren* and global educational standards, while Maskuri (2024) and Wafa (2022) identified inadequate national policy support as a major hindrance to the institutional development of *ma'had aly*. Similarly, Powa et al. (2023) argue that more integrated governmental and institutional efforts are necessary to optimize the legal framework already in growing institutions. Thus, the establishment of Islamic education institutions, including *ma'had aly* requires some aspects that should be investigated.

On another front, some previous studies examining the challenges of educational management and policy in Islamic institutions, such as those by Purnomo et al. (2024) and (Nurdin, 2021), point to the lack of strong and consistent policy support as a major impediment to the development of *ma'had aly*. Purnomo et al., (2024) note that many *ma'had aly* institutions face difficulties in securing resources from both the government and the broader public, limiting their capacity to compete with mainstream universities. Similarly, Nurdin (2021) identified a lack of innovation in institutional governance as a critical factor constraining the sustainability of *ma'had aly*. Infrastructural limitations and the scarcity of qualified teaching staff further obstruct the institution's progress, as Badrudin et al. (2021) have emphasized the importance of both factors in producing high-quality graduates. While these studies are relevant to the current research, they remain primarily focused on policy and managerial aspects, with limited attention to how local cultural values influence institutional sustainability.

Cultural barriers to the sustainability of Islamic educational institutions have also been widely discussed in the literature. Research results have indicated that resistance to change and

negative societal perceptions constitute significant challenges in the development of ma'had aly (Abdullah, 2017; Nasution & Syafieh, 2021). Abdullah (2017) also emphasized that the deeply rooted traditions of *pesantren* often obstruct innovation, particularly in adopting modern technologies and pedagogical approaches. Meanwhile, Nasution and Syafieh (2021) observed that the stigma attached to *pesantren* as "traditional" institutions diminishes *ma'had aly's* appeal to prospective students. Furthermore, ongoing Islamophobic sentiments and the perception of *pesantren* as breeding grounds for radical ideologies continue to pose reputational challenges (Muktar et al. 2021). Thus, much of the existing literature has yet to offer a thorough exploration of strategies to bridge traditional values with the imperatives of modernization. Likewise, limited attention has been paid to how *ma'had aly* might effectively compete with mainstream higher education institutions.

This current study seeks to fill that gap by critically examining the cultural challenges impeding *ma'had aly* and proposing strategic responses. Accordingly, this study aims to investigate the cultural barriers that influence *ma'had aly's* institutional sustainability and academic competitiveness. Specifically, it explores the tension between traditional values deeply rooted in the *pesantren* community and the structural and pedagogical transformations demanded by modernization. Additionally, the analysis presented in this study rests on the premise that cultural factors constitute a primary impediment to *ma'had aly's* advancement. These include both internal resistance to institutional reform and external stigmatization of *pesantren*-based education. Hasan et al. (2023) notes that low cultural literacy within these institutions intensifies resistance to modernization, while Azra (2021) perceived that negative public perceptions were reinforced by limited technological access and weak international engagement. In line with (Purnomo et al., 2024), this article affirms that the integration of traditional Islamic values with modern pedagogical frameworks is essential for building adaptive and resilient Islamic higher education institutions. By examining the multifaceted nature of these cultural barriers, this study demonstrates how culturally grounded strategic interventions can serve as a foundation for transforming *ma'had aly* into an innovative and globally competitive institution.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative design with a case study approach to explore the cultural challenges faced by *ma'had aly*. The qualitative approach was chosen as it enables a deep understanding of complex and contextual phenomena (Creswell & Creswell, 2014). This research followed some steps, such as defining the case, selecting data sources, and determining the analytical techniques to be used (Daughtery, 2016; Yin, 2014). The case study focuses on several *ma'had aly* institutions in Indonesia, each facing different cultural and structural dynamics. The research process involves observing the discourse and practices within *ma'had aly*, both directly and through online media. Data were collected through mapping online discourse that reflects public perceptions of *ma'had aly*, including content from social media, news portals, and official institutional websites. This design allows for an in-depth exploration of the cultural and structural contexts influencing the sustainability of the institution.

Research Setting and Participants

The unit of analysis in this study is *ma'had aly*, an Islamic higher education institution in Indonesia, which represents the transformation of *pesantren* into higher education. The focus on *ma'had aly* is relevant because this institution faces significant cultural challenges, such as resistance to modernization and social stigma that hinder its competitiveness (Abdullah, 2017). As an institution based on *pesantren* traditions, *ma'had aly* plays a strategic role in preserving Islamic values while responding to the demands of global modernization (Azra, 2021). This study aims to identify these barriers and provide recommendations to ensure the institution's sustainability. The research process focuses on exploring cultural issues that affect governance, curriculum, and technological integration in the context of *ma'had aly*.

The primary data sources for this research are online interviews and institutional documentation from *ma'had aly*. The data of research participants can be seen in Table 1. Anonymous names were used throughout this study to protect participants' identities.

Table 1. Research participants

No	Anonymous	Affiliation	Position	Work Length of the Existing Position
1	R1	Ma'had Aly Lirboyo	Director	Three years
2	R2	Ma'had Aly Lirboyo	Director	Seven years
3	R3	Ma'had Aly Lirboyo UIN Syekh Washil Kediri	Director	Four years
4	R4	Ma'had Aly Lirboyo UIN Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang	Lecturer	Three years

Data were obtained from relevant news portals, social media, and the official websites of *ma'had aly*, which provide information about policies, educational practices, and public perceptions. Online news from platforms such as Kompas and Republika was used to map the dynamics of Islamic education policies. Social media platforms, including Twitter and Facebook, offer insights into public perceptions of *ma'had aly*, both positive and negative. The relevance of this online data lies in its ability to capture diverse public opinions in real-time (Hefner, 2009). Data were systematically collected by filtering content based on relevance and the credibility of sources.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection was conducted through online media exploration using web scraping and participatory observation methods. Web scraping was employed to gather data from news sites and social media relevant to the discourse on *ma'had aly*. This process involved selecting keywords such as "*ma'had aly*," "*pesantren*," "*pendidikan Islam*" (Islamic education), and "*tantangan modernisasi*" (modernization challenges). In addition, participatory observation was conducted at several *ma'had aly* institutions to understand cultural practices and responses to modernization firsthand. Data triangulation was used to ensure the validity and reliability of the collected data by comparing information from various sources. The data collection process included source selection, data gathering, and organizing data for further analysis.

