

Tradition and Modernization in the Transformation of Ma'had Aly in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

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This study analyzes the role of Ma'had Aly as a guardian of Islamic traditions and scholarly authority, identifies contemporary educational challenges, and formulates strategies for institutional strengthening through a qualitative approach utilizing a library research method. Data were obtained from regulations governing pesantren and religious higher education, as well as Scopus-indexed and Sinta-accredited journal articles published in the past decade. Data analysis involved content and thematic analysis, including data reduction, coding, categorization, cross-source comparison, and conclusion drawing. Findings indicate that Ma'had Aly maintains scholarly authority through mastery of classical Islamic texts (kitab kuning), chains of transmission (sanad), specialized fields (takhassus), the kiai-student relationship, deliberation (musyawarah), legal discourse (bahtsul masail), and the development of the istinbat method. These traditions are dynamic, evolving through methodological, contextual, critical, and maqasidi approaches. Key challenges include higher education standardization, curriculum relevance, limited research culture, human resource quality, digital transformation, and quality assurance. Institutional strengthening should prioritize an integrative curriculum, faculty competency enhancement, research development, digitization of scholarly sources, network expansion, and quality assurance that integrates formal indicators with the epistemic characteristics of pesantren. The study underscores the importance of selective modernization that reinforces, rather than displaces, the traditions and scholarly authority of Ma'had Aly.

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Introduction

Pesantren are vital institutions for maintaining the continuity of Islamic education and intellectual traditions in Indonesia. For a long time, pesantren have served the functions of education, training future religious scholars, character development, da'wah, and community empowerment. Their status received formal recognition through Law No. 18 of 2019 on Pesantren, which guarantees recognition, affirmation, facilitation, operational independence, and equal quality standards for pesantren graduates (Undang-Undang Republik Indonesia Nomor 18 Tahun 2019 tentang Pesantren, 2019). At the higher education level, Government Regulation No. 46 of 2019 provides the foundation for higher education rooted in religious traditions and community needs (Peraturan Pemerintah Republik Indonesia Nomor 46 Tahun 2019 Tentang Pendidikan Tinggi Keagamaan, 2019). This regulation places Ma'had Aly in a strategic position by linking the pesantren educational tradition with the formal higher education system.

Ma'had Aly was established as a pesantren-based higher education institution focused on the in-depth study of religious knowledge and the training of future religious scholars. Regulation of the Minister of Religion No. 32 of 2020 stipulates that Ma'had Aly education is based on classical Islamic texts (kitab kuning), features specialized fields of study, and is aimed at producing graduates of good moral character, with a global perspective, and a strong commitment to the nation (Peraturan Menteri Agama Republik Indonesia Nomor 32 Tahun 2020 Tentang Ma'had Aly, 2020). These characteristics are upheld through scholarly lineage (sanad), the kiai-mahasantri relationship, mastery of the turats, deliberation (musyawarah), and the tradition of bahtsul masail. Studies by Juandi and Yasid indicate that the development of fiqh at Ma'had Aly does not stop at merely repeating the opinions of scholars but moves toward the application of a more contextual methodology of *usul al-fiqh* (Juandi & Yasid, 2016). This reasoning is reinforced through the application of *maqasid al-sharia*, openness to differing opinions, and consideration of the public interest in addressing contemporary issues (Yaqin et al., 2022). Thus, the scholarly tradition of Ma'had Aly is dynamic, as it is both inherited and developed through processes of argumentation and methodological renewal.

Developments indicate that preserving the Islamic scholarly tradition does not necessarily require rejecting the modern academic system. The sustainability of the Ma'had Aly scholarly tradition is greatly influenced by its curriculum design and teaching practices. The development of a curriculum based on classical Islamic texts (kitab kuning) in Aceh demonstrates that the khataman system can be integrated with semester credit units, academic evaluation, and the writing of scholarly papers (Zulkhairi & Muzakir, 2020). Learning innovations also take place through dialogue, structured assignments, public lectures, as well as textual, contextual, comparative, critical, and *maqasidi* approaches (Riswadi & Amrullah, 2023).

