# The Dynamics of Tradition and Modernization: A Comparative Study of Islamic Religious Education at Al-Azhar University and UIN Sunan Kalijaga

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| Sections Info | ABSTRACT |
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| | *Objective: This study aims to compare the modernization of Islamic education systems at Sunan Kalijaga State Islamic University (UINSUKA), Indonesia, and Al-Azhar University, Cairo, Egypt. **Method:** A qualitative descriptive approach was employed using library research to analyze policies and practices of both institutions in adapting to modernization. **Results:** The findings reveal significant differences in the modernization characteristics of the two universities. Al-Azhar University prioritizes preserving Islamic traditions while incorporating secular sciences, maintaining global relevance. Conversely, UINSUKA emphasizes innovation through an integrative-interconnected paradigm, focusing on local adaptability. Despite their differing approaches, both institutions aim to ensure the relevance of Islamic education in their respective contexts. **Novelty:** This study provides a comparative analysis of two prominent Islamic universities' approaches to modernization, highlighting distinct strategies shaped by global and local influences.* |

## INTRODUCTION

Islamic education is a systematic and planned effort to cultivate the values of Islamic teachings among students, as well as to develop the potential within the students themselves, so that they can fulfill their duties on this earth as representatives of God. Humans, as both subjects and objects of Islamic education, are expected to utilize all their human potential, culminating in their devotion to their God [1]. This is as contained in the Quran, Surah Adh-Dhariyat, verse 56, which encourages humanity to faithfully serve Allah SWT.

As Muslims, we are encouraged to adhere to all the rules contained in the teachings of Islam. Among the rules that we need to follow is worshiping Allah SWT. As Muslims in performing worship to their God, it requires a deep guidance process so that these obligations can be carried out as well as possible. In this regard, education plays a very important role in guiding Muslims to fulfill the obligations contained in the teachings of Islam.

Therefore, almost every country with a majority Muslim population is starting to compete in establishing Islamic educational institutions, from the lowest levels to higher education. This has become an agenda for every country to meet the needs of its society in developing their potential through Islamic educational institutions. Education is very important for the progress of a nation because the quality of a country's education will reflect the quality of that nation [2].

Islamic religious education plays an important role in the effort to advance the civilization of a nation; without efforts to develop Islamic education, it will impact the civilization of a nation and country. Therefore, in every country, it is expected to strive for national progress by emphasizing the sector of quality and internationally standard education. In reality, the implementation of the Islamic education system in Islamic higher education institutions around the world has different characteristics, both in countries with a Muslim majority and non-Muslim majority. For example, in countries with a Muslim majority, the nuances will differ from those in countries with a non-Muslim majority [3].

Education has become a fundamental need in advancing a developing and sovereign state system. Each country strives hard to develop quality educational institutions. Through these efforts, each country inevitably has different characteristics in managing its education system, due to the cultural conditions and political systems in each region of the country. Therefore, among the various concepts and systems of Islamic education, there are differences in their implementation from one country to another.

Al-Azhar University is known for its conservatism that remains relevant in the modern world. Al-Azhar has an educational system that preserves Islamic traditions while beginning to integrate modern approaches. Meanwhile, UIN Sunan Kalijaga is one of the state Islamic universities in Indonesia known for its inclusive and integrative approach in combining religious and secular sciences. This paper provides an overview of how Islamic educational institutions respond to the changing times through the modernization of Islamic religious education at Al-Azhar University Cairo, the oldest and globally influential Islamic educational institution, and UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta, a modern Islamic educational institution in Indonesia.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This research uses a descriptive qualitative method with a library research approach. Data is obtained through the collection, analysis, and interpretation of relevant literature, such as books, scientific articles, reports, and official documents from Al-Azhar University Cairo and UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta. This research focuses on exploring and comparing the characteristics of the modernization of Islamic religious education in both institutions. The library research approach allows the researcher to deeply describe the important elements in the modernization of the educational and institutional systems in both universities. Data is analyzed using the interpretative method by identifying the similarities and differences in the characteristics of modernization in the aspects of curriculum, institution, and learning approach.