Data analysis was performed using a qualitative interpretive method consisting of three stages: restatement, description, and interpretation (Miles et al., 2014). In the restatement stage, the collected data were reorganized to identify key patterns in the cultural challenges faced by *ma'had aly*. The description stage was used to explore the connections between the traditional values of *pesantren* and the barriers to modernization. Finally, in the interpretation stage, the data were analyzed to uncover the ideologies behind cultural resistance and efforts to integrate modernization. This approach was selected as it provides a deep understanding of how cultural dimensions affect the sustainability of *ma'had aly*. The analysis was conducted systematically to generate comprehensive and insightful findings relevant to the research objectives.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Cultural barriers and challenges faced by ma'had aly as a competitive Islamic higher education

Ma'had aly represents a developmental model of *pesantren*-based education, established to meet the growing need for higher education rooted in Islamic values and teachings. The institution was first founded by KH. As'ad Syamsul Arifin in the 1990s at *pesantren* Salafiyah Syafi'iyah Situbondo, with the aim of producing scholars (*ulema*) well-versed in Islamic sciences while maintaining local traditions. Institutionally, *ma'had aly* gained official recognition through a minister of religious affairs regulation—PMA No. 71/2015—concerning *ma'had aly*, later revised by PMA No. 32/2020 to regulate its administration. As of today, 79 *ma'had aly* institutions have been formally integrated into the national education system and are considered equivalent to higher education institutions. Despite this formal status, they retain a strong Islamic identity, maintaining their *pesantren*-based educational orientation, including studies of the Qur'an, hadith, fiqh, theology (*aqidah*), mysticism (*tasawwuf*), astronomy (*falak*), Islamic history, and Arabic language.

Based on the results of analysis, this study found out three cultural resistances that have affected the *pesantren* governance, curriculum and technological integration. The evidences are elaborated as follows:

The conservative nature of *pesantren*

The finding shows that *ma'had aly*' unconsciously reflects the conservative nature. The results of interview are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Summary points of the conservative nature of *pesantren*

Coding	Statement
Learning orientation	<p>"<i>Ma'had Aly</i> Lirboyo continues to preserve traditional cultural and educational values, particularly in instructional practices. This includes reliance on classical Islamic texts from the 16th century, the use of <i>pegon</i> script in the <i>maknani</i> method of text interpretation, and memorization-based learning systems." (R1)</p> <p>"<i>Ma'had Aly</i> Lirboyo is a development of the tradition of traditional Islamic boarding schools with a focus on national jurisprudence. The literature used is diverse, according to the needs of the concentration, including Arabic and foreign languages." (R4)</p>

Coding	Statement
Educational level	“ <i>Ma’had aly</i> is part of a structured formal Islamic educational ecosystem that spans from basic to advanced levels, including the <i>muadalah</i> (secondary education) system. Within this ecosystem, <i>turath</i> (Islamic intellectual heritage) remains dominant, as it is supported by the legal framework of the <i>pesantren</i> law.” (R2)
Learning traditions	“Key <i>pesantren</i> values preserved include: adherence to <i>madhhab</i> -based methodologies for intellectual continuity, emphasis on <i>akhlak al-karimah</i> (noble character), selectivity towards Western thought, and curriculum rooted in <i>turath</i> . The emphasis on moral and character education is rooted in regulatory norms.” (R1) “The <i>syawir</i> tradition at <i>Ma’had Aly</i> Lirboyo reflects an open and regenerative system, where all experienced students are given the opportunity to appear in scientific forums such as <i>bahtsul masail</i> . Other learning models also use interactive approaches typical of Islamic boarding schools such as lectures, <i>kehidmah</i> , collective learning, and scientific <i>dauroh</i> .” (R4)
Vision and mission	“In general, <i>pesantren</i> institutions aim to cultivate competent scholars in fields such as Qur’anic exegesis (<i>tafsir</i>), <i>hadith</i> , Arabic grammar, Arabic literature, <i>fiqh</i> , and <i>usul al-fiqh</i> . However, the vision and mission of <i>ma’had aly</i> are often narrowly focused on advanced studies in <i>fiqh</i> and <i>usul al-fiqh</i> , especially with a concentration on <i>Fiqh Kebangsaan</i> (national jurisprudence).” (R1)
Institutional format	“ <i>Pesantren</i> and <i>ma’had aly</i> maintain internal quality assurance through the council of sheikhs (<i>dewan masyayikh</i>), which, according to government regulation, is established by internal stakeholders—namely the <i>kiai</i> , <i>masyayikh</i> , and administrators responsible for educational programs within <i>ma’had aly</i> and other units.” (R2) “ <i>Ma’had Aly</i> is a formal institution established based on the mandate of the Islamic Boarding School Law and its derivative regulations. Unlike the central <i>pesantren</i> which is autonomous, <i>Ma’had Aly</i> is required to follow the official accreditation process.” (R4)
Institutional management	“The government imposes minimal restrictions on <i>ma’had aly</i> administration, allowing the preservation of distinctive <i>pesantren</i> traditions. The caretaker and <i>mudir</i> (director) of <i>ma’had aly</i> are proactive in policy-making, institutional empowerment, and ongoing evaluation of the educational process.” (R3) “The establishment of <i>Ma’had Aly</i> Lirboyo was driven by the increasing interest of students in <i>fiqh</i> studies over the past two decades. This seriousness was manifested through the formation of a special team until the issuance of the Decree of the Director General of Islamic Education in December 2017 which formalized its establishment.” (R3)

Table 2 illustrates that *ma’had aly* retains a conservative character akin to that of traditional *pesantren*. This is evident in its curriculum based on *kitab kuning* (classical Islamic texts), the continued use of *sorogan* (one-on-one) and *bandongan* (group) teaching methods, and the central role of the *kiai* in determining academic policy. Additionally, student life at *ma’had aly* mirrors traditional *pesantren* practices, such as obligatory Qur’anic study, strict disciplinary codes, and dormitory living infused with *pesantren* values. The curriculum continues to prioritize classical Islamic sciences, with only minimal adaptation to contemporary developments. While some *ma’had aly* institutions have begun integrating modern pedagogical approaches, the majority adhere to long-standing traditions passed down through generations. Consequently, despite its formal recognition as an Islamic higher education institution, *ma’had aly* remains deeply embedded in the traditional *pesantren* system in its day-to-day practices.