The formal recognition of Ma'had Aly as a form of higher education presents both opportunities and institutional pressures. As of March 2025, the Ministry of Religious Affairs recorded that 91 Ma'had Aly institutions had obtained operational permits across various regions of Indonesia (Kementerian Agama Republik Indonesia, 2025). This growth reflects the growing recognition of pesantren-based higher education. However, formal status also brings new demands regarding curriculum management, research, community service, academic staff, quality assurance, and accreditation. Faculty members' research and publication activities still face limitations in expertise, heavy teaching loads, insufficient budgets, and inadequate institutional support (Purnomo et al., 2024). Some Ma'had Aly institutions also approach modernization with caution, as standardization is perceived as potentially reducing pesantren autonomy and the authority of the kiai (Wajdi & Aulia, 2019). These conditions reveal a tension between the demands of modern higher education

management and the need to preserve the pesantren's epistemological distinctiveness.

The modernization of Ma'had Aly also affects the curriculum, teaching, governance, and the process of establishing scholarly authority. Curriculum development in Situbondo demonstrates a blend of administrative and grassroots pesantren approaches (Maktumah, 2024). A cross-case study in Sukorejo and Tebuireng identified a hybrid curriculum model that combines subject-oriented, student-centered, problem-based, and text-based approaches (Maktumah et al., 2025). In the field of management, the integration of student selection determines educational quality, the cultivation of pesantren values, academic activities, research, and learning evaluation ('Azah, 2023). However, modernization that is overly focused on administration risks reducing quality to mere compliance with documentation and uniformity of indicators. In fact, the legitimacy of Ma'had Aly remains tied to the sanad, mastery of the turats, the authority of the kiai, and public trust.

The literature on Ma'had Aly has expanded across various themes, but the discussions remain scattered and have not yet been integrated. Epistemological studies have largely highlighted the shift from a taqlidi approach toward manhaji, maqasidi, and contextual reasoning (Ishaq et al., 2025; Juandi & Yasid, 2016; Sulthon et al., 2024; Yaqin et al., 2022). Pedagogical studies address the teaching of classical Islamic texts, methodological innovations, changes in academic traditions, and the development of hybrid curricula (Riswadi & Amrullah, 2023; Zulkhairi & Muzakir, 2020). Research on religious moderation emphasizes tolerance, local culture, national commitment, and "kitab kuning" literacy as the foundation for fostering moderate attitudes (I. M. Abdullah et al., 2022; Afifuddin et al., 2023; Huda & Fitriana, 2023; Pamessangi et al., 2024). Studies on religious authority indicate that Ma'had Aly graduates combine traditional legitimacy with the ability to preach through social spaces and digital media (Halim, 2022). Meanwhile, management research places greater emphasis on institutional modernization, educational quality, research productivity, and accreditation (Arifin & Sulaeman, 2026; Purnomo et al., 2024; Wajdi & Aulia, 2019). This separation leaves an analytical gap regarding the relationship between tradition, modernization, and scholarly authority in the transformation of Ma'had Aly.

A study that integrates these three dimensions is necessary because the transformation of Ma'had Aly does not proceed linearly. Tradition is not limited to classical Islamic texts (kitab kuning) but also encompasses chains of transmission (sanad), scholarly methods, pedagogical relationships, exemplary conduct, and specialized fields (takhassus). Modernization encompasses changes in curriculum, governance, research, publications, technology, accreditation, and institutional relations with the state. Scholarly authority has also expanded, as the legitimacy of ulama is now shaped through mastery of the turats, academic competence, recognition by kiai, formal credentials, social engagement, and digital media (Halim, 2022; Ishaq et al., 2025).

The urgency of this research, therefore, lies in positioning tradition, modernization, and scholarly authority as three mutually influential elements in the transformation process of Ma'had Aly. This study aims to systematically explain the transformation of Ma'had Aly within the context of Indonesian Islamic education. The analysis is directed toward identifying the forms of scholarly tradition that have been preserved, the patterns of modernization that have been developed, and the resulting shifts in the sources of scholarly authority. This study does not proceed from the assumption that modernization always eliminates tradition or that tradition is always capable of addressing all changes. Theoretically, this study is expected to produce a conceptual framework that links epistemic continuity, institutional adaptation, and the reconstruction of authority. Practically, the research findings can serve as a basis for developing a curriculum, research culture, governance, and quality assurance that align with the character of Ma'had Aly. In the policy realm, this research can be used to evaluate the implementation of recognition,

affirmation, standardization, and accreditation to ensure they continue to respect the classical Islamic texts, scholarly chains of transmission, and the orientation toward the training of future religious scholars.

