Decolonization of Islamic Education and Efforts to Achieve Academic Independence: A Case Study of Ma'had Aly Lirboyo Kediri

Syafik Ubaidila,[1] Mubaidi Sulaeman[2], Khamim[3]

[1][2] Universitas Islam Tribakti Lirboyo Kediri, Indonesia, [3]Politknik Negeri Pontianak, Indonesia

syafikubaidila@uit-lirboyo.ac.id, mubaidisulaeman@uit-lirboyo.ac.id, khamim@polnep.ac.id

Abstract

This study aims to examine how Ma'had Aly Lirboyo implements epistemological decolonization in Islamic education through the preservation of pesantren traditions and their integration into the formal higher education system. The background of this research is rooted in the dominance of Western epistemology within national education systems, which often marginalize the Islamic intellectual heritage. This is a field research study using a qualitative approach, employing techniques such as direct observation, in-depth interviews with Ma'had Aly administrators and educators, and documentation analysis of institutional policies and curricula. The findings reveal that Ma'had Aly Lirboyo successfully preserves traditional pesantren methods—such as *bandongan, sorogan, wetonan*, and *daurah ilmiah*—while adapting them to a structured academic system through the Fiqh Kebangsaan curriculum. This strategy has enabled the development of an Islamic education model that not only maintains *sanad* (chains of knowledge transmission) and scholarly authority but also responds effectively to national and global challenges. Theoretically, these findings reinforce the discourse of knowledge decolonization by demonstrating that local systems of knowledge—rooted in tradition, spirituality, and social context—can form legitimate, autonomous, and globally relevant educational frameworks.

Keywords: *Ma'had Aly Lirboyo, Islamic education, pesantren, epistemological decolonization, Fiqh Kebangsaan.*

Introduction

Education in Indonesia has undergone a long journey marked by ideological dynamics, reflecting the tension between local knowledge systems and colonial influences.[1] Since the Dutch colonial period, the formal education system introduced in the 19th century was explicitly designed

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[1] Indah Wahyu Puji Utami et al., "Decolonizing Indonesian History Curriculum, 1946–1964," *Paramita: Historical Studies Journal* 34, no. 1 (April 4, 2024), https://doi.org/10.15294/paramita.v34i1.43482.

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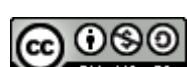
to serve the interests of colonial power, namely to produce educated labor within the framework of colonial bureaucracy, not for the intellectual liberation of society.[2] In this construction, traditional Islamic educational institutions such as pesantren were not only structurally marginalized but also epistemologically.[3] The concept of decolonizing Islamic education, which later emerged in contemporary debates, stems from an awareness of the dominance of Western epistemology, which has displaced the Islamic view of knowledge, education, and humanity. Thinkers such as Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas refer to this process as a form of secularization of knowledge that erases the dimensions of adab and spirituality in education.[4] Meanwhile, Fazlur Rahman criticized the stagnation of modern Islamic education due to its entrapment in formalism without revitalizing meaning and methods consistent with Islamic intellectual tradition.[5]

Furthermore, the decolonial approach, popularized by Latin American thinkers such as Linda Smith,[6] Ramon Grosfoguel,[7] Walter Mignolo[8] and Aníbal Quijano,[9] and translated into an Islamic context by figures like Rofiq Mudzakir[10] and Ziauddin Sardar,[11] highlights that education is not merely a space for knowledge transfer but also a political arena of identity and epistemic power. Within this framework, Islamic education—particularly pesantren—is viewed as an *epistemic alternative* that needs to be revitalized through a decolonial approach. Unfortunately, during the post-independence era, national education policies have continued to be inherited from a colonial and technocratic framework, which positions Islamic education as a marginal complement to the formal system. Thus, the demand for the decolonization of Islamic education is not merely a historical critique but also an effort to reconstruct an educational paradigm capable of integrating spiritual, ethical, and transformative values rooted in the Islamic heritage of the Nusantara region.

The hegemony of Western epistemology in the formal education system has created structural inequalities in the world of scholarship, where local knowledge systems, including the intellectual traditions of Islamic boarding schools, have been marginalized. This dominance has not only impacted methodological preferences that are rational-positivistic in nature, but also the eradication of spiritual, metaphysical, and ethical values inherent in Islamic sciences. Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas sharply criticized this process as a form *of secularization of* knowledge—

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[2] Harry J. Benda, "Decolonization in Indonesia: The Problem of Continuity and Change," *The American Historical Review* 70, no. 4 (1965): 1058–73, https://doi.org/10.2307/1846903; N. Bootsma, "The Discovery of Indonesia: Western (non-Dutch) Historiography on the Decolonization of Indonesia," *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 151, no. 1 (1995): 1–22.

[3] Fahimah 1974- Ulfat, "Decolonizing Religious Education: A Challenge for International Knowledge Transfer," *Educating Religious Education Teachers*, 2023, 167.

[4] Muhammad Naguib Al-Attas, "The Concept of Education in Islam: A Framework for an Islamic Philosophy of Education," 1991, https://philpapers.org/rec/ALATCO-2.

[5] Fazlur Rahman, "Islamization of Knowledge: A Response," *American Journal of Islam and Society* 5, no. 1 (September 1, 1988): 3–11, https://doi.org/10.35632/ajis.v5i1.2876.

[6] Jo-ann Archibald Q'um Q'um Xiiem, Jenny Bol Jun Lee-Morgan, and Jason De Santolo, *Decolonizing Research: Indigenous Storywork as Methodology* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019).

[7] Ramón Grosfoguel, "Decolonizing Post-Colonial Studies and Paradigms of Political-Economy: Transmodernity, Decolonial Thinking, and Global Coloniality," *TRANSMODERNITY: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World* 1, no. 1 (2011), https://cir.nii.ac.jp/crid/1360017285992058624.

[8] Walter D. Mignolo, "Introduction: Coloniality of power and de-colonial thinking," in *Globalization and the Decolonial Option* (Routledge, 2010).

[9] Aníbal Quijano and Edgardo LANDER, "Colonialidad del saber: eucentrismo e ciências sociais," *Perspectivas Latinoamericanas. Buenos Aires: CLACSO*, 2005.

[10] Muhamad Rofiq Muzakkir, *Decolonization: Critical Methodology in the Study of Humanities and Islamic Studies* (Yogyakarta: Bentala Foundation, 2022).

[11] Ziauddin Sardar, *The Touch of Midas: Science, Values, and Environment in Islam and the West* (Manchester University Press, 1984).

that is, the separation of knowledge from its ontological roots, namely revelation and ethics. For al-Attas, secularization not only creates a crisis of meaning in Muslim education,[12] but also undermines the Islamic epistemological hierarchy that places knowledge as a means to *ta'dib* (character formation) and not merely rational achievement. In the Indonesian context, this has serious implications for traditional Islamic educational institutions, particularly pesantren, which now face a dilemma between maintaining their epistemological autonomy or adapting to the technocratic structure of national education, which is steeped in secular values.[13]

Edward Said, in *Orientalism*, adds depth to this critique of epistemic dominance. He argues that Western studies of Islam have never been neutral but are part of an ideological project that positions "the Other" as an object of knowledge subordination ( ). Consequently, Islamic texts such as hadith are often treated as mere objects of rationalistic criticism, detached from their spiritual and social roots. Therefore, a decolonial approach to Islamic education, particularly within the pesantren context, is urgently needed. This is not only to free the knowledge system from its dependence on Western paradigms but also to rebuild a knowledge system rooted in revelation, etiquette, and the integration of reason and spirituality—a scholarly project that is not merely academic but also *liberationist* in *nature*.[14]

The discourse on the decolonization of education in Indonesia has long been a focus of academic study, particularly in relation to the colonial legacy that continues to dominate the knowledge system. Harry J. Benda[15] argues that decolonization in Indonesia has largely preserved colonial structures rather than replacing them, including in the field of education, thereby hindering postcolonial intellectual independence. In a more contemporary context, Zulfa Sakhiyya[16] identifies three forms of decolonization initiatives in Indonesian higher education—curriculum decolonization, academic self-decolonization, and research decolonization—that open up space for more equitable interaction between local and Western knowledge, while dismantling the colonial roots of academic practices. Meanwhile, Joseph E. B. Lumbard[17] highlights how Euro-American intellectual dominance in Islamic studies has marginalized Islamic epistemology, despite the significant potential of Islamic intellectual heritage in metaphysics and theology to build holistic higher education through a cognitive liberation approach. These three studies emphasize the importance of developing education rooted in local epistemology as a means of resisting Western domination. In this context, Islamic boarding schools—especially Ma'had Aly—hold a strategic position as spaces for epistemic liberation and laboratories for the decolonization of Islamic education oriented toward intellectual independence.