Furthermore, Table 2 reveals three main patterns that underscore the continuity of the *pesantren*-oriented character of *ma'had aly*. First, in terms of educational orientation, *ma'had aly* remains focused on the study of *kitab kuning* and classical Islamic sciences as the primary learning foundation. Second, in terms of institutional format, *ma'had aly* continues to operate under the auspices of the *pesantren*, where the *kiai* retains supreme authority in academic decision-making and student guidance. Third, the administrative model still follows traditional *pesantren* patterns, characterized by simple management structures and a culturally rooted rather than bureaucratic approach. These three aspects demonstrate that *ma'had aly* maintains *pesantren* characteristics in its educational methods, institutional structures, and governance systems. Although there have been modest adjustments to meet higher education standards, the core values and traditions of the *pesantren* continue to serve as the foundation of *ma'had aly* operations.

In addition to interview data, the observation shows that the learning condition during *Bahitsul Masa'il* at *ma'had aly* represents a deep sketch to preserve the traditional Islamic legal discourse while addressing contemporary issues. This can be seen in Figure 1.



Figure 1. *Bahitsul Masa'il* atmosphere

Figure 1 depicts that students were less-immersive. They sat on chairs in formal rows. However, the learning activity remained interactive as the students engaged in critical questioning, debates, and text-based reasoning on the jurisprudence. This condition reflects the intellectual spirit of the *pesantren* tradition.

The documentation on the learning schedule in *pesantren* also demonstrates its conservative orientation which is mostly centered on the classical Islamic sciences, spiritual purification, and moral training. The schedule was also linked with the Islamic lunar calendar and exclusion of secular subjects. This indicates a commitment to sustaining traditional *pesantren* values rather than modern educational tenets. The schedule can be seen in Figure 2.

JADWAL PERKULIAHAN
MARHALAH TSANIYAH MAHAD ALY LIRBOYO
Tahun Akademik: 1446-1447 H / 2025-2026 M.

