COMPARATIVE STUDY OF ISLAMIC BOARDING SCHOOLS IN INDONESIA AND MALAYSIA: CURRICULUM AND APPROACH

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Abstract

This study explores and compares the Islamic education systems of Indonesian pesantren and Malaysian residential madrasahs, focusing on their curriculum structures and educational approaches. The research stems from a need to understand how both institutions balance religious values with modern knowledge in response to educational globalization. Using a qualitative method through a literature-based approach, the study analyzes a wide range of scholarly sources and related studies. The findings reveal that Indonesian pesantren emphasize a value-driven and tradition-oriented model centered on spirituality, character building, and moral education, while Malaysian madrasahs employ a structured system under national policy frameworks that formally integrate religious and scientific studies. Both share the same goal of nurturing a balanced Muslim generation that harmonizes intellect and faith, though they differ in their implementation strategies. This study highlights that the integration of Islamic values and scientific knowledge can serve as a foundation for advancing an Islamic education model that is contextually relevant, sustainable, and globally competitive.
Keywords: *pesantren; madrasah; curriculum; Islamic education; comparative study*

INTRODUCTION

Islamic education in Southeast Asia plays a central role in shaping the character, spirituality, and morals of Muslim communities. Among the most influential institutions are Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia and madrasahs or Islamic boarding schools in Malaysia, which serve as a combination of classical Islamic scholarship and modern education systems (Wantini, Ramadhani, Zahra, Putri, & Purba, 2025). In line with global developments, both countries face similar challenges in balancing religious traditions with the demands of modernity and globalization of education (Mujahid, 2021)

Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia are rooted in the classical Islamic educational tradition as formulated in Ta'līm al-Muta'allim by al-Zarnūjī, which emphasizes the integration of ethical, spiritual, and intellectual dimensions in the learning process (Huda, 2021). This principle forms the basis of traditional Islamic

education in the archipelago. However, in the contemporary context, these institutions must adapt to the needs of modern society, which demands mastery of science and technology without sacrificing spiritual values.

Malaysia has developed a more structured formal Islamic education system with a model of science and religion integration called holistic integration, as found in research on science and religion integration in Islamic schools in Selangor (Hadi, Affani, & Al-Akiti, 2024). The findings confirm that Malaysia tends to apply an integrative approach formally and systematically, while Indonesia is more adaptive with a diverse curriculum pattern that is often based on the locality of Islamic boarding schools (Omar, 2025).

Leadership innovation in modern Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia, such as Pondok Modern Gontor, has produced a curriculum model that harmoniously integrates the madrasah system and the pesantren system (Arroisi, Mustopa, & Djayusman, 2024). The dual curriculum approach at Gontor has successfully shaped an educational strategy oriented towards the values of Panca Jiwa and the integration of religious and general knowledge (Lateh et al., 2024). Therefore, the pesantren curriculum in Indonesia shows an evolutionary pattern from a traditional system to modern management based on universal Islamic values.

Some of the traditional Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia, such as Dayah in Aceh, still face obstacles in adopting a dynamic academic culture. Learning at Dayah tends to be teacher-centered with an organizational structure that is not yet fully modern, thereby inhibiting the active participation of students (Aman & Yuliantri, 2024). In Aceh, Islamic institutions also operate within a strong customary context in which local traditions and Islamic teachings are closely intertwined (Mulia et al., 2024). Meanwhile, in Malaysia, the boarding school system emphasizes a moderate and holistic approach that integrates spiritual leadership with scientific competency development. Leadership innovation in modern Islamic boarding schools is also implemented through a spiritual-democratic leadership style to respond to the challenges of globalization (Salim, Zaibi, Brantasari, Ikhsan, & Aslindah, 2024). The approach to spirituality and multiculturalism in Indonesian Islamic boarding schools is an important aspect that helps shape social awareness. Islamic boarding schools build multicultural awareness through a strong spiritual foundation, resulting in "selfless multiculturalism" as a result of the interaction between Sufi and social values (Mashuri, Futaqi, & Sulhan, 2024).

As a result, a comparison between Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia and madrasahs in Malaysia reveals differences in philosophy, curriculum, and approach. Indonesia tends to preserve Sufi and traditional values with local flexibility, while Malaysia emphasizes systemic integration between religious and general knowledge through national education policy (Prasetyo, Rahman, Haekal, & Salabi, 2025). This study uses a qualitative approach to explore in depth how these two models have developed, adapted, and provided solutions to the challenges of modernizing Islamic education in Southeast Asia (Janah, Sunan, & Yogyakarta, 2024).