In this context, the study of Ma'had Aly Lirboyo is significant because this institution represents a distinctive form of pesantren higher education that seeks to " " build knowledge structures from the traditions of Nusantara Islam. To date, no research has specifically examined

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[12] Muhammad Naguib Al-Attas, *Knowledge, Language, Thought, and the Civilization of Islam: Essays in Honor of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas* (UTM Press, 2010).

[13] Junaidi Arsyad and Maisaroh Ritonga, "Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas' Contemplations About Islamic Education," *Proceedings of the International Seminar and Conference on Islamic Studies (ISCIS)* 2, no. 1 (October 8, 2023), https://doi.org/10.47006/iscis.v2i1.17675.

[14] Edward W. Said, "Orientalism," *The Georgia Review* 31, no. 1 (1977): 162–206.

[15] Benda, "Decolonization in Indonesia."

[16] Zulfa Sakhiyya, "Internationalizing or Decolonizing the Curriculum, Academic Self, and Research?: Exploring Decolonization Initiatives in Three Indonesian Universities," in *East and Southeast Asian Perspectives on the Internationalization of Higher Education* (Routledge, 2023).

[17] Joseph E. B. Lumbard, "Islam, coloniality, and the pedagogy of cognitive liberation in higher education," *Teaching in Higher Education* 0, no. 0 (n.d.): 1–11, https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2025.2468974.

how Ma'had Aly implements decolonization strategies in its curriculum, epistemology, and scholarly practices. This research aims to fill this gap by positioning Ma'had Aly Lirboyo as an empirical locus in the effort to liberate knowledge from the dominance of colonial educational structures. Through an in-depth case study approach, this research is expected to present an alternative model of Islamic higher education rooted in local values, traditional spirituality, and intellectual independence. This study also bridges the philosophical discourse of decolonization and the concrete transformation of Islamic education in the global era.

However, this integration is not without challenges. The pesantren education system, which is based on values, sanad, and spirituality, often conflicts with the national education system, which is more competency-oriented and administrative. Academic debates continue to rage about how to harmonize the two systems without losing the epistemic identity of pesantren. Therefore, the revitalization of pesantren is not about standardization, but rather about strengthening pesantren as a legitimate and credible alternative education system—a decolonial education laboratory capable of producing contextual, equitable knowledge rooted in authentic Islamic values.

Method

This study employs a qualitative approach with a case study design focused on Ma'had Aly Lirboyo as the empirical locus to understand the process of epistemological decolonization in pesantren higher education.[18] The research location was chosen because Ma'had Aly is a traditional Islamic higher education institution striving to revitalize its curriculum and knowledge system independently, rooted in the traditions of Nusantara Islam.[19] Data was collected through in-depth interviews with kyai, lecturers, administrators, and senior students directly involved in curriculum development and teaching practices,[20] participatory observation in the pesantren environment to capture the dynamics of the learning process and the integration of spiritual values, as well as document studies such as curricula, syllabi, and institutional policies related to epistemological decolonization strategies. [21]

Data analysis was conducted thematically using an interpretive approach to identify key themes related to educational decolonization, academic autonomy, and the challenges of integrating tradition and modernity, with triangulation between data sources to ensure validity. This study uses the epistemological decolonization theoretical framework of Walter Mignolo,[22] Rofiq Mudzakkir,[23] and Linda Smith,[24] as well as traditional Islamic epistemology from Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas and Fazlur Rahman, to analyze how Ma'had Aly reconstructs an authentic and contextual Islamic scientific system. Research ethics were upheld by providing participants with complete information, ensuring anonymity, and using data solely for academic purposes after obtaining written consent.

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[18] Joe R. Feagin, Anthony M. Orum, and Gideon Sjoberg, A *Case for the Case Study* (UNC Press Books, 2016).

[19] Ali Wafa, "The Contest Between Quality and Formality in Ma'had Aly," *MANAGIERE: Journal of Islamic Educational Management* 1, no. 1 (April 17, 2022): 86–106, https://doi.org/10.35719/managiere.v1i1.1428.

[20] Anna M. Ortiz, "The Qualitative Interview," in *Research in the College Context,* 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2015).

[21] Brigitte Smit and Anthony J. Onwuegbuzie, "Observations in Qualitative Inquiry: When What You See Is Not What You See," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 17, no. 1 (December 1, 2018): 1609406918816766, https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406918816766.

[22] Mignolo, "Introduction."

[23] Muzakkir, *Decolonization.*

[24] Xiiem, Lee-Morgan, and Santolo, *Decolonizing Research.*

Results and Discussion
The Concept of Decolonization in Islamic Education

Decolonization in Islamic education is a transformative project to liberate the scholarly system from Western colonial domination that marginalizes Islamic values and the experiences of Muslims. Abbasi highlights how colonialism has shaped the *"coloniality of* being" of Muslims, that is, the colonized way of life, thinking, and feeling shaped by Western modernity's knowledge constructions.[25] This is reinforced by Abdou, who refers to it as resistance through the relationship between Islam and anarchism as a form of liberation from epistemic hierarchies.[26] Leila Ahmed demonstrates how colonialism manipulated gender issues in Islam to support imperialist projects, revealing that Western epistemic interventions are not neutral but rather laden with power interests.[27] Within this framework, Al-Attas emphasizes the importance of Islamic education as a process of ta'dīb, namely the formation of civilized human beings through the integration of knowledge, morals, and spirituality.[28] Thus, decolonization not only demands the restoration of Islamic knowledge structures, but also the reconstruction of the ontology and fundamental values that shape the Muslim subject.

Expanding on this dimension, Michalinos Zembylas emphasizes that the decolonization of religious education also requires attention to the affective and emotional aspects involved in learning relationships. He encourages the creation of decolonial affective spaces in the classroom that can accommodate the emotional experiences of students and teachers in dealing with public discourses such as Islamophobia and multiculturalism.[29] This perspective affirms that decolonization of education is not sufficient if it only touches on cognitive and epistemological aspects; it must also address the realms of affect and intersubjectivity.[30] Thus, decolonized Islamic education becomes a space for historical healing, spiritual restoration, and the creation of inclusive learning communities rooted in Islamic tradition.

Decolonization in Islamic education is a comprehensive effort to free the education system from the legacy of epistemic colonialism, particularly the long-standing dominance of Western knowledge in the structure of Islamic scholarship. This concept is not merely about the transfer of political power or institutional reform, but demands a transformation of ways of thinking, value systems, learning methodologies, and curricula that have long been subject to Western universalistic standards.[31] In this context, decolonization is an intellectual and practical project that targets the ontological, epistemological, and practical foundations of Islamic education and studies.