NO.	HARI	TANGGAL		ULA: A TSANIYAH: B		ULA: B TSANIYAH: A		ULA: C TSANIYAH: D		ULA: D TSANIYAH: C	
		HIJRIYAH	MASEHI								
SEMESTER I											
1	Kamis Wage	24 Dzulqo'dah 1446	22 Mei 2025	FIKIH KERANGSAAN K. A. Fauzi Hamzah Syaam	TAFSIR & HADIS K. M. Thohari Muband	FIKIH KERANGSAAN K. M. Thohari Muband	TAFSIR & HADIS K. M. Thohari Muband	FIKIH KERANGSAAN K. M. Thohari Muband	TAFSIR & HADIS K. M. Thohari Muband	FIKIH KERANGSAAN K. M. Thohari Muband	TAFSIR & HADIS K. M. Thohari Muband
2	Jumat Kliwon	25 Dzulqo'dah 1446	23 Mei 2025	ILMU TAFSIR K. M. Thohari Muband	USHUL FIKIH K. M. Thohari Muband	ILMU TAFSIR K. M. Thohari Muband	USHUL FIKIH K. M. Thohari Muband	ILMU TAFSIR K. M. Thohari Muband	USHUL FIKIH K. M. Thohari Muband	ILMU TAFSIR K. M. Thohari Muband	USHUL FIKIH K. M. Thohari Muband
3	Kamis Legi	02 Dzulhijjah 1446	29 Mei 2025	FIKIH KERANGSAAN K. A. Fauzi Hamzah Syaam	QOIDAH FIKIH K. M. Ma'rufan Mukhlisin	FIKIH KERANGSAAN K. A. Fauzi Hamzah Syaam	QOIDAH FIKIH K. M. Ma'rufan Mukhlisin	FIKIH KERANGSAAN K. A. Fauzi Hamzah Syaam	QOIDAH FIKIH K. M. Ma'rufan Mukhlisin	FIKIH KERANGSAAN K. A. Fauzi Hamzah Syaam	QOIDAH FIKIH K. M. Ma'rufan Mukhlisin
4	Jumat Pahing	03 Dzulhijjah 1446	30 Mei 2025	QOIDAH FIKIH K. M. Ma'rufan Mukhlisin	USHUL FIKIH K. M. Ma'rufan Mukhlisin	QOIDAH FIKIH K. M. Ma'rufan Mukhlisin	USHUL FIKIH K. M. Ma'rufan Mukhlisin	QOIDAH FIKIH K. M. Ma'rufan Mukhlisin	USHUL FIKIH K. M. Ma'rufan Mukhlisin	QOIDAH FIKIH K. M. Ma'rufan Mukhlisin	USHUL FIKIH K. M. Ma'rufan Mukhlisin
	Kamis Pon	09 Dzulhijjah 1446	05 Juni 2025	LIBUR HARI RAYA IDUL ADHA							
	Jumat Wage	10 Dzulhijjah 1446	06 Juni 2025	LIBUR HARI RAYA IDUL ADHA							
5	Kamis Kliwon	16 Dzulhijjah 1446	12 Juni 2025	FIKIH KERANGSAAN K. A. Fauzi Hamzah Syaam	TAFSIR & HADIS K. M. Thohari Muband	FIKIH KERANGSAAN K. A. Fauzi Hamzah Syaam	TAFSIR & HADIS K. M. Thohari Muband	FIKIH KERANGSAAN K. A. Fauzi Hamzah Syaam	TAFSIR & HADIS K. M. Thohari Muband	FIKIH KERANGSAAN K. A. Fauzi Hamzah Syaam	TAFSIR & HADIS K. M. Thohari Muband
6	Jumat Legi	17 Dzulhijjah 1446	13 Juni 2025	ILMU TAFSIR K. M. Thohari Muband	USHUL FIKIH K. M. Thohari Muband	ILMU TAFSIR K. M. Thohari Muband	USHUL FIKIH K. M. Thohari Muband	ILMU TAFSIR K. M. Thohari Muband	USHUL FIKIH K. M. Thohari Muband	ILMU TAFSIR K. M. Thohari Muband	USHUL FIKIH K. M. Thohari Muband
7	Kamis Pahing	23 Dzulhijjah 1446	19 Juni 2025	FIKIH KERANGSAAN K. A. Fauzi Hamzah Syaam	SPI K. M. Anwarul Ula	FIKIH KERANGSAAN K. A. Fauzi Hamzah Syaam	SPI K. M. Anwarul Ula	FIKIH KERANGSAAN K. A. Fauzi Hamzah Syaam	SPI K. M. Anwarul Ula	FIKIH KERANGSAAN K. A. Fauzi Hamzah Syaam	SPI K. M. Anwarul Ula
8	Jumat Pon	24 Dzulhijjah 1446	20 Juni 2025	ILMU TAFSIR K. M. Thohari Muband	USHUL FIKIH K. M. Thohari Muband	ILMU TAFSIR K. M. Thohari Muband	USHUL FIKIH K. M. Thohari Muband	ILMU TAFSIR K. M. Thohari Muband	USHUL FIKIH K. M. Thohari Muband	ILMU TAFSIR K. M. Thohari Muband	USHUL FIKIH K. M. Thohari Muband
9	Kamis Wage	30 Dzulhijjah 1446	26 Juni 2025	FIKIH KERANGSAAN K. A. Fauzi Hamzah Syaam	TAFSIR & HADIS K. M. Thohari Muband	FIKIH KERANGSAAN K. A. Fauzi Hamzah Syaam	TAFSIR & HADIS K. M. Thohari Muband	FIKIH KERANGSAAN K. A. Fauzi Hamzah Syaam	TAFSIR & HADIS K. M. Thohari Muband	FIKIH KERANGSAAN K. A. Fauzi Hamzah Syaam	TAFSIR & HADIS K. M. Thohari Muband
10	Jumat Kliwon	01 Muharam 1447	27 Juni 2025	ILMU TAFSIR K. M. Thohari Muband	USHUL FIKIH K. M. Thohari Muband	ILMU TAFSIR K. M. Thohari Muband	USHUL FIKIH K. M. Thohari Muband	ILMU TAFSIR K. M. Thohari Muband	USHUL FIKIH K. M. Thohari Muband	ILMU TAFSIR K. M. Thohari Muband	USHUL FIKIH K. M. Thohari Muband
11	Kamis Legi	07 Muharam 1447	03 Juli 2025	FIKIH KERANGSAAN K. A. Fauzi Hamzah Syaam	QOIDAH FIKIH K. M. Ma'rufan Mukhlisin	FIKIH KERANGSAAN K. A. Fauzi Hamzah Syaam	QOIDAH FIKIH K. M. Ma'rufan Mukhlisin	FIKIH KERANGSAAN K. A. Fauzi Hamzah Syaam	QOIDAH FIKIH K. M. Ma'rufan Mukhlisin	FIKIH KERANGSAAN K. A. Fauzi Hamzah Syaam	QOIDAH FIKIH K. M. Ma'rufan Mukhlisin
12	Jumat Pahing	08 Muharam 1447	04 Juli 2025	QOIDAH FIKIH K. M. Ma'rufan Mukhlisin	USHUL FIKIH K. M. Ma'rufan Mukhlisin	QOIDAH FIKIH K. M. Ma'rufan Mukhlisin	USHUL FIKIH K. M. Ma'rufan Mukhlisin	QOIDAH FIKIH K. M. Ma'rufan Mukhlisin	USHUL FIKIH K. M. Ma'rufan Mukhlisin	QOIDAH FIKIH K. M. Ma'rufan Mukhlisin	USHUL FIKIH K. M. Ma'rufan Mukhlisin
13	Kamis Pon	14 Muharam 1447	10 Juli 2025	KULIAH UMUM TASAWUF K. M. Ma'rufan Mukhlisin				KULIAH UMUM TASAWUF K. M. Ma'rufan Mukhlisin			
14	Jumat Wage	15 Muharam 1447	11 Juli 2025	ILMU TAFSIR K. M. Thohari Muband	METODE PENELITIAN K. M. Thohari Muband	ILMU TAFSIR K. M. Thohari Muband	METODE PENELITIAN K. M. Thohari Muband	ILMU TAFSIR K. M. Thohari Muband	METODE PENELITIAN K. M. Thohari Muband	ILMU TAFSIR K. M. Thohari Muband	METODE PENELITIAN K. M. Thohari Muband
15	Kamis Kliwon	21 Muharam 1447	17 Juli 2025	SPI K. M. Anwarul Ula	TAFSIR & HADIS K. M. Thohari Muband	SPI K. M. Anwarul Ula	TAFSIR & HADIS K. M. Thohari Muband	SPI K. M. Anwarul Ula	TAFSIR & HADIS K. M. Thohari Muband	SPI K. M. Anwarul Ula	TAFSIR & HADIS K. M. Thohari Muband
16	Jumat Legi	22 Muharam 1447	18 Juli 2025	METODE PENELITIAN K. M. Thohari Muband	USHUL FIKIH K. M. Thohari Muband	METODE PENELITIAN K. M. Thohari Muband	USHUL FIKIH K. M. Thohari Muband	METODE PENELITIAN K. M. Thohari Muband	USHUL FIKIH K. M. Thohari Muband	METODE PENELITIAN K. M. Thohari Muband	USHUL FIKIH K. M. Thohari Muband