Method

This study used a qualitative library research approach to explore how Ma'had Aly helps preserve Islamic traditions and scholarly authority, responds to current educational challenges, and strengthens its institutional structure. The data included regulatory documents on Islamic boarding schools and higher religious education, along with journal articles from 2016 to 2026 that were indexed in Scopus or accredited by Sinta. Only full-text articles with clear publication details and relevance to the topic were considered. Data were collected by searching Scopus, the Sinta portal, Google Scholar, Crossref, official journal websites, the Legal Documentation and Information Network, and the Ministry of Religious Affairs Website using keywords related to Ma'had Aly, pesantren higher education, Islamic scholarly traditions, religious authority, classical Islamic texts, pesantren modernization, curriculum, institutional structure, and quality assurance. Sources were selected by reviewing titles, abstracts, keywords, publication years, indexing status, relevance, and completeness. The study excluded duplicate articles, conference proceedings, theses, popular articles, publications with unclear indexing, and articles that only briefly mentioned Ma'had Aly. Articles that met the criteria were read in full and recorded in a literature matrix with publication details, research focus, methods, key findings, and relevance. Data were analyzed using qualitative content and thematic analysis, including reduction, coding, categorization, cross-source comparison, presentation, and interpretation. The coding results were grouped into three themes: Islamic scholarly traditions and authority, challenges in contemporary education, and strategies to strengthen Ma'had Aly's institutional framework. To ensure validity, the study used source triangulation, checked for consistency across documents, and verified publication details such as DOI, year, journal name, and indexing status. Conclusions were drawn by identifying patterns, similarities, differences, and trends in the literature and relating them to the regulations that guide Ma'had Aly.

Results and Discussion

1. The Role of Ma'had Aly in Preserving Islamic Scholarly Traditions and Authority

Ma'had Aly has a primary mandate to preserve the continuity of Islamic scholarly traditions rooted in the pesantren system. Law No. 18 of 2019 recognizes the distinctiveness, independence, and educational functions of pesantren within the national education system (Undang-Undang Republik Indonesia Nomor 18 Tahun 2019 tentang Pesantren, 2019). Government Regulation No. 46 of 2019 places Ma'had Aly within the structure of religious higher education (Peraturan Pemerintah Republik Indonesia Nomor 46 Tahun 2019 Tentang Pendidikan Tinggi Keagamaan, 2019). Its status is further clarified by Regulation of the Minister of Religion No. 32 of 2020, which emphasizes tafaquh fiddin, classical Islamic texts (kitab kuning), the academic traditions of Islamic boarding schools, and the training of future religious scholars (Peraturan Menteri Agama Republik Indonesia Nomor 32 Tahun 2020 Tentang Ma'had Aly, 2020). This framework demonstrates that the preservation of tradition constitutes the institutional identity, not merely an ancillary activity in the delivery of pesantren higher education.

The scholarly tradition of Ma'had Aly is shaped by the "kitab kuning," the sanad, fields of takhassus, the kiai-mahasantri relationship, and pesantren learning methods. The "kitab

kuning" provides the textual foundation, while the sanad ensures the continuity of transmission and scholarly accountability. The takhassus fields direct education toward in-depth mastery of specific disciplines. The relationship between the kiai and students also fosters etiquette, integrity, and a service-oriented mindset qualities that are difficult to cultivate through formal education alone. The leadership of nyai at Ma'had Aly Nurul Jadid demonstrates that the continuity of classical text study is supported by religious competence, exemplary conduct, institutional support, and the ability to respond to technological changes (Amalia & Arifin, 2018). This tradition forms an epistemic system that integrates knowledge, methodology, authority, and character development.