Michalinos Zembylas adds an important dimension to this project, namely the need to pay attention to the affective dimension involved in decolonization. He emphasizes the importance of

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[25] Iskander Abbasi, "Islam, Muslims, and the Coloniality of Being: Reframing the Debate on Race and Religion in Modernity," *Journal for the Study of Religion* 33, no. 2 (2020), https://www.ajol.info/index.php/jsr/article/view/205273.

[26] Ehaab D. Abdou, *Education, Civics, and Citizenship in Egypt: Towards More Inclusive Curricular Representations and Teaching* (Springer Nature, 2023).

[27] Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (Yale University Press, 2021).

[28] Al-Attas, "The Concept of Education in Islam."

[29] Michalinos Zembylas, "Decolonising religious education through the prism of affect theory: analytical perspectives for approaching Islamophobia in curriculum and pedagogy," *British Journal of Religious Education* 45, no. 1 (January 2, 2023): 3–13, https://doi.org/10.1080/01416200.2022.2042672.

[30] Michalinos Zembylas, "Reinventing critical pedagogy as decolonizing pedagogy: The education of empathy," *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* 40, no. 5 (October 20, 2018): 404–21, https://doi.org/10.1080/10714413.2019.1570794.

[31] Mayssoun Sukarieh, "Decolonizing education, a view from Palestine: an interview with Munir Fasheh," *International Studies in Sociology of Education* 28, no. 2 (April 3, 2019): 186–99, https://doi.org/10.1080/09620214.2019.1601584.

recognizing the role of religious emotions, creating spaces for affective decolonization in the classroom, and understanding the affective experiences of students and educators in dealing with public discourse on multiculturalism and religious differences, especially in the context of Islamophobia.[32] This perspective opens the way for revealing colonial legacies in contemporary religious education and emphasizes the need to build decolonized affective communities in educational settings, so that decolonization is not only cognitive but also emotional and intersubjective.

Sajjad Rizvi, in his work *Decolonising 'Islam'*,[33] , argues that Islamic studies need to undergo intellectual decolonization in order to intervene and transform the way we understand the humanities, religion, and Islam itself. Rizvi begins with a critique of *the coloniality of knowledge* in Islamic studies—the tendency to treat Islam as a passive object studied through Western paradigms, rather than as an active subject with its own epistemology. He asserts that decolonization must be carried out by juxtaposing contemporary decolonial theory with internal Islamic epistemological sources, and in this regard, he emphasizes the importance of the thinking of Syed Hussein Alatas, a Malaysian sociologist who has long been neglected in global decolonial discourse.[34]

Alatas's thinking is highly relevant because it sharply dissects how intellectual colonization was carried out through six basic assumptions that demeaned non-Western peoples and reinforced the superiority of Western knowledge. This critique reveals that non-Western societies are often considered incompetent, in need of guidance, and unworthy of having their own standards of knowledge. This critique serves as a crucial foundation for efforts toward epistemological decolonization, which advocates for the development of knowledge based on the values and history of Islam itself.[35]

Alatas' critique aligns with the views of contemporary Muslim decolonial thinkers such as Muzakkir and[36] , who emphasize that knowledge colonialism is subtle, internalized in theory, methodology, and even academic language. Similarly, Edward Said, through his concept of Orientalism, demonstrates how Western discourse not only studies the East but also determines how the East is understood. This constitutes a form of *epistemic violence* that distances the Islamic world from its own intellectual heritage and worldview.[37]

This decolonization project takes an applied form in the work *Qur'anic Schools in West Africa: A Postsecular Approach to Decolonial Education*. The book shows that traditional Islamic education such as madrasahs and halaqahs in Senegal are not relics of the past, but active responses to the challenges of secular modernity. Using ethnographic methods and decolonial theory, the work reveals how Qur'anic educational institutions negotiate with the colonial-secular education system

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[32] Michalinos Zembylas, "Con-/divergences between postcolonial and critical peace education: towards pedagogies of decolonization in peace education," *Journal of Peace Education* 15, no. 1 (January 2, 2018): 1–23, https://doi.org/10.1080/17400201.2017.1412299; Michalinos Zembylas, "Recovering Anticolonialism as an Intellectual and Political Project in Education," *Educational Theory* 74, no. 5 (2024): 759–79, https://doi.org/10.1111/edth.12660.

[33] Sajjad Rizvi, "Decolonizing 'Islam,'" in *Conceptualizing Islam* (Routledge, 2025).

[34] Syed Hussein Alatas, "Intellectual Imperialism: Definition, Traits, and Problems," January 1, 2000, https://doi.org/10.1163/030382400X00154.

[35] Syed Hussein Alatas, "The Autonomous, the Universal and the Future of Sociology," *Current Sociology* 54, no. 1 (January 1, 2006): 7–23, https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392106058831; Leon Moosavi, "Decolonising Criminology: Syed Hussein Alatas on Crimes of the Powerful," *Critical Criminology* 27, no. 2 (June 1, 2019): 229–42, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10612-018-9396-9.

[36] Muzakkir, *Decolonization.*

[37] Said, "Orientalism."

while exposing gender, caste, and social class inequalities. The postsecular approach offered provides space for religious values as a legitimate part of the education system and public sphere, while also serving as an epistemological strategy in the context of Muslim pluralism.[38]

This post-secular approach complements critiques of modern educational secularism that separates science from faith and transcendent values. Within a decolonial framework, post-secularity enables the positive reconstruction of Islamic education—not merely as a response to hegemony, but also as an affirmation of Islam's distinctive epistemological framework.[39] This framework can further be linked to maqāṣid al-sharī'ah as the normative and spiritual foundation of education.

Fatwa proposes a *3C framework—concept, content, and* context—as an instrument for the decolonization of Islamic education.[40] Through this approach, Islamic education not only dismantles colonial legacies but also builds an alternative system of " " based on an Islamic worldview, the values of tawhid, and local relevance. In Indonesia, institutions such as pesantren and madrasah have become strategic actors in the development of education based on contextual Islamic values.[41] Furthermore, the decolonization of Islamic education also necessitates the reactivation of local sources such as Nusantara manuscripts and Indonesian Islamic historical archives, which have been marginalized by the dominance of Western literature. [42]

Nevertheless, significant challenges remain. The secularization and liberalization of global education have posed a threat to the integrity of Islamic epistemology. An educational system that separates facts from values and faith risks producing knowledge that is devoid of transcendental aspects. Therefore, the reconstruction of a curriculum based on tawhid, maqāṣid al-sharī'ah, and spirituality is an urgent necessity for Islamic education to become an autonomous, just, and relevant civilizational project.

Thus, the decolonization of Islamic education is a multidimensional project that includes dismantling colonial knowledge structures, revitalizing turats, developing alternative epistemologies, and institutionalizing an education system rooted in Islamic values and local realities. This approach is not merely a form of resistance against hegemony, but also an affirmative effort to build a future of education capable of transforming civilization.

Decolonization of Pesantren Education in Indonesia

The decolonization of Islamic education is a cultural and epistemological project that aims not only to erase the traces of colonialism from educational structures but also to revive the marginalized intellectual and spiritual heritage of Islam. It is a movement to build independence of

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[38] Anneke Newman, *Decolonising Education in Islamic West Africa: Secular Erasure, School Preference and Social Inequality* (London: Routledge, 2024), https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003172475.

[39] Abbasi, "Islam, Muslims, and the Coloniality of Being"; Hamza R'boul and Othman Z. and Barnawi, "Islamic Emancipation as an Alternative Maarifa in Education: Decoloniality as a Holy Mission," *British Journal of Religious Education* 47, no. 3 (July 3, 2025): 242–52, https://doi.org/10.1080/01416200.2024.2393176.