17	Kamis Pahing	28 Muharam 1447	24 Juli 2025	FIKIH KERANGSAAN K. A. Fauzi Hamzah Syaam	TAFSIR & HADIS K. M. Thohari Muband	FIKIH KERANGSAAN K. A. Fauzi Hamzah Syaam	TAFSIR & HADIS K. M. Thohari Muband	FIKIH KERANGSAAN K. A. Fauzi Hamzah Syaam	TAFSIR & HADIS K. M. Thohari Muband	FIKIH KERANGSAAN K. A. Fauzi Hamzah Syaam	TAFSIR & HADIS K. M. Thohari Muband
18	Jumat Pon	29 Muharam 1447	25 Juli 2025	ILMU TAFSIR K. M. Thohari Muband	USHUL FIKIH K. M. Thohari Muband	ILMU TAFSIR K. M. Thohari Muband	USHUL FIKIH K. M. Thohari Muband	ILMU TAFSIR K. M. Thohari Muband	USHUL FIKIH K. M. Thohari Muband	ILMU TAFSIR K. M. Thohari Muband	USHUL FIKIH K. M. Thohari Muband
19	Kamis Wage	06 Shafar 1447	31 Juli 2025	FIKIH KERANGSAAN K. A. Fauzi Hamzah Syaam	METODE PENELITIAN K. M. Thohari Muband	FIKIH KERANGSAAN K. A. Fauzi Hamzah Syaam	METODE PENELITIAN K. M. Thohari Muband	FIKIH KERANGSAAN K. A. Fauzi Hamzah Syaam	METODE PENELITIAN K. M. Thohari Muband	FIKIH KERANGSAAN K. A. Fauzi Hamzah Syaam	METODE PENELITIAN K. M. Thohari Muband
20	Jumat Kliwon	07 Shafar 1447	01 Agustus 2025	METODE PENELITIAN K. M. Thohari Muband	USHUL FIKIH K. M. Thohari Muband	METODE PENELITIAN K. M. Thohari Muband	USHUL FIKIH K. M. Thohari Muband	METODE PENELITIAN K. M. Thohari Muband	USHUL FIKIH K. M. Thohari Muband	METODE PENELITIAN K. M. Thohari Muband	USHUL FIKIH K. M. Thohari Muband
21	Kamis Legi	13 Shafar 1447	07 Agustus 2025	FIKIH KERANGSAAN K. A. Fauzi Hamzah Syaam	QOIDAH FIKIH K. M. Ma'rufan Mukhlisin	FIKIH KERANGSAAN K. A. Fauzi Hamzah Syaam	QOIDAH FIKIH K. M. Ma'rufan Mukhlisin	FIKIH KERANGSAAN K. A. Fauzi Hamzah Syaam	QOIDAH FIKIH K. M. Ma'rufan Mukhlisin	FIKIH KERANGSAAN K. A. Fauzi Hamzah Syaam	QOIDAH FIKIH K. M. Ma'rufan Mukhlisin
22	Jumat Pahing	14 Shafar 1447	08 Agustus 2025	QOIDAH FIKIH K. M. Ma'rufan Mukhlisin	USHUL FIKIH K. M. Ma'rufan Mukhlisin	QOIDAH FIKIH K. M. Ma'rufan Mukhlisin	USHUL FIKIH K. M. Ma'rufan Mukhlisin	QOIDAH FIKIH K. M. Ma'rufan Mukhlisin	USHUL FIKIH K. M. Ma'rufan Mukhlisin	QOIDAH FIKIH K. M. Ma'rufan Mukhlisin	USHUL FIKIH K. M. Ma'rufan Mukhlisin
23	Kamis Pon	20 Shafar 1447	14 Agustus 2025	DIKLAT MANAHIJ AL-BAHTSI				DIKLAT MANAHIJ AL-BAHTSI			
24	Jumat Wage	21 Shafar 1447	15 Agustus 2025	DIKLAT MANAHIJ AL-BAHTSI				DIKLAT MANAHIJ AL-BAHTSI			
25	Kamis Kliwon	27 Shafar 1447	21 Agustus 2025	FIKIH KERANGSAAN K. A. Fauzi Hamzah Syaam	SPI K. M. Anwarul Ula	FIKIH KERANGSAAN K. A. Fauzi Hamzah Syaam	SPI K. M. Anwarul Ula	FIKIH KERANGSAAN K. A. Fauzi Hamzah Syaam	SPI K. M. Anwarul Ula	FIKIH KERANGSAAN K. A. Fauzi Hamzah Syaam	SPI K. M. Anwarul Ula
26	Jumat Legi	28 Shafar 1447	22 Agustus 2025	ILMU TAFSIR K. M. Thohari Muband	USHUL FIKIH K. M. Thohari Muband	ILMU TAFSIR K. M. Thohari Muband	USHUL FIKIH K. M. Thohari Muband	ILMU TAFSIR K. M. Thohari Muband	USHUL FIKIH K. M. Thohari Muband	ILMU TAFSIR K. M. Thohari Muband	USHUL FIKIH K. M. Thohari Muband
27	Kamis Pahing	04 R. Awal 1447	28 Agustus 2025	FIKIH KERANGSAAN K. A. Fauzi Hamzah Syaam	QOIDAH FIKIH K. M. Ma'rufan Mukhlisin	FIKIH KERANGSAAN K. A. Fauzi Hamzah Syaam	QOIDAH FIKIH K. M. Ma'rufan Mukhlisin	FIKIH KERANGSAAN K. A. Fauzi Hamzah Syaam	QOIDAH FIKIH K. M. Ma'rufan Mukhlisin	FIKIH KERANGSAAN K. A. Fauzi Hamzah Syaam	QOIDAH FIKIH K. M. Ma'rufan Mukhlisin
28	Jumat Pon	05 R. Awal 1447	29 Agustus 2025	QOIDAH FIKIH K. M. Ma'rufan Mukhlisin	METODE PENELITIAN K. M. Thohari Muband	QOIDAH FIKIH K. M. Ma'rufan Mukhlisin	METODE PENELITIAN K. M. Thohari Muband	QOIDAH FIKIH K. M. Ma'rufan Mukhlisin	METODE PENELITIAN K. M. Thohari Muband	QOIDAH FIKIH K. M. Ma'rufan Mukhlisin	METODE PENELITIAN K. M. Thohari Muband
	Kamis Wage	11 R. Awal 1447	04 September 2025	LIBUR MAULID							
	Jumat Kliwon	12 R. Awal 1447	05 September 2025	LIBUR MAULID							
29	Kamis Legi	18 R. Awal 1447	11 September 2025	FIKIH KERANGSAAN K. A. Fauzi Hamzah Syaam	QOIDAH FIKIH K. M. Ma'rufan Mukhlisin	FIKIH KERANGSAAN K. A. Fauzi Hamzah Syaam	QOIDAH FIKIH K. M. Ma'rufan Mukhlisin	FIKIH KERANGSAAN K. A. Fauzi Hamzah Syaam	QOIDAH FIKIH K. M. Ma'rufan Mukhlisin	FIKIH KERANGSAAN K. A. Fauzi Hamzah Syaam	QOIDAH FIKIH K. M. Ma'rufan Mukhlisin
30	Jumat Pahing	19 R. Awal 1447	12 September 2025	QOIDAH FIKIH K. M. Ma'rufan Mukhlisin	USHUL FIKIH K. M. Ma'rufan Mukhlisin	QOIDAH FIKIH K. M. Ma'rufan Mukhlisin	USHUL FIKIH K. M. Ma'rufan Mukhlisin	QOIDAH FIKIH K. M. Ma'rufan Mukhlisin	USHUL FIKIH K. M. Ma'rufan Mukhlisin	QOIDAH FIKIH K. M. Ma'rufan Mukhlisin	USHUL FIKIH K. M. Ma'rufan Mukhlisin
31	Kamis Pon	25 R. Awal 1447	18 September 2025	TAFSIR & HADIS K. M. Thohari Muband	SPI K. M. Anwarul Ula	TAFSIR & HADIS K. M. Thohari Muband	SPI K. M. Anwarul Ula	TAFSIR & HADIS K. M. Thohari Muband	SPI K. M. Anwarul Ula	TAFSIR & HADIS K. M. Thohari Muband	SPI K. M. Anwarul Ula
32	Jumat Wage	26 R. Awal 1447	19 September 2025	ILMU TAFSIR K. M. Thohari Muband	METODE PENELITIAN K. M. Thohari Muband	ILMU TAFSIR K. M. Thohari Muband	METODE PENELITIAN K. M. Thohari Muband	ILMU TAFSIR K. M. Thohari Muband	METODE PENELITIAN K. M. Thohari Muband	ILMU TAFSIR K. M. Thohari Muband	METODE PENELITIAN K. M. Thohari Muband
	Jumat Legi	04 R. Akhir 1447	26 September 2025	UJIAN AKHIR SEMESTER I							