The analysis results are supported by references from various reliable primary and secondary sources, thus providing a holistic picture of the responses of both universities to global and local challenges in the context of Islamic religious education.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### A. Modernization of the education system at Sunan Kalijaga State Islamic University

The modernization of education refers to the process of transforming and improving the education system to meet the needs of society and the development of contemporary technology. The aim of educational modernization is to enhance the overall quality of education, support the holistic development of students, and produce globally competitive graduates. In the long term, a modern education system is expected to produce innovative, adaptive individuals who are ready to face future challenges, both locally and globally [4].

The scope of educational modernization is not limited to the adoption of digital technology in the teaching and learning process, such as the use of online learning platforms, educational applications, and data-based technology. It also includes the updating of educational curricula and teaching methods to ensure that students acquire skills relevant to the globalization era, such as critical thinking, creativity, digital literacy, and providing more contextual learning experiences. Moreover, education policy is one of the key elements in modernization to support inclusivity, efficiency, and equity in access to education [5]. The government and policymakers are expected to respond to the needs of a multicultural society and the challenges of globalization, including the importance of cross-cultural education and a global perspective.

The modernization of Islamic religious education institutions involves changes in structure, governance, and functions to make them more relevant to contemporary challenges. This process includes the transformation of traditional religious-based institutions into modern institutions that are adaptive to the needs of the global community, without losing their Islamic identity. Institutional modernization reflects the efforts of Islamic educational institutions to integrate religious values with management practices and modern technological innovations.

As part of the national education system established by the government, state Islamic higher education institutions, particularly State Islamic Universities, have made significant contributions to the advancement of education in Indonesia. Islamic education at Islamic universities has also greatly contributed to educating the younger generation of Indonesia. Through the integration of various fields of knowledge, Islamic higher education institutions can become pioneers in the development of Islamic studies in Indonesia and the Islamic world. Strengthening institutions and improving the quality of the workforce are necessary to achieve the above goals.

State Islamic Universities must do more to assist civilization and human resources in the future. Higher education institutions, perhaps gradually, will help develop Islam-based knowledge and science and produce a better generation in the future. It is hoped that State Islamic Universities can produce religious scholars who are proficient in science and technology. A generation like this is needed to build a balanced civilization. This hope can be placed on the State Islamic Universities in Indonesia [6].

The modernization of the education system at Sunan Kalijaga State Islamic University Yogyakarta can be examined through the historical records of its establishment up to the present, which are divided into several phases.

1. The initial phase was established in 1951–1960.

This period began with the change of status of the Faculty of Religion of the Islamic University of Indonesia (UII) to a State University. Islamic Higher Education Institution (PTAIN) was established by Presidential Regulation Number 34 of 1950 on August 14, 1950, and inaugurated on September 26, 1951. At the same time, ADIA (established by Minister of Religious Affairs Regulation Number 1 of 1950) and PTAIN (established by Presidential Regulation Number 34 of 1950) were also merged. During this period, KHR Moh Adnan (1951-1959) and Prof. Dr. H. Mukhtar Yahya (1959-1960) were responsible for PTAIN.

2. Phase of formulating the foundation in 1960–1972

This period began with the establishment of IAIN on August 24, 1960. At that time, IAIN was divided into two. The first one is located in Yogyakarta, and the second one in Jakarta. Based on Religious Decision Number 49 of 1963, established on February 25, 1963, IAIN Yogyakarta was named IAIN Sunan Kalijaga. Then, on July 1, 1965, Minister of Religious Affairs Decision Number 26 of 1965 gave a new name to IAIN Yogyakarta. Education and other infrastructure were built at that time, one of which was the construction of a mosque located between several faculties. At this time, the education system was still "free" because students were given the opportunity to take exams only after they had truly prepared themselves. The curriculum materials still follow the curriculum from Al-Azhar University in Egypt.