[40] Ah Fajruddin Fatwa, "Decolonization of Thought and the Effectiveness of Human Rights Enforcement from the Perspective of Abdullahi Ahmed An-Naim," *Al-Jinayah: Journal of Islamic Criminal Law* 9, no. 2 (December 7, 2023): 177–94, https://doi.org/10.15642/aj.2023.9.2.177-194.

[41] Mark Woodward, "Paradigms, Models, and Counterfactuals: Decolonizing the Study of Islam in Indonesia," *Studia Islamika* 32, no. 1 (April 30, 2025): 101–35, https://doi.org/10.36712/sdi.v32i1.46005; Sakhiyya, "Internationalizing or Decolonizing the Curriculum, Academic Self, and Research?"

[42] Carool Kersten, "Islamic Post-Traditionalism: Postcolonial and Postmodern Religious Discourse in Indonesia," *Sophia* 54, no. 4 (December 1, 2015): 473–89, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11841-014-0434-0.

thought and restore a knowledge system rooted in *the* Islamic *worldview*.[43] In this sense, education is not merely understood as an instrument for reproducing modern Western knowledge, but as a means of spiritual and social liberation. As explained by Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, Islamic education is a process of forming civilized individuals (*ta'dib*), not merely a tool for transmitting information, but also a medium for instilling manners, integrity, and human connection with divine values.[44] Decolonial education rejects the secularization of knowledge that eliminates spirituality and affirms that knowledge in Islam is a trust to shape a just and meaningful life.

In the Indonesian context, pesantren institutions occupy a strategic position in the effort to decolonize education. Pesantren are not merely religious educational institutions but also cultural institutions rooted in society and community-based. Traditions such as *ngaji kitab kuning*, *bandongan*, and *sorogan* are not merely teaching methods but forms of intellectual heritage intertwined with the moral and spiritual values of the community. As stated by Azyumardi Azra (2012), recognition of such local values must be the starting point in building a more independent and contextual Islamic education system. Pesantren have proven that education can be a tool for liberation, not merely a tool for reproducing dominant structures. Pesantren-based education is capable of shaping individuals who are not only intellectually intelligent but also spiritually and socially mature.

Mujamil Qomar classifies the development of pesantren thought into several important phases, including a phase in which pesantren began to engage in dialogue with critical social science approaches and postcolonial disciplines. This phase opened up great opportunities to reinterpret pesantren traditions from a more reflective and transformative perspective. In the postcolonial approach, Islamic education is no longer a space for the domestication of Western discourse, but rather a fertile ground for the growth of alternative, locally rooted thought. This encourages pesantren to maintain an "epistemological distance" from liberal or Marxist discourses that are incompatible with the values and needs of local communities, while simultaneously exploring local potential as raw material for grassroots social and educational movements.[45] Ahmad Baso, through his works *Islam Pascakolonial (Postcolonial Islam)*[46] and *Islam Nusantara (Islam in the Archipelago)*,[47] , demonstrates how this approach can connect the historical social identity ( ) of Indonesian Muslims with intellectual resistance against the dominance of colonialism and global liberalism.

Decolonization also means restructuring the national education system, which tends to be homogeneous and based on Western formal standards. In this context, the *muadalah* system emerges as a crucial middle ground. Regulated under PMA No. 13 of 2014, the muadalah system provides legal recognition and formal acknowledgment of pesantren curricula while preserving their traditional identity.[48] Muadalah pesantren can integrate national curricula such as mathematics and science while maintaining the core teachings based on classical Islamic texts and santri etiquette. With this recognition, pesantren are given a more equal position in the national education system, and their graduates gain broader access to higher education and the workforce. However,

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[43] Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Eve Tuck, and K. Wayne Yang, eds., *Indigenous and Decolonizing Studies in Education: Mapping the Long View* (New York: Routledge, 2018), https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429505010.

[44] *The Concept Of Education In Islam - Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas,* accessed June 4, 2025, http://archive.org/details/the-concept-of-education-in-islam.

[45] Mujamil Qomar, *Pesantren: From Methodological Transformation to Institutional Democratization* (Erlangga, 2002).

[46] Ahmad Baso, *Islam in* (Mizan, 2005).

[47] Ahmad Baso, *Islam Nusantara: Genius Ijtihad & Ulama Consensus in Indonesia* (Pustaka Afid, 2015).

[48] Wawan Juandi and Abu Yasid, "Discourse of Islamic Jurisprudence in Indonesian Ma'had Aly between Taqlidy and Manhajy," *JOURNAL OF INDONESIAN ISLAM* 10, no. 1 (June 18, 2016): 139–58, https://doi.org/10.15642/JIIS.2016.10.1.139-158.

challenges remain, particularly in bridging the pedagogical approach of pesantren, which is based on the *kyai–santri* relationship, with the competency-based learning system used in formal schools.[49]

Amid the challenges of globalization, which brings with it a homogenization of culture, pesantren have demonstrated remarkable adaptability. Gontor Pesantren, for example, is a successful example of responding to changing times without losing its traditional roots. Gontor combines classical teaching with technology-based education, foreign language proficiency, and life skills development.[50] This eclectic model shows that pesantren can be centers of innovation while also preserving values. Pesantren do not reject globalization, but face it with cultural and spiritual strength rooted in local traditions. This is the concrete form of education that liberates and enlightens—not only in an academic sense, but also culturally and morally.[51]

Martin van Bruinessen emphasizes that pesantren have an extraordinary capacity to become social institutions that shape societal structures. In his view, pesantren are not merely bastions of traditional values but also social laboratories that produce character-driven individuals. Their ability to preserve local values while remaining open to change makes pesantren a highly relevant alternative educational model in the global era.[52] Therefore, the decolonization of education is not merely about erasing colonial traces but also about creating an educational system rooted in tradition yet open to innovation.[53] With planned revitalization, pesantren can become pillars of future education—a system that is inclusive, sustainable, and addresses the challenges of the times without losing its Islamic spirit and local wisdom.

Ultimately, building an independent and character-driven Islamic education cannot be done in isolation. An integrated approach is needed between the state, society, and the pesantren community itself. The government must adopt more inclusive policies that not only standardize education but also accommodate the diversity of traditional education models. On the other hand, society must also strengthen its commitment to pesantren as autonomous educational institutions that serve the local and spiritual needs of the community. The decolonization of Islamic education is a collective effort, and pesantren, with all its dynamics, possess sufficient social, cultural, and spiritual capital to lead this transformation.

Ma'had Aly Lirboyo as a Space for Decolonization

In fact, in 2016, Ma'had Aly Lirboyo took a progressive step by opening a specialization program in National Fiqh. This initiative was taken in response to the socio-political dynamics following the Ahok incident, which triggered identity tensions and heightened religious sentiments

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[49] Wahyuddin Halim, "The Mass Production of Religious Authority: A Study on a Ma'had Aly Program in South Sulawesi, Indonesia," *Islamic Studies Review* 1, no. 2 (December 29, 2022): 161–80, https://doi.org/10.56529/isr.v1i2.83.

[50] Dihyatun Masqon Ahmad, "The Dynamics of the Pondok Pesantren: An Islamic Educational Institution in Indonesia" (Brill, 2012), https://doi.org/10.1163/9789401207584_006.

[51] Nurul Azizah, Syamsul Ma'arif, and Mahfud Junaedi, "The Franchising of Pesantren Education: A New Model of The Development of Islamic Education in A Disruptive Era," *Edukasi Islami: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 10, no. 001 (November 30, 2021): 245–60, https://doi.org/10.30868/ei.v10i001.1764; Wahidul Anam et al., "Quo Vadis Hadith Studies in Islamic Boarding Schools in Al-Jabiri's Perspective," *Nazhruna: Journal of Islamic Education* 7, no. 2 (2024): 290–314.