Figure 2. Learning Schedule

Traditional (primordial) management

Another factor that affects the governance, curriculum development and technological integration is traditional (primordial) management. The results of interview are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Summary points of the traditional (primordial) management in *pesantren*

Coding	Statement
Leadership	“The leadership structure of <i>ma'had aly</i> differs slightly from that of conventional universities. The highest authority in <i>ma'had aly</i> is the caretaker, followed by the senate chair and its members, then the <i>mudir 'am</i> (rector) and deputy <i>mudir</i> (vice rector), along with other officials responsible for specific roles.” (R2)
Teaching Staff	“The appointment of teaching staff is determined internally by the <i>masyayikh</i> council (a body akin to a university senate). For example, the majority of instructors at Lirboyo are alumni of the same institution, ensuring that their competencies and

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Coding	Statement
	conduct align with the internal quality assurance system rooted in <i>pesantren</i> education.” (R2) “Resource management at <i>Ma'had Aly</i> is carried out in a structured manner involving 184 staff divided into policy-making and policy-implementing positions. Each implementing field has specific tasks, systematic work guidelines, and is facilitated by routine evaluations through periodic meeting forums.” (R3)
Administrative Structure	“Generally, the administration in <i>ma'had aly</i> is organized into various bodies according to institutional needs. These bodies are coordinated under the supervision of seven <i>mudir</i> , the <i>mudir 'am</i> , and the caretakers. Each unit is structured with a chairperson, secretary, treasurer, and their respective deputies.” (R1)
Lecturers	“Lecturers at <i>ma'had aly</i> are typically senior <i>santri</i> (students) or alumni possessing expertise in relevant fields.” (R1) “The teaching staff at <i>Ma'had Aly</i> consists of 17 main lecturers with a background of <i>kyai</i> and alumni of Islamic boarding schools, with various roles such as <i>Mustabiq</i> lecturers, <i>Munammib</i> lecturers, non-permanent lecturers, and guest lecturers. In addition, there are around 141 senior students who serve as administrative, academic, and technical implementers according to their respective fields.” (R3)
Students	“ <i>Ma'had Aly</i> students do not come from beginners, but rather those who have been able to access Arabic literature since undergraduate level, let alone postgraduate level. Recruitment is focused on alumni of <i>Madrasah Aliyah</i> Lirboyo, with high standards and strict selection, including matriculation requirements for candidates from outside.” (R4)
Policymakers	“The <i>masyayikh</i> council holds the authority to formulate the curriculum, structure the leadership, and determine lecturer recruitment. Meanwhile, the <i>mudir</i> is responsible for coordinating learning activities. Faculty meetings are held twice annually, complemented by frequent sessions that serve as forums for deliberation (<i>musyawarah</i>) and evaluation, primarily within the <i>mudir</i> or leadership domain. The <i>masyayikh</i> council also convenes three times a year: at the beginning, mid-year, and end of the academic cycle, during which evaluations and planning are conducted.” (R2)
Decision-Making	“Decision-making is carried out through <i>musyawarah</i> (consultative deliberation) led by the caretakers via the Small Committee Session. The outcomes are formally documented in the Results of the Small Committee Session.” (R1) “Decision-making in <i>Ma'had Aly</i> is carried out in stages based on the level of difficulty and authority, in four categories; 1) Technical decisions are decided by the <i>Mudir</i> of each field, 2) Difficult decisions and those requiring large funds are decided by the <i>Mudir Am</i> , 3) Urgent decisions that have an impact on the education process are handed over to the Small Committee as the highest management institution in <i>Ma'had Aly</i> , 4) Very difficult and extraordinary decisions that affect the regulations and policies that have been made are then transferred to the Lirboyo Islamic Boarding School Welfare Development Agency.” (R3)
Management Challenges	“Several institutional aspects of <i>Ma'had Aly</i> still need strengthening, such as the unformulated Master Plan for Development, weak library management, and less than optimal facilitation of research and final project guidance. In addition, some lecturers have not met professional qualifications, and the internal quality assurance system has not been running effectively.” (R3)

Table 3 illustrates that *ma'had aly* management remains rooted in traditional *pesantren* practices. This is evident in its leadership model, which centers on the *kiai* as the principal decision-maker in both academic and administrative domains. Institutional governance is still largely based on trust and cultural norms rather than strict formal bureaucratic systems. Additionally, teaching and administrative staff are predominantly recruited from within the *pesantren* community itself, with greater emphasis on religious depth and institutional loyalty than on formal academic certification. Administrative procedures and governance models are relatively simple, relying more on inherited customary practices than on standardized written

protocols. While some *ma'had aly* institutions have begun integrating modern management systems, the majority continue to uphold traditional patterns of institutional governance. Consequently, *ma'had aly* remains a reflection of *pesantren*-based management, where religious values and tradition prevail over modern formal systems.

Table 3 also reveals three dominant patterns indicating the persistence of traditional management within *ma'had aly*. First, in terms of administration, the leadership structure remains centered on the *kyai* and a select group of *pesantren* administrators who play a central role in determining academic policy and student affairs. Second, regarding staff composition, both educational and administrative personnel predominantly emerge from within the *pesantren* environment, with recruitment prioritizing Islamic scholarly competence and alignment with *pesantren* values over formal academic standards. Third, the decision-making process remains highly centralized, with authority residing primarily in the hands of the *kyai*. As a result, the involvement of modern administrative systems or formal bureaucratic structures remains limited. These three aspects underscore that *ma'had aly* continues to follow the traditional *pesantren* governance model, where culturally based leadership and personal relationships are more influential than formal systems. Moreover, policymaking is more frequently determined by religious authority than by modern administrative mechanisms.

The interview results in Table 3 can be connected to the system of personal structure and leadership seen in Appendix 1 and its organogram in Appendix 2. The system of leadership and personal structure exemplifies that KH. M. Anwar Manshur and KH. Abdullah Kafabihi Mahrus, both residing in the *pesantren* centrally enact as the spiritual and institutional leaders. They were supported by six senates determined by senior *kyai*, multiple directors, secretaries, and treasures. From this kind of positions, the structure at *pesantren* maintains male-role. In the part of organizational map, there is a centralized and hierarchical management structure, dominated by traditional Islamic divisions, such as tarbiyah, tashfiyah, and tafaquh. The structure mostly signifies the *pesantren's* goal to transform religious knowledge and regulate the moral, spiritual and social values to all of its members. There was an absence of interdisciplinary divisions, such as curriculum development, technology integration or student welfare.