Preserving this tradition does not mean maintaining a closed way of thinking. The development of fiqh at Ma'had Aly Situbondo has shifted from a dominance of the taqlidi approach toward the use of a manhaji approach grounded in *usul al-fiqh* (Bashori, 2017; Juandi & Yasid, 2016). The process of *istinbat al-ahkam* integrates texts from fiqh treatises, the Qur'an, Hadith, fiqh principles, *usul al-fiqh*, and considerations of the public interest (Sulthon et al., 2024; Yaqin et al., 2022). Subsequent developments integrated the bayani, ta'lili, and maqasidi approaches to address evolving social and legal issues (Ishaq et al., 2025). This pattern demonstrates renewal occurring from within the tradition, rather than through a break with the turats and sanad.

The curriculum translates scholarly traditions into a structured academic experience. The "kitab kuning"-based curriculum in Aceh retains the classical texts as the primary source but adapts the khataman system to include semester credits, evaluations, and the writing of scholarly papers (Zulkhairi & Muzakir, 2020). Ma'had Aly Situbondo has developed a blend of administrative and grassroots models through an orientation toward transmission, transaction, transformation, and transcendence (Maktumah, 2024). Cross-case studies in Sukorejo and Tebuireng demonstrate curriculum integration centered on classical texts, academic subjects, student scholars, and problem-solving (Maktumah et al., 2025). Innovations at Ma'had Aly Iqna' Ath-Thalibin also combine bandongan, sorogan, mudzakaroh, bahtsul masail, independent assignments, and relevant general education courses (Nashiruddin et al., 2025). This model underscores that the structure of higher education can be used to strengthen, rather than replace, pesantren traditions.

Ma'had Aly's scholarly authority is established through mastery of knowledge and the ability to address community needs. Learning innovations combine teacher-centered and student-centered approaches through dialogue, assignments, lectures, and textual, contextual, comparative, critical, and maqasidi analysis (Riswadi & Amrullah, 2023). This model transforms students from passive recipients of knowledge into active participants in testing arguments. Authority no longer stems solely from the ability to quote religious texts but also from the skill to apply them methodologically and responsibly. This shift preserves the teacher's role as an epistemic and moral guide. Thus, critical learning does not weaken the pesantren's authority but rather strengthens its rational and ethical foundations.

The authority of religious scholars also evolves through social engagement and new media. Graduates of Ma'had Aly in South Sulawesi maintain traditional da'wah practices while utilizing digital media to reach a broader audience (Halim, 2022). The contextualization of classical Islamic texts to address societal issues expands the institution's contribution to the circulation of Islamic knowledge (Taufiq, 2024). Religious moderation is reinforced through tolerance, acceptance of local culture, the exemplary leadership of kiai, commitment to the nation, and literacy in classical Islamic texts (A. Abdullah et al., 2023; I. M. Abdullah et al., 2022; Huda & Fitriana, 2023). The practice of mangaji tudang demonstrates that local culture can serve as a medium for fostering moderate attitudes without diminishing the depth of Islamic scholarship (Pamessangi et al., 2024). Contemporary scholarly authority, therefore, rests on the depth of tradition,

methodological competence, moral integrity, and social relevance.

The role of Ma'had Aly as a guardian of tradition is productive, not defensive. The sanad safeguards the integrity of transmission, while the "kitab kuning" provides the depth of sources. The curriculum, deliberation, and istinbat activate this heritage to address new challenges. The resulting authority derives its legitimacy from the continuity of tradition and the ability to provide accountable answers.

2. Contemporary Educational Challenges Faced by Ma'had Aly

Formalization presents an initial challenge in the institutional development of Ma'had Aly. State recognition expands access, legitimizes diplomas, and enhances graduates' standing within the national education system. However, this recognition also brings demands regarding curriculum, the three pillars of higher education, faculty qualifications, academic administration, research, and quality assurance. As of March 2025, 91 Ma'had Aly institutions had obtained operational permits from the Ministry of Religious Affairs. This growth indicates institutional expansion while simultaneously increasing the need for consistent quality oversight. The issue lies in aligning formal requirements with the epistemic character of the pesantren, not in formal recognition itself (Wajdi & Aulia, 2019).

Standardization can strengthen accountability but also risks oversimplifying quality. Higher education systems generally emphasize documentation, semester credits, formal qualifications, publications, and data-driven reporting. Ma'had Aly institutions derive additional legitimacy from their sanad, the reputation of their kiai, mastery of the turats, the depth of their takhassus, and public trust. The dominance of administrative indicators can overlook these dimensions and promote uniformity across institutions. Accreditation that is insensitive to the character of pesantren risks measuring compliance with documentation more heavily than the quality of scholars' formation (Arifin & Sulaeman, 2026).