[52] Martin van Bruinessen, *The Yellow Book, Islamic Boarding Schools, and Sufi Orders: Islamic Traditions in Indonesia,* 1st ed. (Mizan, 1995), https://cir.nii.ac.jp/crid/1130282272367756800.

[53] Teguh Budiharso, Syamsul Bakri, and Sujito Sujito, "Transformation of the Education System of the Pesantren in Indonesia from the Dutch Colony to the Democratic Era," *Journal of Social Studies Education Research* 14, no. 4 (December 22, 2023): 179–206.

in public spaces.[54] With this approach, Lirboyo not only strengthens classical fiqh understanding but also instills national consciousness within a moderate and relevant academic framework. Ma'had Aly serves as a vehicle to contextualize Islamic teachings within the framework of nation-building while safeguarding society from narrow and exclusive religious interpretations.[55]

In its management practices, Ma'had Aly Lirboyo involves various components in an integrated manner, from leadership structures, teaching staff, to an effective administrative system. Communication and coordination between institutions, units, and individuals are key to ensuring operational smoothness and aligning the institution with its established vision and mission. The results of this effective governance are reflected in the rapid growth in the number of students since 2017. From 1,045 students in the 2017–2018 academic year, the number surged to 4,362 students in the 2023–2024 academic year. This growth demonstrates increased public confidence in the quality of education offered and highlights how Ma'had Aly Lirboyo has become a leading destination for higher Islamic education in Indonesia.[56]

In line with this, the number of faculty members at Ma'had Aly Lirboyo has also seen a significant increase. From 93 faculty members at the time of its establishment in the 2017–2018 academic year, the number has risen to 155 by the 2023–2024 academic year. This trend demonstrates Lirboyo's commitment to strengthening human resources as the foundation of quality education. The addition of teaching staff enables diversification of studies, improvement in teaching quality, and expansion of academic and research activities. With the support of infrastructure, human resources, and public trust, Ma'had Aly Lirboyo has successfully positioned itself as a dynamic institution in responding to the challenges of the times.[57]

In a broader context, Ma'had Aly Lirboyo can be seen as a tangible manifestation of the decolonization of Islamic education in Indonesia. It emerged from the roots of the pesantren tradition but operates in a modern institutional format that is legally recognized by the state and responsive to contemporary needs.[58] By blending classical scholarly lineage with modern academic structures, Ma'had Aly not only preserves Islamic scholarly heritage but also articulates it within national and humanitarian contexts.[59] Through Fikih Kebangsaan, the growth of its students, the strengthening of its faculty, and adaptive governance, Lirboyo demonstrates that traditional Islamic education can continue to thrive, evolve, and make a substantive contribution to the nation's civilization in the present and future.

In this context, Ma'had Aly Lirboyo can be seen as a concrete manifestation of the decolonization of Islamic education in Indonesia. It emerged from the roots of the pesantren tradition but is structured within a modern institutional framework that is legally recognized by the state. Through a curriculum based on classical Islamic texts, scholarly lineage, and focused studies

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[54] Kurnia Arofah, "Rhetorical Analysis of Hate Speech: Case Study of Hate Speech Related to Ahok's Religion Blasphemy Case," *Mediator: Journal of Communication* 11, no. 1 (June 29, 2018): 91–105, https://doi.org/10.29313/mediator.v11i1.3119 Nadirsyah Hosen, "Race and Religion in the 2012 Jakarta Gubernatorial Election: The Case of Jokowi-Ahok," in *Religion, Law and Intolerance in Indonesia* (Routledge, 2016).

[55] Kadi Kadi, "Continuity and Change in Salafi Traditions in the Educational System of the Lirboyo Islamic Boarding School in Kediri," *Islamica: Journal of Islamic Studies* 12, no. 1 (September 4, 2017): 117–41, https://doi.org/10.15642/islamica.2017.12.1.22-46.

[56] Official data on the admission of new students (PMB) at Ma'had Aly Lirboyo for the academic year 2017–2024.

[57] Internal documentation of the human resources department of Ma'had Aly Lirboyo, 2024.

[58] KH. Athoilah Shalahudin Anwar, Interview, Director of Ma'had Aly Lirboyo, February 24, 2024

[59] Ahmad Khoirul Mustamir, "Integration of Islamic Traditions and National Values in Indonesia: A Study of National Fiqh Education at Ma'had Aly Lirboyo Islamic Boarding School, Kediri," *Indonesian Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 5, no. 4 (December 25, 2024): 2051–62, https://doi.org/10.33367/ijhass.v5i4.6477.

addressing contemporary issues, Ma'had Aly offers a model of Islamic higher education that not only preserves tradition but also articulates it in a relevant manner within the Indonesian context. It is part of the long process of how pesantren adapt without losing their identity—maintaining the continuity of values while contributing more articulately to the public sphere and national discourse.

Ma'had Aly Lirboyo: Vision of Birth, Transformation, and Academic Independence
1. Vision of Birth: Addressing the Crisis of Knowledge and the Tide of Modernization

The establishment of Ma'had Aly Lirboyo in 1910 by KH. Abdul Karim was a tangible manifestation of a strategic effort to deconstruct and reconstruct the Islamic education system, which had long been subjected to pressure and marginalization due to the dominance of Western epistemology. Since the colonial era, the Islamic education system in Indonesia has not only been marginalized but also forced to submit to the shadow of the formal education system established by colonial powers with an administrative orientation focused on control and domination. This was not merely about education but also about how knowledge and discourse were controlled as instruments of power. Edward Said in *Orientalism* asserts that the West's " " created a knowledge construction about the East not to understand objectively but to dominate and affirm cultural superiority that justified colonization. In this context, the Islamic education system rooted in the pesantren tradition and classical knowledge was deemed subordinate and irrelevant.

As a response to this condition, Ma'had Aly Lirboyo emerged as a critical and alternative response that affirms the epistemic sovereignty of Islamic scholarly tradition. This institution places sanad—the chain of knowledge transmission—classical texts, and adab practices as its primary foundations, which are not only cultural heritage but also an autonomous knowledge system that is rich and has its own epistemological legitimacy. Ma'had Aly is not merely a place of learning but an institutional space that revives an intellectual tradition rooted in authentic and holistic methods of knowledge transmission. In this way, Ma'had Aly reaffirms that Islamic knowledge is not inferior but a system with unique epistemological characteristics that cannot be equated with the reductionist and fragmentary approaches of Western science.

Within the framework of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas's thought, Ma'had Aly occupies a strategic position in the project of decolonizing Islamic knowledge. Al-Attas rejects the separation of religious knowledge and worldly knowledge as introduced by the Western secular paradigm, which divides the unity of knowledge into two separate realms. For him, true Islamic education is ta'dib—an educational process that not only produces rational minds but also shapes adab and hikmah as the core of humanity. This concept calls for the restoration of an integrated spiritual epistemology of Islam, where knowledge is not merely factual information but also a means of forming deep moral and spiritual values.

In line with this thinking, Ma'had Aly Lirboyo does not merely emphasize textual mastery of fiqh and usul fiqh but also cultivates ethical and Sufi awareness. This means that education at Ma'had Aly is directed toward producing scholars who are not only intellectually competent but also spiritually mature and well-mannered.[60] Thus, this institution does not merely produce graduates capable of scientific argumentation but also possesses the capacity to serve as moral and

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[60] Compilation Team, *Lirboyo Islamic Boarding School: History, Events, Phenomena, and Legends* (Kediri: BPK P2L in collaboration with Lirboyo Press, 2019), 202–205.

spiritual leaders in society. This approach simultaneously serves as a counter- t to the secularization of knowledge that eliminates the spiritual dimension from education.