Curriculum decontextualization

Curriculum challenge aspect is categorized as the third factor that affects the governance, curriculum development and technological integration. The results of interview are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Summary points of curriculum challenges in *pesantren*

Coding	Statement
Tiered curriculum	<p>“The curriculum of <i>Ma'had Aly</i> Lirboyo is a continuation of the educational fra of Madrasah Hidayatul Mubtadiin, which has long been implemented. The t materials and learning processes follow a classical and tiered structure; howe levels at <i>ma'had aly</i> are differentiated by semester-based stages.” (R1)</p> <p>”The curriculum series includes among others; Regular Lectures, General Lectures, Scientific Areas, Bahtsul Masail, Usul Fiqh Lectures, Al-Mahalli Deliberations, Fathul Qorib Deliberations, Ngaji Bandongan, Research and Writing of Thesis Papers.” (R3)</p>
Religious and general focus	<p>“The <i>ma'had aly</i> curriculum is rooted in Islamic values, which results in limited engagement with contemporary issues. Moreover, general education</p>

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	<p>courses—commonly found in mainstream higher education—are not prioritized within the <i>ma'had aly</i> curriculum.” (R2)</p> <p>“The courses offered are massively based on normative religious bases. Additionally, the composition of the curriculum at <i>Ma'had Aly</i> still refers to the composition of the <i>pesantren</i> curriculum, both in basic courses, main courses, and supporting courses are still based on the material, values, and orientations possessed by <i>pesantren</i> institutions.” (R3)</p>
Curricular reference (<i>madhbab</i>)	<p>“The curriculum at <i>ma'had aly</i> draws on religious education models from the Middle East, such as Al-Azhar in Egypt and Makkah’s Munkura. It remains oriented around specific legal schools (<i>madhabib</i>), causing instruction to emphasize Islamic doctrinal views over the development of broader scientific or interdisciplinary knowledge.” (R2)</p> <p>The <i>Ma'had Aly</i> curriculum is oriented towards producing <i>Fiqh</i> and <i>Usbul Fiqh</i> experts who are deep in religious knowledge, have morals, have a global outlook and are committed to nationalism. This curriculum is patterned after the <i>Shafi'i</i> school of thought with clear scientific <i>sanad</i>, based on <i>mi'tabar</i>. (R3).</p>
Curricular continuity	<p>“The curriculum at <i>ma'had aly</i> inherits the distinctive features of <i>pesantren</i> education. For example, Ma'had Aly Lirboyo continues using the same curriculum as its middle and primary education programs. As an illustration, <i>usul fiqh</i> taught at the <i>muadalab</i> (intermediate) level begins with basic texts and is followed at the <i>ma'had aly</i> level by more advanced texts such as <i>Jam' al-Jawami'</i>.” (R2)</p>
Curriculum contextualization	<p>“<i>Ma'had aly</i> offers three types of courses: general lectures, specialization lectures, and regular courses. It also organizes <i>daurab ilmiah</i> (scholarly workshops), where national scholars or international <i>shuyukh</i> are invited to discuss specific issues from scholarly perspectives. Unlike general lectures, <i>daurab ilmiah</i> is restricted to students who pass a selection process.” (R2)</p> <p>“The scientific specifications of each Ma'had Aly differ according to the characteristics of its Islamic boarding school, such as astronomy at Ma'had Jombang which requires a technology laboratory. Meanwhile, Ma'had Aly Lirboyo with a specialization in National Fiqh makes greater use of the social environment as a natural laboratory.” (R4)</p> <p>“Curriculum contextualization has not been seen in the regular learning process, because the process carried out is the same as the Koran reading activities in Islamic boarding schools. However, it has been seen in the <i>bahtsul masail</i> process, although it is still hampered in using a scientific approach other than the yellow book and the lack of socializing the results in the context of community life.” (R3)</p>
Curricular model	<p>“The traditional <i>pesantren</i> learning model remains the dominant system. However, efforts have been made to enrich it with general and specialized lectures and <i>daurab ilmiah</i> to expose students to contemporary issues. The curriculum has also begun to emphasize academic writing.” (R3)</p>
Curriculum challenges	<p>“Not yet accustomed to modern research methods, the ratio of teachers to students is not yet ideal, not optimal in learning to convey ideas in written form because for now, they are more accustomed to oral forms.” (R1)</p> <p>“Getting used to scientific writing. In the task of making scientific papers (<i>Risalah</i>) there are still many shortcomings.” (R3)</p> <p>“Ma'had Aly faces challenges in institutional recognition, especially from the community and non-Ministry of Religious Affairs universities, as well as technical obstacles such as an internet-based reporting system that is not yet available. In addition, expectations for the academic quality of graduates are increasing, demanding that Ma'had Aly not only excel in morals but also in scientific responsibility and the quality of scientific knowledge.” (R4)</p>

Table 4 demonstrates that the curriculum of *ma'had aly* remains largely rooted in traditional *pesantren* frameworks. This is evident in the dominance of *kitab kuning* (classical Islamic texts) as core instructional material, focusing primarily on Islamic sciences such as *fiqh*,

tafsir, *hadith*, and *tasawwuf*. General subjects are offered only minimally and are not a central component of the learning process. Furthermore, the curriculum is heavily influenced by particular *madhabib*, especially the Shafi'i school in *fiqh*, and continues to employ a normative and textual approach in religious studies. Contextualization of the curriculum in response to global challenges and technological developments remains limited. Pedagogical methods prioritize textual comprehension over critical engagement with contemporary issues. Although there have been incremental attempts to align the curriculum with modern needs—such as introducing scholarly workshops and academic writing—the dominant orientation of *ma'had aly* remains conservative, preserving the educational model and values of traditional *pesantren*. The teaching approach continues to emphasize mastery of religious knowledge rather than the acquisition of modern competencies.

Table 4 also shows three main patterns that highlight the *pesantren*-based nature of the *ma'had aly* curriculum. First, in terms of curriculum composition, religious subjects dominate the syllabus, with *kitab kuning* studies at the core, while general education subjects serve only a supplementary role. Second, regarding curricular orientation and emphasis, *ma'had aly* tends to adhere to specific *madhabib*, especially in *fiqh* and *usul al-din*, resulting in instructional methods that are normative and textual rather than analytical or interdisciplinary. Third, in terms of contextual relevance, the curriculum is still insufficiently responsive to global trends and modern technologies, as the focus remains on classical texts with limited application to contemporary contexts.