Curriculum relevance presents the next challenge. Ma'had Aly must maintain the depth of classical texts while equipping students with research, writing, communication, and the ability to understand contemporary issues. The modernization of pesantren curricula highlights the need for integration between formal academic structures and the distinctive learning methods of pesantren (Zulkhairi & Muzakir, 2020). A curriculum that is overly packed with general courses can diminish the depth of takhassus. Conversely, a curriculum focused solely on mastering texts can limit graduates' ability to navigate social change. The challenge lies in developing new competencies without resulting in a superficial and unfocused expansion of course material.

Pedagogical challenges relate to the need to develop students' analytical skills. Bandongan and sorogan are effective in ensuring accurate understanding of texts, but they do not always provide sufficient space for problem formulation and the testing of arguments. Deliberation, bahtsul masail, case studies, and scholarly writing can expand the functions of these traditional methods (Nashiruddin et al., 2025; Riswadi & Amrullah, 2023). Active learning still requires guidance from religious leaders and faculty members to ensure that freedom of expression is not separated from methodological discipline. Pedagogical reform must therefore expand students' capacity for critical thinking without compromising scholarly etiquette.

The culture of research and publication remains a significant weakness. Research activities among Ma'had Aly faculty members have not developed uniformly due to limitations in methodological competence, heavy teaching loads, non-academic duties, and institutional support (Purnomo et al., 2024). These conditions limit faculty development and reduce the pesantren's contribution to academic discourse. The outcomes of deliberations, bahtsul masail, and student treatises often possess scientific value but are not

always processed into systematic publications. This wealth of thought ultimately circulates within a limited environment and receives insufficient peer review. Strengthening research is necessary so that the pesantren's scholarly tradition can serve as a source of knowledge, not merely as an object of external research.

Digital transformation raises issues of access, competence, and authority. Digital learning resources are increasingly being utilized through libraries, electronic references, social media, learning platforms, and academic information systems (Basri & Asrori, 2022; Rahmadani & Nurhidin, 2025). Technology opens access to a wider range of books, journals, and academic forums. However, this ease of access also increases the risk of using unverified sources, instant understanding, and reliance on fragmented information. Social media even allows popularity to replace the lengthy process of establishing authority. Therefore, digitization must be accompanied by source literacy, scientific ethics, and the strengthening of knowledge verification skills.

The quality of human resources and academic facilities remains uneven. Faculty competence and infrastructure management are directly linked to the quality of Ma'had Aly graduates (Badrudin et al., 2021). Libraries, access to journals, technological facilities, discussion spaces, and research support determine the quality of the academic process. At the same time, the development of student scholars requires a selection system, competency mapping, mentoring, and evaluation aligned with the goals of training future religious scholars ('Azah, 2023). Limitations in resources cannot be resolved solely through physical construction. Competent faculty, an academic culture, and consistent management remain decisive factors.

The relevance of graduates is a key measure of an institution's sustainability. Ma'had Aly is expected to produce scholars who are faqih fi zamanih, scholars well-versed in their time, possess integrity, serve as role models, and are capable of addressing societal issues. However, changing social needs demand skills in communication, research, leadership, and technology use. The quality of graduates cannot be adequately demonstrated solely through graduation rates or accreditation status. Continuation of studies, professional engagement, social and religious service, and societal acceptance need to be tracked systematically. Assessments by the Majelis Masyayikh, competency evaluations, tracer studies, and alum networks can provide a stronger foundation for evaluating educational outcomes (Ismail et al., 2026).

Contemporary educational challenges reveal a tension between accountability and epistemic autonomy. Ma'had Aly institutions require modern systems to strengthen quality but cannot rely entirely on the metrics of general universities. Tradition, too, cannot be used as an excuse to avoid evaluation, research, and transparency. The necessary path is selective modernization grounded in the goal of training religious scholars.