The solutions that emerged from various studies emphasized the importance of transformative leadership, curriculum integration, and religious moderation. Religious moderation itself has become an important research agenda in Indonesia, in which education is identified as a key arena for preventing radicalism (Murad & Rizki, 2022). Approaches such as those implemented in Gontor and Selangor madrasahs could serve as synergistic models for the development of a globally oriented Islamic curriculum that remains rooted in local values (Hadi et al., 2024).

METHOD

Research Types and Approaches

This study uses a qualitative method with a comparative phenomenological approach based on literature review (Dalimunthe, 2023). The main focus of the research is to understand and compare how the curriculum systems and educational approaches in Indonesian Islamic boarding schools and Malaysian madrasahs shape students' self-reflection (Makruf & Asrori, 2022). The phenomenological approach was used to explore students' reflective experiences arising from learning practices based on spiritual and moral values (Mujahid, 2021).

The qualitative approach provides space for a deep understanding of the meaning of human experience (Janah et al., 2024). The literature review was conducted by examining scientific journals and empirical research related to Islamic education in Southeast Asia (Thoyib, Degaf, Fatah, & Huda, 2024). Literature-based designs of this kind have also been widely applied to map developments in Islamic studies and Islamic economics in Indonesia (Al Afif et al., 2024; Rizki et al., 2023). This approach helps identify patterns of integration between religious, academic, and reflective aspects in the Islamic education systems of both countries (Arroisi et al., 2024).

Data were obtained from secondary sources in the form of scientific articles, books, and research reports relevant to the theme of the pesantren curriculum and student self-reflection. The selection of sources was conducted purposively, based on relevance and recency (2019–2025). Data collection was carried out through the following stages: (1) inventory of academic journals, (2) content analysis to identify curriculum and self-reflection themes, and (3) conceptual coding to develop categories (Dahlan & Yusuf, 2025).

Researchers serve as the primary instruments for analyzing the meaning and context of data (Heriana, Said, Yasmin, Nurrika, & Nugroho, 2023). Data validity is ensured through triangulation of sources and theories, as well as cross-confirmation between academic literature from various Islamic educational contexts (Yusuf, 2022).

The analysis was conducted using phenomenological thematic analysis to reveal patterns of reflective meaning in the pesantren and madrasah curriculum (Rifiyani, Namaziandost, Ubaidillah, & Budianto, 2025). The data were classified into three main themes, namely: (1) integration of religious and general curricula, (2) the role of spiritual leadership in shaping self-reflection, and (3) reflective learning strategies. The validity of the results is reinforced through a cross-context comparison between Indonesia and Malaysia, which supports the finding that religious leadership, integrative curriculum, and spiritual values are the main foundations for the formation of student self-reflection in modern Islamic education (Lateh et al., 2024).

FINDINGS

1. Curriculum Integration and Educational Transformation

Curriculum integration in Indonesian Islamic boarding schools has shown significant progress, particularly in efforts to combine religious and general knowledge through a holistic and contextual approach. The Salafi Islamic boarding school in West Aceh, for example, has designed a step-by-step curriculum from basic books such as *Jurumiyah* and *Tashrif* to advanced books such as Mutammimah Jurumiyah and Syarh Khalid Ibn Naja to strengthen the Nahwu and Sharaf skills of the students (Zikriati, Arani, & Chapakia, 2024).

The curriculum design demonstrates epistemological integration between classical Islamic scholarship and contextual learning. Each rule of Arabic grammar is linked to verses from the Qur'an or Hadith, so that learning is not only oriented towards linguistic aspects, but also builds the spiritual and intellectual awareness of students (Zikriati et al., 2024). The Islamic Education Curriculum (PAI) at the Tengku Chiek Omar Diyan Islamic Boarding School in Aceh Besar is the center for shaping religious, nationalistic, and humanistic character. Students are taught the concepts of ukhuwah Islamiyah, wathaniyyah, and basyariyyah, which encourage the creation of an inclusive, disciplined, and responsible personality (Dungga, Indiarti, Kedokteran, Kedokteran, & Negeri, 2023).

Modern Islamic boarding schools such as Pondok Gontor and the Tahfiz Science Stream institution in Malaysia implement a dual curriculum that combines religious studies and modern science as a form of global-oriented Islamic education transformation (Arif, Nasir, & Ma`arif, 2025). Islamic boarding schools also need to reacclimatize to the digital era by integrating digital literacy and adaptive technological skills into the curriculum system to remain relevant in Society 5.0 (T. Wibowo & Hardiyati, 2024).