> "Ma'had Aly Lirboyo was established as a response to the pressure of the Western education system that has dominated since the colonial era. The Islamic scholarly tradition built through sanad, classical texts, and etiquette is an autonomous and rich system of knowledge that must be preserved. Education at Ma'had Aly does not merely teach the textual mastery of fiqh and usul fiqh but also cultivates scholars who are wise and cultured, integrating religious and worldly knowledge in a holistic manner. As a result, graduates are prepared to become moral and spiritual leaders and to resist the secularization of knowledge."[61]

In essence, Ma'had Aly Lirboyo serves as a meeting point between tradition and modernity, where Islamic education is developed as a knowledge system free from Western dominance yet relevant to the dynamics of the times. By integrating rationality, spirituality, and ethics, Ma'had Aly not only preserves the traditions of the pesantren but also affirms the strategic role of Islamic education in shaping a just, dignified, and humane civilization.

In the realm of global Islamic education, Ziauddin Sardar asserts that the essence of Islamic education is not merely a process of transmitting knowledge from one generation to the next, but must serve as a tangible and relevant agent of transformation in response to the social dynamics of the Muslim community. Ideal Islamic education revives the social relevance of knowledge by making tangible contributions that can respond to and transform contemporary realities. Thus, Islamic knowledge does not stop at textual teaching or memorization, but must be actualized in the context of daily life, providing solutions to national, plurality, and social justice issues. Within this framework, Ma'had Aly Lirboyo has taken a strategic position by developing Fiqh Kebangsaan, a discipline that seeks to align traditional fiqh understanding with the needs of modern socio-political contexts.[62] This approach reflects transformative pedagogy that integrates values of justice, inclusivity, and social responsibility, ensuring that Islamic education is not merely an intellectual legacy but an active and progressive social force.

Furthermore, by borrowing concepts from Walter Mignolo, Ma'had Aly can be understood as a manifestation of what is called epistemic delinking, a , a conscious effort to break dependence on the colonial matrix of power—a structure of knowledge power that is historically rooted in modern education systems and places Western epistemology as the sole standard of truth. The epistemic disobedience advocated by Mignolo is not a rejection of modernity itself, but rather a dismantling of the hegemony of a single system of defining knowledge, opening space for the emergence of alternative knowledge systems rooted in local experiences, spiritual traditions, and cultural wisdom. Ma'had Aly maintains and actualizes pesantren-specific learning methods such as sorogan, wetonan, musyawarah, and sanad as forms of epistemic resistance that reject the universal claims of Western knowledge, which are often reductionist and fragmented. These methods not only preserve the authenticity of knowledge transmission but also affirm the epistemological autonomy of the holistic Islamic tradition, where knowledge is inseparable from ethical and spiritual values. Thus, Ma'had Aly not only revives the traditional Islamic education system but also represents a modern alternative that prioritizes epistemic justice and the sustainability of Islamic scholarship in facing contemporary challenges.

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[61] Kiai An'im Falahuddin, interview, conducted at his residence on September 18, 2023.

[62] KH. Abdulloh Kafabihi Mahrus, Interview, Director of Lirboyo Islamic Boarding School, Kediri, February 2, 2024.

"Islamic education is not merely about teaching knowledge textually and by rote, but must also be able to shape individuals who are aware of their social responsibilities. Scholars produced by this education must understand the realities of the community and be able to provide solutions that are contextual to the times. In this way, Islamic knowledge is not merely passed down, but also lives and evolves in accordance with the dynamics of society."[63]

What Ma'had Aly, particularly Ma'had Aly Lirboyo, is doing is a concrete manifestation of efforts to redefine power dynamics within the realm of Islamic education in Indonesia. From a position that has long been subordinate—submissive to Western epistemic dominance and state formalities—pesantren have transformed into active and authoritative participants in contemporary Islamic scholarly discourse. [64]The formal legal recognition granted by the state through Ministry of Religious Affairs Decree No. 7111 of 2017 is not a cooptation that restricts tradition, but rather a decolonial strategy to solidify the existence of pesantren as a legitimate part of the national education system without sacrificing local values and distinctive scholarly traditions.[65] This represents a repositioning of epistemic power, where pesantren are no longer viewed as passive cultural heritage but as centers for the reproduction of ulama and the development of contextual and critical Islamic thought.

This transformation aligns with the emerging concept of Islamic Public Administration (IPA), a discipline that integrates Islamic values into governance and public service management. In the Indonesian context—as a country with a Muslim majority and a strong pesantren tradition—Islamic PA is not merely a response to the dominance of Western administrative models but also a space for affirming local values and Islamic spirituality as social capital for fair and humane administration. Pesantren, with their educational systems and traditions of etiquette, serve as social and educational laboratories that produce graduates who are not only intellectually intelligent but also ethically and spiritually mature.[66] This opens the way for the integration of Islamic values into public administration practices without losing relevance to modernity.

Furthermore, Islamic education through pesantren is part of a broader epistemological decolonization project, which not only seeks to eradicate the influence of Western colonialism in education but also revives the intellectual and spiritual heritage of Islam that has been marginalized. According to Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, the decolonization of Islamic education is a process of forming civilized individuals (ta'dib), which not only transfers information but also instills manners and a connection between humans and divine values.[67] Pesantren education, rooted in classical Islamic texts, santri etiquette, and community-based teaching, is grounded in local values and spirituality that transcend purely academic aspects.

Thus, the vision behind the establishment of Ma'had Aly Lirboyo must be understood as part of *an epistemological resistance project* against the legacy of colonial knowledge, as well as a

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[63] HM. Ibrohim A. Hafidz, Interview, Director of Ma'had Aly Lirboyo, January 6, 2024.

[64] Abdurrahman Wahid and M. Dawam Rahardjo, *Pesantren and Renewal,* 1st ed. (Jakarta: Institute for Economic and Social Research, Education, and Information, 1974), https://cir.nii.ac.jp/crid/1130282269618896512. The concept of the subordination of pesantren education to the dominant system is explained through the dichotomy between traditional and modern education.

[65] Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, *Decision of the Director General of Islamic Education No. 7111 of 2017 on the Establishment of Ma'had Aly as an Islamic Higher Education Institution* (Jakarta: Directorate General of Islamic Education, 2017).

[66] Ahmad Muthohar et al., "Shifting the Scientific Paradigm for the Transformation of Higher Education: Experience at State Islamic University (UIN) in Indonesia," *Tuning Journal for Higher Education* 11, no. 1 (November 30, 2023): 65–102, https://doi.org/10.18543/tjhe.2483.

[67] *The Concept of Education in Islam - Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas.*

movement *for the emancipation of Islamic scholarship* based on locality, spirituality, and the practice of social justice ( ). It is a symbol of how Islamic education can become a liberating political space, not because it is anti-modern, but because it is capable of creating a more just, humane, and value-based *alternative* to *modernity*.

2. Institutional Transformation: From Salaf Tradition to Formal Higher Education

The institutional transformation experienced by Ma'had Aly Lirboyo reflects the spirit of Islamic educational renewal that remains rooted in its traditional foundations. From the outset, Lirboyo demonstrated adaptive capacity in responding to changing times, beginning with the adoption of the classical madrasah system in 1925 as a response to the need for a more structured educational framework within the pesantren environment. This step marked the initial phase of modernization in traditional pesantren education, without abandoning classical teaching methods such as sorogan and bandongan. In 1966, the establishment of the Islamic Institute (IAI) Tribakti by internal pesantren circles became a significant milestone in expanding the scope of knowledge and granting formal recognition to pesantren-based higher education.[68] This transformation reached its peak in 2016 when Ma'had Aly Lirboyo was officially recognized as part of the national Islamic higher education system through Minister of Religion Regulation No. 71 of 2015. Ma'had Aly is not merely a state recognition of the pesantren's informal educational system but also a symbol of the restoration of the pesantren's epistemic authority as an autonomous and contextual center for the production of Islamic knowledge.[69] This recognition demonstrates that pesantren are not merely surviving but are capable of transforming while remaining rooted in tradition, while critically and selectively engaging with the dynamics of modernity.