3. Phase of formulating the academic foundation from 1972-1996

At this stage, the State Islamic Institute of Sunan Kalijaga is beginning to design campus infrastructure, including the rectorate, library, and graduate school building. In addition, the current education system has begun to shift from a free system to a structured system. The shadow semester system is used alongside the original and pure semester credit system. The Sunan Kalijaga State Islamic Institute also adjusts its curriculum to meet the needs of the Indonesian generation. At this stage, the State Islamic Institute of Sunan Kalijaga established and opened several faculties, such as the Faculty of Adab, the Faculty of Da'wah, the Faculty of Shari'ah, the Faculty of Tarbiyah, and the Faculty of Ushuluddin. In addition, the Postgraduate Program of the State Islamic Institute of Sunan Kalijaga began at this stage, coinciding with the 1983/1984 academic year.

Academic activities at IAIN Sunan Kalijaga began with short courses in Islamic studies (known as postgraduate courses) and post-postgraduate studies, which did not confer a master's degree. Therefore, the postgraduate program was opened in 1980 to strengthen the function of IAIN Sunan Kalijaga as a higher education institution beyond the undergraduate level.

4.  Phase of academic management consolidation in 1996-2001

At this time, the Sunan Kalijaga State Islamic Institute continues to strive to improve academic quality. Its main priority is to improve the quality of lecturers and alumni. Lecturers are encouraged and given the opportunity to continue their education at higher levels in various fields, both domestically and internationally. There is also an enhancement of administrative staff to improve academic services and management. Currently, the Sunan Kalijaga State Islamic Institute is focusing more on improving the academic field and strengthening its status as an Islamic Higher Education Institution.

5.  Phase of developing institutional aspects in 2001-2010

This phase is also referred to as the transformation phase because many changes occurred, such as the transformation from the State Islamic Institute of Sunan Kalijaga to the State Islamic University of Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta. This change was made based on Presidential Decree Number 50 of 2004 on June 21. This period was led by Amin Abdullah from 2001 to 2005.

The change of status from an institute to a university was made to implement the interconnection integration paradigm, a new approach to dialogue between the branches of religious and general sciences. The integration-interconnection approach encompasses three dimensions of knowledge development: hadlarah an-nas, hadlarah al-ilm, and hadlarah al-falsafah, aiming to combine Islamic studies with modern science (general knowledge). The goal of this approach is to achieve a unity of knowledge that is integrative and interconnected [7].
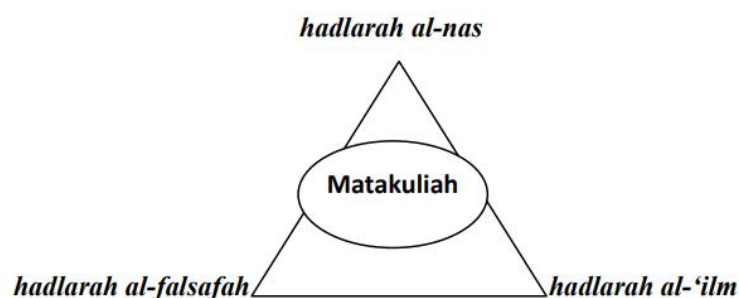


**Figure 1.** The triangle of sciences at UIN Sunan Kalijaga.

The image of the triangle of knowledge is intended to mean that the courses at UIN Sunan Kalijaga should depict an integrated and mutually supportive knowledge system from the three existing entities of knowledge: hadlarah an-nas, hadlarah al-ilm, and hadlarah al-falsafah. It is hoped that the idea of reintegrating epistemology of science will help resolve the conflict between extreme secularism and negative fundamentalism of rigid and radical ideologies.