Table 1. Model of Islamic Boarding School Curriculum Integration in Southeast Asia

Comparative Aspects	Indonesia (Pesantren Gontor & Salafi)	Malaysia (Tahfiz Science Stream)
Curriculum Approach	*Dual system: kitab kuning* + general knowledge	Integration of Quran memorization + science
Learning Methods	*Sorogan*, *bandongan*, memorization *nadham*	*Digital-based student-centered learning*
Value Orientation	Spiritual, moral, social	Spiritual and academic
Achieved Results	Religious and scientific literacy for santri	Students with Quranic and scientific character

The table above shows the direction of Islamic education integration in Southeast Asia, where all curriculum models emphasize a balance between faith, knowledge, and practice.

2. Pedagogical Innovation, Learning Methods, Character Education, and Morality

The pedagogical model in Islamic boarding schools shows various innovations that combine traditional approaches and modern methods. Learning systems such as sorogan and bandongan are still maintained because they are considered capable of building emotional closeness between teachers and students and are effective in instilling moral values deeply (Zikriati et al., 2024). Arabic teachers at Salafi Islamic boarding schools have developed strategies based on nadham, or rhythmic poetry, as a means of facilitating the memorization of grammar rules. In addition, the use of regional languages such as Acehnese is utilized to help students understand difficult concepts (Zikriati et al., 2024).

At the Tengku Chiek Omar Diyan Islamic Boarding School, Islamic Religious Education (PAI) is developed through five main roles of teachers, namely as motivators, conveyors of values, integrators, sublimators of values, and innovators. This approach has proven to be effective in fostering religiosity and social awareness among students through activities such as recitation, congregational prayer, and reflection on moral values (Saudah et al., 2023).

On a broader scale, Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia have begun to implement the Contextual Literacy Learning (CLL) model, which focuses on strengthening the critical thinking skills of students. This approach combines self-reflection, context-based literacy, and modern learning technologies (Mufrihah, Yudha, Supriatna, Ahman, & Nurihsan, 2025).

Meanwhile, in Malaysia, character building is carried out by integrating moral values into all subjects and co-curricular activities to foster religious awareness and social awareness among students (Irmayati, 2025).

Table 2. Pedagogical Innovation and Character Building in Indonesian Islamic Boarding Schools and Malaysian Islamic Schools

Aspects	Innovations / Methods Applied	Learning Objectives	Impact on Character and Morality	National Context
Traditional Methods	Sorogan and Bandongan	Build teacher-student relationships and learning etiquette	Discipline, respect, responsibility	Indonesia
Local Language and Culture	Nadham (rhythmic poetry), use of regional languages	Facilitate memorization and conceptual understanding	Love of culture, enthusiasm for learning	Indonesia
The Role of Teachers in Islamic Education	Motivator, value communicator, integrator, value sublimator, innovator	Foster religiosity and social awareness	Noble character, social empathy	Indonesia
Global Approach	Contextual Literacy Learning (CLL)	Improve contextual literacy and critical thinking	Critical thinking, reflection, openness to change	Indonesia
Integration of Moral Values	Integration of moral values in all lessons and co-curricular activities	Foster religious and social awareness	Religious, ethical, and socially responsible	Malaysia

3. The Challenges of Modernization and Globalization, and Synergy in the Development of Islamic Education in Southeast Asia

Islamic boarding schools face major challenges in adapting to globalization, particularly in terms of academic management, technological adaptation, and human resource quality. Traditional Islamic boarding schools such as Dayah in Aceh still face obstacles in implementing digital evaluation systems and modern academic management (Aman & Yuliantri, 2024). In contrast, Malaysian madrasahs are already more established in the implementation of digital learning systems and standardized curriculum management (Hadi et al., 2024).

Islamic boarding schools need to reacclimatize by renewing their educational functions to include digital literacy, social skills, and cross-institutional collaboration in order to face Society 5.0 (A. Wibowo et al., 2022). Islamic education must also emphasize the formation of moderate and strong-minded individuals who are a

blessing to the world, so that they do not lose their spiritual identity amid global challenges (M. Umar, Ismail, Rahmi, & Arifin, 2024)

Table 3. Challenges of Pesantren Modernization and Adaptive Strategies

Challenges	Impact on Education	Adaptive Strategy	Implementation Examples
Technological Limitations	Less effective learning process	Digital literacy integration	E-learning training at Islamic boarding schools in West Aceh
Conventional Curriculum	Not in line with global demands	Dual curriculum development	Gontor and Tahfiz Science models
Weak Teaching Staff	Low innovation and quality	Collaboration with PTKI (Islamic Higher Education Institutions)	Arabic language teacher training program
Crisis of Identity Among Students	Loss of spiritual values	Reorientation of moderate Islamic character	Ukhuwah-based Islamic education program at Diyan

Synergy in the development of Islamic education in Southeast Asia is a strategic step in facing the challenges of modernization and globalization. Collaboration between countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia can strengthen knowledge exchange, curriculum innovation, and teacher competency improvement through cross-institutional programs and regional networks. Indonesian Muslim thinkers such as Nurcholish Madjid have also framed the enforcement of human rights as part of Islamic political thought (Syamsuar et al., 2024). The integration of moderate Islamic values oriented towards humanity and technological advancement will create an adaptive, inclusive, and globally competitive education ecosystem without losing its spiritual roots and local culture (Ismail, Siddiq, & Bustami, 2021).