In this transformation process, Ma'had Aly Lirboyo has not only carried out institutional reforms but also strengthened traditional pesantren educational methods and approaches such as *bandongan*, *wetonan*, *sorogan*, and *daurah ilmiah*. These traditional methods are characteristic of Islamic education based on oral transmission, direct experience, and personal relationships between teachers and students. *Bandongan* and *wetonan* involve the collective delivery of material by a teacher to many students, *sorogan* emphasizes individual reading of texts by students in front of a teacher for correction, while *daurah ilmiah* is an intensive, themed study conducted over a short period.[70]

This approach is aligned with the formal education system through the division *of marhalah ula* and *tsani*, making the Ma'had Aly curriculum an integrative model that combines the scientific tradition of pesantren with a structured and progressive academic framework. This is not merely an adaptation strategy but a concrete manifestation of epistemic decolonization—the restoration of learning, thinking, and developing knowledge rooted in the Islamic scholarly heritage of the Nusantara region. By continuing to place *sanad*, teacher authority, and the blessings of knowledge as fundamental principles, Ma'had Aly Lirboyo demonstrates that Islamic higher education does not have to conform to Western patterns but can stand on its own authentic and sustainable epistemological foundation.[71]

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[68] Zaenal Arifin, "Conflict Management in Collective Leadership at BPK-P2L Lirboyo *Islamic* 29, no. 1 (January 29, 2018): 177–205, https://doi.org/10.33367/tribakti.v29i1.616.

[69] Mia Audina and Zulfatmi, "Policies on the Implementation of Ma'had Aly (Analysis of Minister of Religion Regulation No. 71 of 2015)," *Journal of Integrated Multidisciplinary Research* 8, no. 12 (December 30, 2024), https://oaj.jurnalhst.com/index.php/jpmt/article/view/7926.

[70] M. Rifa'i Bachrun, Interview, Director of Ma'had Aly Lirboyo, April 18, 2024.

[71] Internal interview with the administrators of Ma'had Aly Lirboyo and institutional observation, 2024

The Ma'had Aly curriculum also demonstrates the integration of two Islamic epistemological axes: bayani (textual) and irfani (spiritual). According to Abid Al-Jabiri's theory, this integration is a crucial prerequisite for building a substantive and transformative Islamic rationality. The bayani epistemology enables in-depth study of classical texts (turats) through linguistic logic and fiqh, while the irfani epistemology enriches understanding with inner experience, ethics, and spiritual intuition. The synergy between the two makes education at Ma'had Aly not only produce scholars of the text but also ulama with spiritual depth and social sensitivity. This approach also serves as a critique of Islamic education that tends to be narrow, formalistic, and lacking in deep spirituality.[72] In the context of decolonization, this strategy marks a shift from the dominant Western paradigm that tends to separate knowledge and values, towards a model of scholarship that unites truth, meaning, and wisdom.

This view is in line with the ideas put forward by Muhamad Rofiq Muzakkir, who asserts that the decolonization of knowledge is a necessity. He states that decolonization means removing colonial elements that are contrary to the Islamic knowledge system, including the view that separates science and religion. According to Rofiq, the challenge facing Muslims today is not only mastering technology or modern science, but also the ability to integrate this knowledge with Islamic values.[73] After the decolonization process, the next step is to build an integrative knowledge system that combines scientific rationality and Islamic spiritual depth. In this regard, he quotes Al-Ghazali, who in *Ihya Ulumiddin* emphasizes the importance of synergy between reason and revelation as two complementary lights. Al-Ghazali shows that it is impossible for someone to achieve a complete understanding of religion without using reason as a tool for interpreting revelation, and conversely, reason has no meaning without being guided by the light of revelation.[74]

Furthermore, Rofiq explains that neither muftis nor rulers can issue correct decisions unless they follow two steps: first, understanding reality through knowledge, that is, reading social facts and phenomena with rational instruments; second, judging reality based on the values of the Qur'an and Hadith. This creates a balance between empirical validity and normative authority, between facts and ethics. In the context of Islamic education, this approach encourages the emergence of academic individuals who are not only intellectually capable but also possess spiritual integrity and moral commitment.[75] Thus, the integration of knowledge and religion as intended by Rofiq is not merely an epistemological step but also a social practice capable of improving the civilization of the ummah amid the global crisis of modernity.

Within this framework, the transformation of Ma'had Aly Lirboyo represents a practical movement toward the decolonization of Islamic education, rooted in the social realities of Indonesia. It does not merely seek formal legitimacy from the state but builds an independent, contextual, and spiritually meaningful educational ecosystem. Ma'had Aly offers a creative middle path between tradition and modernity, between rational and intuitive reasoning, and between knowledge and religion. Amid the global dominance of Western knowledge systems, the existence of Ma'had Aly is a form of productive epistemic resistance: building a scientific system rooted in

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[72] Kadi, "Continuity and Change in Salaf Traditions within the Educational System of the Lirboyo Islamic Boarding School in Kediri."

[73] Muzakkir, *Decolonization*.

[74] Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali, *Ar-Risalah Al-Laduniyah* (Cairo: Dar al Maqtham li an-Nasyr wa Tauzi', 2014), https://bacabuku.com/book/BK55800/kitab-ar-risalah-al-laduniyah.

[75] Muhamad Rofiq Muzakkir et al., "Sectarian Tensions, Islamophobia, and Decolonization: Comparing Jasser Auda's and Jonathan Brown's Analysis of the Hadiths Concerning Aisha's Marital Age," *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies* 13, no. 2 (December 31, 2023): 427–56, https://doi.org/10.18326/ijims.v13i2.427-456.

its own soil yet open to global currents, rejecting the old dichotomy between religion and science, and reviving the Islamic scientific heritage as a source of enlightenment and empowerment for the people.

3. Academic Independence: Efforts at Decolonization and Affirmation of Pesantren Identity

Ma'had Aly Lirboyo is a concrete manifestation of efforts to decolonize epistemology in the realm of Islamic education in Indonesia. The concept of decolonization, as proposed by figures such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o[76] , in the context of literacy and knowledge, or Talal Asad in the realm of Islam and religious studies, emphasizes the need for intellectual liberation from Western epistemic domination, which has long reinforced hegemony in the education system.[77] Ma'had Aly Lirboyo has taken a critical step by explicitly rejecting the subordination of pesantren to the secular and technocratic Western higher education system, which often alienates Islamic scholarly traditions and positions them as a minor and marginalized "other" knowledge.

In the context of Islamic education, this decolonization thinking is in line with the ideas of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, who emphasized the need to rebuild an authentic Islamic epistemology, namely an epistemology rooted in revelation, classical tradition, and the integral spiritual values of Islam.[78] Ma'had Aly Lirboyo practices this by establishing an education system based on turath, or Islamic scholarly heritage, which is preserved and developed through scholarly chains of transmission and pesantren etiquette. This chain of transmission approach is not merely a mechanism of transmission but a guardian of epistemic authority that rejects the fragmentation of knowledge often caused by the separation of religious and secular knowledge in modern education systems.[79]

Ma'had Aly Lirboyo's decision to make classical texts the center of study is not merely a conservative act or preservation of heritage, but an epistemological resistance strategy that challenges the dominance of Western epistemology. Rudolf T. Ware's perspective in *Walking Qur'an* emphasizes the importance of the traditional approach to learning as practiced in Islamic boarding schools, which emphasizes the direct study of the Qur'an and classical texts through structured repetition and memorization. Ware describes how this learning process is not merely a mechanism for transmitting texts, but a way of life that builds an intense relationship between the learner and the sacred text on both personal and collective levels.[80]

In this context, Ma'had Aly Lirboyo utilizes this approach to strengthen the authority of Islamic scholarship rooted in sanad and spiritual experience, differing from Western epistemology, which tends to prioritize textual analysis separate from its social and spiritual context. Meanwhile, Boyle's research highlights how Islamic boarding schools, as institutions of Islamic education, are not only places of normative learning but also spaces for the formation of independent epistemic communities, where the educational process takes place in a dialogical and integrative manner

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[76] Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, "Decolonising the Mind," *Diogenes* 46, no. 184 (December 1998): 101–4, https://doi.org/10.1177/039219219804618409.