Additionally, there are some documentations that showed the curriculum decontextualization in *mabad aly*. These can be seen in the course schedule in Appendix 3, list of turath texts in Appendix 4, and its body of knowledge in Appendix 5. The academic schedule at *ma'had aly* comprises a set of core courses, such as *fiqh*, *usul-al fiqh*, *tasawwuf*, *hadith*, history of Islamic civilization and research methodology. Additionally, the Islamic sociology, Islamic psychology, and Islamic philosophy are part of academic course the students should learn. From these subjects, Islamic teachings take dominant portions in the first and second semesters. The engagement on sociology, psychology, and philosophy are also introduced. This teaching reflects dimensions of Islamic thoughts which indicate a gradual curricular expansion beyond classical texts. These courses incorporate Islamic perspectives within contemporary human sciences. In alignment with the Islamic courses, most of the references were derived from the classical texts or turath, except research methodology course. It indicates that the curriculum prioritizes classical texts, rather than secular integrating thoughts. Finally, there was a lack of technology use and collaboration activities in the learning and teaching process. The technology integration was not clearly stated as the instructional media by the teacher and the learning media by the students. Similarly, the learning activity was mostly done by lecturing, questioning and answering.

Discussion

This study identifies cultural barriers and challenges that hinder *ma'had aly* from evolving into a competitive Islamic higher education institution. These challenges are primarily rooted in the dominance of *pesantren* conservatism, a primordial and traditional management model, and a curriculum that lacks contextual relevance to global and technological developments. The findings indicate that the deeply entrenched conservative culture impedes innovation and the adoption of new approaches, resulting in resistance to change perceived as a threat to the status quo (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015). Furthermore, management innovation emerges as a critical factor in ensuring *ma'had aly's* transformation into an adaptive and relevant institution (Ikhsanudin et al. 2013). These findings imply the need for strategic interventions to address both internal and external factors that hinder the institution's development. With an innovation strategy grounded in Islamic tradition yet responsive to globalization, *ma'had aly* has the potential to enhance its standing as a competitive Islamic higher education institution.

The cultural barriers at *ma'had aly* are largely influenced by the dominant conservative mindset within the *pesantren* environment. Traditions preserved without adapting to contemporary developments can lead to institutional stagnation and a decline in competitiveness (Wisarja & Sudarsana, 2017). In the context of globalization and technological advancement, *ma'had aly's* inability to adapt to contemporary expectations places the institution at risk of losing its relevance. This presents a substantial challenge in meeting the expectations of stakeholders and society. As a higher education institution rooted in *pesantren* values, *ma'had aly* holds considerable potential to preserve Islamic traditions while introducing modern innovations. Identifying cultural challenges—such as resistance to change—is a crucial step in overcoming the status quo and fostering innovation that aligns with global relevance (Cummings et al. 2016). By addressing the root causes of these challenges, *ma'had aly* can construct a strategic framework for sustainable development in the modern era.

The findings of this study offer a nuanced understanding of how cultural barriers—such as resistance to modernization and traditional management structures—affect the long-term viability of *ma'had aly*. Conservatism within *pesantren* settings often safeguards traditional values but can obstruct the innovation necessary to respond to global demands (Abdullah, 2017; Ma'arif dkk., 2025; Mumtaz, Muafiah, & Witro, 2024; Utama & Salim, 2024; Yamin, 2023). This study emphasizes the significance of innovative management approaches in striking a balance between tradition and modernity. Whereas Ikhsanudin et al.'s (2013) study primarily focused on curricular content, this research underscores the necessity of a comprehensive institutional approach to ensure the competitiveness of *ma'had aly*. The findings also support existing theories regarding the importance of institutional transformation to generate innovations relevant to global challenges (Maskuri, 2024). Accordingly, this study offers a fresh perspective on overcoming cultural constraints through integrated institutional strategies.

This research broadens the discourse on *ma'had aly* by focusing on cultural barriers, in contrast to earlier studies that emphasized curriculum and academic traditions (Ikhsanudin et al, 2013). While sharing a common concern for the transformation of Islamic education, this study contributes a new dimension by identifying institutional management as a pivotal factor in the development of a competitive *ma'had aly*. Maskuri (2024) notes that existing policies concerning *ma'had aly* suffer from implementation gaps, particularly in institutional aspects. This

study adds a critical dimension by highlighting the role of innovative management in addressing these gaps and provides a clearer roadmap for the future development of *ma'had aly*. To overcome cultural barriers, *ma'had aly* must develop a professional, innovative, and results-oriented management system. First, the institution should reinforce policies that support institutional transformation, particularly in leadership, curriculum design, and academic services. Second, it is essential to integrate technology-based approaches in administration and instruction to ensure that *ma'had aly* remains relevant in the digital era. Third, internal resources, including faculty and infrastructure, must be effectively managed to generate sustainable value (Barney & Clark, 2017). Finally, *ma'had aly* should establish strategic partnerships with other institutions to expand its networks and enhance program quality. Through this approach, *ma'had aly* can overcome existing barriers and build a competitive and future-relevant institutional foundation.

CONCLUSION

This study offers critical insights into the cultural barriers and challenges confronting *ma'had aly* in its pursuit of becoming a competitive Islamic higher education institution. The principal obstacles identified include the dominance of *pesantren* conservatism, a rigid and traditional management style, and a curriculum that lacks contextual alignment with global demands and technological advancements. However, the study affirms that these barriers are not insurmountable limitations but rather opportunities to reassess and strategically guide institutional transformation. Nonetheless, this study has several limitations. Its primary focus on cultural barriers and challenges means that structural aspects and the inherent strengths of *ma'had aly* remain underexplored. Furthermore, limited access to documentation and representativeness of data sources may affect the comprehensiveness of the analysis. Therefore, future research is necessary to investigate the unique strengths and potential of *ma'had aly*, which may offer valuable lessons for managing other Islamic educational institutions. Subsequent studies could also examine the effectiveness of institutional transformation strategies, including assessments of how well traditional values are balanced with modern educational demands. The practical implications of this research emphasize the necessity of a holistic approach involving visionary leadership, professional resource management, and technological integration to facilitate the transformation of *ma'had aly* into a relevant, innovative, and competitive Islamic higher education institution.

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