3. Strategies for Institutional Strengthening of Ma'had Aly

Institutional strengthening must begin with affirming the academic identity of each Ma'had Aly. The field of takhassus must form the basis for developing graduate profiles, curricula, research, and community service. This identity must be translated into measurable competencies without diminishing the unique character of the pesantren. The Sukorejo and Tebuireng curriculum models demonstrate that standardization does not necessarily lead to uniformity. Ma'had Aly institutions can meet higher education requirements while maintaining distinct scholarly orientations. Affirming this identity will prevent these institutions from becoming general religious universities merely bearing the name of a pesantren. The curriculum must be developed through the integration of classical texts (turats), methodology, and contemporary issues. The kitab kuning must remain the primary source, but its use should be directed toward analysis and problem-solving.

Courses in research methodology, digital literacy, public communication, and the social sciences can serve as supporting tools for takhassus. Bahtsul masail, deliberation, and scholarly treatises must be preserved as the core of argumentation training. Curriculum innovations in Situbondo, Sukorejo, Tebuireng, and Sarang demonstrate that such integration can be achieved without undermining the traditional pesantren learning methods (Maktumah, 2024; Maktumah et al., 2025; Nashiruddin et al., 2025).

Faculty development should focus on academic, pedagogical, research, and publication competencies. Institutions need to provide training in research methodology, writing workshops, publication mentoring, research incentives, and a reduction in non-academic workload. Such support must be part of a regular program, not a one-time effort ahead of accreditation. Collaboration with universities and journals can expand access to advisors, data sources, and publication networks. A culture of research will flourish when faculty members are provided with time, facilities, recognition, and a supportive academic environment (Purnomo et al., 2024).

Research agendas should stem from the unique characteristics of each takhassus. Ma'had Aly fiqh programs can develop studies on contemporary law, while the Hadith field can strengthen the critical analysis of sanad, matn, and contextualization. The results of bahtsul masail, deliberations, and student theses can be developed into articles, scholarly books, or knowledge databases. A model of legal reform based on bayani, ta'lili, and maqasidi demonstrates the significant potential of the pesantren tradition to produce relevant academic contributions (Ishaq et al., 2025; Sulthon et al., 2024). This strategy strengthens academic autonomy because the needs of the tradition and society determine the research agenda.

Digital transformation must be designed to strengthen the scholarly ecosystem. Priorities include the digitization of libraries, religious texts, manuscripts, journals, administrative records, and documentation of research findings. The use of learning platforms must be accompanied by information literacy training for faculty and students. Social media can be used to disseminate concise, accurate, and responsible research findings. Institutions also need to establish guidelines for the use of artificial intelligence, citation ethics, and source verification. In this way, technology serves to expand access to and the influence of scholarship, rather than replacing the process of in-depth learning (Basri & Asrori, 2022; Halim, 2022; Rahmadani & Nurhidin, 2025).

Quality assurance must combine formal and substantive indicators. Formal indicators include the curriculum, faculty qualifications, administration, research, and academic services. Substantive indicators encompass mastery of classical texts, chains of transmission (sanad), the ability to derive legal rulings (istinbat), scholarly etiquette, the quality of theses, and graduates' contributions to society. Quality assurance systems, internal quality audits, assessments by the Majelis Masyayikh, competency evaluations, tracer studies, and alums networks can be integrated into a single improvement cycle (Ismail et al., 2026). This model maintains accountability without neglecting the epistemic character of the pesantren. Accreditation then serves as a tool for quality improvement, not merely a document review.

Student management must encompass selection, mentoring, evaluation, and career guidance. The selection process should assess candidates' foundational knowledge of religious texts, academic motivation, readiness to live in a pesantren, and integrity. Mentoring should integrate academic, spiritual, research, community service, and leadership activities. Evaluation based on mastery learning can ensure the attainment of competencies before students proceed to the next stage. Community service programs are also crucial as they strengthen students' emotional, intellectual, social, and economic independence. Integrated management will bridge the depth of knowledge with the readiness to fulfill social roles ('Azah, 2023).

Strengthening public authority requires the integration of religious moderation and social communication. A moderate attitude can be fostered through in-depth knowledge, the exemplary leadership of religious scholars, acceptance of local culture, and experiences in dialogue (Z. Abdullah et al., 2021; Huda & Fitriana, 2023; Pamessangi et al., 2024). This strategy is more effective than teaching moderation solely through supplementary materials. Advanced students need to be trained to present arguments openly, respectfully, and based on reliable sources. These skills are essential for addressing polarization, extremism, and the oversimplification of religious teachings in digital spaces. Graduates' authority will strengthen when deep knowledge is paired with social maturity.