DISCUSSION

The results of the study show that the Islamic education systems in Indonesia and Malaysia both seek to integrate religious values with modern science, but through different approaches and structures. Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia are more flexible and value-based, while madrasahs in Malaysia are more systematic because they are under national education policy. A comparative study of Islamic courts in Aceh and Penang similarly shows that differences between Indonesian and Malaysian Islamic institutions are shaped by each country's constitutional structure and distribution of state power (Wahyudi et al., 2026). This shows a difference in paradigms in responding to the globalization of Islamic education in Southeast Asia (Manshur, 2020).

In the Indonesian context, Islamic boarding schools such as Gontor have demonstrated their ability to adapt to changing times by implementing a dual curriculum that harmoniously combines religious and general education. This approach has succeeded in creating an educational environment that emphasizes a balance between spirituality and rationality, while preparing students to face the challenges of the modern world (Lateh et al., 2024). In contrast, Malaysia has formally developed an integrative approach through its holistic integration policy, which emphasizes a balance between memorization of the Qur'an, science, and leadership competencies based on Islamic values (Darwanto, Prahmana, Susanti, & Khalil, 2024).

This difference in orientation confirms that Indonesian Islamic boarding schools tend to emphasize spiritual and character development, while Malaysian madrasahs are oriented toward a measurable system based on academic achievement. Nevertheless, both share similarities in shaping students who are virtuous, knowledgeable, and ready to contribute to global society (U. Umar, Setyosari, & Kamdi, 2021).

Pedagogical innovations in both countries have also shown significant progress. Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia have begun to adopt contextual learning methods such as Contextual Literacy Learning (CLL), which fosters critical thinking skills among students without abandoning Islamic values (Rozak & Fitriani, 2024). On the other side, Islamic schools in Malaysia emphasize character building through the integration of moral values in all subjects and co-curricular activities, resulting in students who are religious, ethical, and socially responsible (Purhasanah, 2024).

However, the challenges of globalization require Islamic boarding schools to strengthen their academic management capacity, digital literacy, and teacher competence in order to compete in the era of Society 5.0. Limited technology and human resources remain major obstacles for some traditional Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia, such as Dayah in Aceh, which have not yet fully implemented modern management systems (Huda, Yusuf, Jasmi, & Zakaria, 2016). Therefore, a model of synergy between countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia in the form of regional educational networking is needed to strengthen curriculum collaboration and improve teacher professionalism (Wardi, Ismail, Zainollah, & Wekke, 2019).

Conceptually, the results of this study indicate that the integration of Islamic values and science is not only possible but also necessary as the basis for the formation of a modern Islamic education paradigm. Cross-border collaboration in Southeast Asia has the potential to give rise to a model of Islamic education that is sustainable, contextual, and oriented toward universal humanity (Mashuri et al., 2024). In this sense, the future of Islamic education in this region will depend heavily on the ability of educational institutions to adapt traditional values into modern learning systems without losing their spiritual identity (Subaidi et al., 2023).

CONCLUSION

This study confirms that Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia and boarding madrasahs in Malaysia play an important role in shaping a knowledgeable, moral, and competitive Muslim generation, albeit through different approaches and structures. Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia emphasize value-based and tradition-based integration, with an emphasis on spiritual development, character building, and learning practices rooted in the daily lives of students. In contrast, madrasahs in Malaysia feature a systemic model organized through national policy with an emphasis on balancing religious and modern knowledge. This comparison shows that Islamic education in both countries is moving towards a more inclusive and holistic model, combining spiritual depth with scientific rationality. Theoretically, this study enriches the comparative study of Islamic education by showing that the dichotomy between religion and science can be bridged through an integrative approach oriented towards the unity of knowledge and humanity. The results of this study can be used as a basis for the development of a cross-border Islamic curriculum and encourage collaboration between educational institutions in the Southeast Asian region to form a global Islamic education system that is adaptive, contextual, and centered on the values of divinity and humanity.

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