[77] Talal Asad, "The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam" (Brill, 1996), https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004457478_022.

[78] Al-Attas, *Knowledge, language, thought, and the civilization of Islam*.

[79] Ahmad Jamil and Naswan Abdo Khaled, "The Genealogy of Authoritative Transmission of Sanad Al-Qur'an in Java Islamic Boarding Schools," *Kalimah: Journal of Islamic Studies and Thought* 20, no. 2 (October 7, 2022), https://doi.org/10.21111/klm.v20i2.8332.

[80] Rudolph T. Ware, *The Walking Qur'an: Islamic Education, Embodied Knowledge, and History in West Africa* (UNC Press Books, 2014).

between teachers, students, and texts. This approach rejects the objectification of Islamic knowledge within the framework of Western science, treating it instead as a living and evolving system of knowledge. Thus, Ma'had Aly's focus on classical texts is a critical step in maintaining the continuity and epistemological independence of Islam in the face of the hegemony of modern knowledge.

Furthermore, the approach taken by Ma'had Aly also demonstrates an understanding that is in line with the thinking of knowledge decolonization theorists such as Walter Mignolo.[81] He asserts that knowledge decolonization is not merely an effort to restore what is old or preserve tradition in a static form, but rather a critical and dialogical process of reconstruction. This means that the decolonization process must be able to dynamically connect traditional scholarship with contemporary social, political, and cultural realities. In the context of Ma'had Aly, this is realized through the Fiqh Kebangsaan curriculum, which not only examines classical texts literally but also develops an understanding of Islamic law that is relevant to the national and global challenges of today. This curriculum integrates the values of Islam Nusantara, which emphasize tolerance, consultation, and social harmony, with contemporary issues such as pluralism, democracy, human rights, and social justice.[82] In this way, Ma'had Aly successfully connects classical knowledge with modern problems without losing the authentic epistemological identity of Islam.

The Fiqh Kebangsaan curriculum shifts the paradigm of Islamic scholarship from a textual and exclusive approach to a contextual and inclusive one, while also serving as a space for dialogue between tradition and modernity. This demonstrates that the preservation of classical texts is not an end in itself, but rather a means to build knowledge that is responsive to the changing times and capable of providing concrete solutions to contemporary issues. Thus, Ma'had Aly not only preserves the Islamic scholarly heritage but also revitalizes and transforms it to remain relevant to the ever-evolving socio-political dynamics.[83] This effort is a concrete example of how Islamic education can combine strong traditional roots with progressive intellectual innovation, thereby contributing to the development of global knowledge while maintaining the epistemic sovereignty of Islamic boarding schools from ongoing forms of knowledge colonialism.

Additionally, it is important to note that the decolonization of Islamic education undertaken by Ma'had Aly Lirboyo is not merely nostalgic or a uncritical return to the past. Rather, this approach is a critical reconstruction process that prioritizes dynamic dialogue between tradition and modernity, between the local and the global, and between spiritual and intellectual dimensions. Ma'had Aly Lirboyo firmly rejects the mechanical repetition of classical texts without context, instead engaging in contextual and relevant reinterpretation in light of contemporary challenges. This means that Islamic scholarly tradition is not viewed as rigid and closed, but rather as a living intellectual resource capable of adapting to the ever-changing social, political, and cultural realities.

This concept is very much in line with Dipesh Chakrabarty's idea of 'provincializing Europe,' which is an effort to shift the epistemic center that has been dominated by Western perspectives and narratives. Chakrabarty emphasizes the importance of opening space for authentic plurality of knowledge, which does not rely solely on Western epistemic standards as the sole measure of truth and rationality.[84] In the context of Ma'had Aly, this means building an educational system that does

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[81] Mignolo, "Introduction."

[82] Baso, *Postcolonial Islam.*

[83] Mustamir, "Integration of Islamic Traditions and Indonesian National Values."

[84] Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Provincializing Europe: Postcoloniality and the Critique of History," *Cultural Studies,* October 1, 1992, https://doi.org/10.1080/09502389200490221.

not merely follow secular and technocratic global educational models, but also integrates local knowledge and the cultural values of Nusantara Islam as valid and relevant intellectual wealth.[85] Thus, Ma'had Aly not only creates Islamic education that survives in epistemic independence, but is also able to contribute to global discourse with a different and enriching perspective.

Additionally, the dialogue between tradition and modernity in Ma'had Aly emphasizes a balance between spirituality and intellectuality. Education here does not only teach rational and normative aspects but also builds deep spiritual awareness as the foundation of meaningful knowledge. This approach affirms that Islamic knowledge cannot be separated from its spiritual dimension, resulting in knowledge that is holistic and transformative. Therefore, the decolonization process occurring at Ma'had Aly is a movement of epistemic liberation ( ) that not only opens alternative spaces for Islamic education but also redesigns ways of thinking and learning that are responsive to local contexts while remaining capable of competing and engaging in dialogue on a broader global stage.

Thus, Ma'had Aly Lirboyo has successfully affirmed its academic independence rooted in the authentic epistemological heritage of Islam, while also responding to contemporary demands in a way that does not marginalize local cultural roots and traditions. This represents a concrete form of Islamic education that decolonizes itself, freeing itself from the epistemological shackles of colonialism, and builds a new narrative of Islamic scholarship that is inclusive, contextual, and transformative.

Conclusion

This study concludes that Ma'had Aly Lirboyo is a concrete manifestation of efforts to decolonize epistemology in Islamic education in Indonesia. Born as a response to the dominance of Western knowledge systems since the colonial era, Ma'had Aly not only presents an alternative Islamic higher education institution based on pesantren, but also affirms the epistemological sovereignty of Islam through an integral and contextual approach. By preserving and maintaining pesantren traditions such as *bandongan, sorogan, wetonan,* and *daurah ilmiah,* and placing *sanad, kitab kuning,* and *adab* as the foundation of education, Ma'had Aly has successfully integrated classical Islamic educational heritage with modern academic structures without losing its authenticity and epistemological identity.

The institutional transformation undertaken, including formal recognition from the state, is not a form of co-optation but an affirmative strategy to strengthen the position of pesantren as authoritative centers of Islamic knowledge. Innovative curricula such as Fiqh Kebangsaan demonstrate Ma'had Aly's ability to address contemporary issues—such as pluralism, social justice, and democracy—without abandoning the roots of Nusantara Islamic tradition. This approach demonstrates the integration between *bayani* (textual) and *irfani* (spiritual) epistemologies, positioning Islamic education as an instrument of social transformation, not merely as a vehicle for the transmission of knowledge.

From the perspective of decolonization theory as articulated by figures such as Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, Walter Mignolo, and Dipesh Chakrabarty, Ma'had Aly emerges as an institution engaged *in epistemic* delinking—breaking free from dependence on Western epistemic dominance and constructing a knowledge system rooted in local values, Islamic spirituality, and social civility. Thus, Ma'had Aly Lirboyo is not only a symbol of epistemic resistance but also a

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[85] Baso, *Islam Nusantara.*

model of inclusive, contextual, and transformative Islamic education, capable of contributing rich alternative perspectives to the global discourse on knowledge.

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