Institutional and alums networks must be integrated into the sustainability strategy. Collaboration with universities, research institutions, Government agencies, publishers, and other Islamic boarding schools can strengthen faculty exchanges, scholarship programs, research initiatives, and publications. Alums can play a role in tracer studies, career mentoring, resource mobilization, and mapping community needs. These networks must be built on an equal footing so that Ma'had Aly retains autonomy in determining its academic agenda. Institutional strengthening ultimately rests on a clear identity, adequate resources, contextually relevant quality, and the ability to build collaborations.

Strategies to strengthen Ma'had Aly must be implemented as an interconnected system. A strong curriculum requires supportive faculty, facilities, research, and a quality assurance system. Digitalization requires digital literacy, while accreditation requires indicators that align with the nature of Islamic boarding schools. The ultimate goal is to produce scholars with profound knowledge, strong integrity, and relevant contributions.

Conclusion

Ma'had Aly plays a strategic role as an Islamic higher education institution that preserves pesantren-based traditions and scholarly authority. This role is fulfilled through mastery of the kitab kuning, preservation of the sanad, strengthening of takhassus fields, the pedagogical relationship between the kiai and mahasantri, and the use of methods such as musyawarah, bahtsul masail, and istinbat of Islamic law. The traditions that are preserved are not static but are developed through methodological, contextual, critical, and maqasidi approaches. Ma'had Aly's scholarly authority thus rests on the continuity of the turats, methodological competence, moral integrity, and the ability to respond to community needs. These findings affirm that Ma'had Aly's strength lies in its ability to develop traditions without severing ties to the sources of its scholarly legitimacy.

The challenges of contemporary education faced by Ma'had Aly include the standardization of higher education, curriculum relevance, the quality of human resources, a culture of research, digital transformation, and quality assurance. Formalization opens opportunities for institutional and graduate recognition but also carries the risk of homogenizing the pesantren education system. Limitations in publications, research competencies, academic facilities, and technology utilization indicate that modernization has not yet occurred uniformly. These challenges demand selective renewal so that institutional changes do not diminish the depth of takhassus, the authority of the kiai, and the epistemic character of the pesantren.

Institutional strengthening of Ma'had Aly must be achieved through curriculum integration, enhancing faculty competencies, fostering a culture of research, digital transformation, and context-specific quality assurance. The curriculum must position the turats as the foundation of scholarship and contemporary issues as the arena for its application. Quality assurance must also combine formal indicators with mastery of classical texts, chains of transmission (sanad), the ability to derive legal rulings (istinbat), scholarly etiquette, the quality of community service, and the sustainability of graduates.

Strengthening networks with academic institutions, alums, research institutions, and universities can expand resources without compromising Ma'had Aly's autonomy. Theoretically, this study demonstrates that tradition and modernization are not two poles that are always opposed. Practically, institutional transformation must be directed toward strengthening the capacity of tradition to respond to the changing times.

This study has limitations because all data are sourced from regulations and journal articles available over the past ten years. A literature-based approach cannot directly capture variations in implementation, internal conflicts, student experiences, or differences in capacity among Ma'had Aly institutions. The available literature is also still dominated by single-case studies, qualitative approaches, and discussions of specific institutions. Therefore, the conclusions of this study are stronger at the conceptual level than in terms of empirical generalizations.

Future research should employ a multisite study to compare curriculum models, governance structures, and scholarly authority across various Ma'had Aly institutions. Quantitative or mixed-methods approaches are also needed to measure graduate quality, pedagogical effectiveness, religious moderation, and the impact of digital transformation. Longitudinal studies could track alum career development, social authority, and contributions after completing their education.

Future research should also develop quality assurance instruments that integrate higher education standards with sanad, turats, takhassus, and community service. This direction is crucial to ensure that the strengthening of Ma'had Aly institutions does not stop at formal recognition but results in an authoritative, adaptive, and sustainable pesantren higher education system.

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