**B.    Modernization of the Education System at Al-Azhar University Cairo**

Several modernizations of Islamic education that have swept through the Middle East over the past few hundred years have influenced the culture and traditions of

society. Problems and reactions to modernization efforts occur in the Middle East due to the intertwining of modern societal traditions and old/traditional societal traditions [8]. Moreover, the issue of modernization has become a subject of debate. Some advocate for reviving Islamic values, while others call for freeing themselves from traditional values. They also demand a new model based on the dynamics of the current reality and future expectations [9]. This situation led to the emergence of separatist groups, and the government quickly built strength by adopting Western technology and supporting progress. As a result, the main focus of life in Middle Eastern countries, including Egypt, is now on very dynamic changes.

1. Al-Azhar in its early days

Founded in the late 10th century AD by the Fatimid Dynasty in Egypt, Al-Azhar University is considered the world's foremost cultural and academic center for Sunni Islamic theology, philosophy, and Arabic literature. This university is considered the second oldest degree-granting university still in operation after the University of al-Karaouine in Fez, Morocco (around 859 AD). Although originally intended as a mosque, this university gradually evolved into a center of learning and an academic institution. The Al-Azhar curriculum focuses on the study of Islamic law and theological hermeneutics while maintaining an original Islamic model in its academic structure, differing from the Western model [10], without using formal academic degrees or strict admission requirements.

Al-Azhar has become a center of religious education in Egypt and throughout the Muslim world. It not only guides the religious practices of the Egyptian people but also plays a significant role in the political and social structure of Egypt. In the political arena, Egyptian politicians and statesmen strive hard to gain legitimacy from al-Azhar. On the other hand, Egyptian society sees al-Azhar as a sanctuary and representation, especially during complex political and social upheavals [11].

2. Al-Azhar after the French Invasion Period

The effort to modernize the Al-Azhar education system was spearheaded by Muhammad Abduh [12], Muhammad Ali Pasha and Muhammad Rashid Rida who sought to implement reforms and modernization by incorporating Western curricula [13]. This is backed by the event of the French invasion led by Napoleon Bonaparte, which successfully defeated the Mamluk forces of Egypt at the end of the 18th century [14]. This directly resulted in the contact between European civilization brought by Napoleon and the Muslim community in Egypt, thereby awakening the intellectual awareness of Muslims to modernize Islamic education [15].

After the incident, the Egyptian government realized that the country needed its younger generation not only to study Islam but also secular sciences to be used in their homeland. Moreover, students who pursued secular education at Al-Azhar University did not receive partial religious education; instead, religious knowledge was combined with secular sciences [16]. Since then, the Egyptian government began establishing modern schools and sending students abroad to study science and technology [17].

The modernization of education began in the 1930s when Al-Azhar officially attained university status through three strategies: (1) the opening of new study programs, namely faculties of engineering, medicine, and business administration, in addition to traditional programs such as Islamic law and Arabic literature; (2) the acceptance of international students by opening doors to students from various countries to expand Al-Azhar's global influence; and (3) the establishment of women's colleges, specifically creating faculties for women as a step towards inclusivity and modernization [10].

3.    Al-Azhar after the Egyptian Revolution

Since the 1952 revolution, Al-Azhar has been incorporated as part of the state by the Egyptian government through control over its finances and as a religious actor that secures fatwas legitimizing government policies. Gamal Abdel Nasser recognized the influence of Al-Azhar, so he sought to bring Al-Azhar under his political authority in order to achieve his domestic and foreign policy goals [18]. Efforts to legitimize power through educational institutions, in this case Al-Azhar, continued until the Mubarak era by promoting values such as obedience and tolerance in the school curriculum [19].

In 1961, Gamal Abdel Nasser adopted the program proposed by Thaha Husein, which included (1) opening secular faculties at Al-Azhar, namely the faculties of medicine and engineering [20], (2) adding content to the curriculum with the aim of establishing a modern school that stands in society and teaches modern sciences in addition to Islam. The curriculum at Al-Azhar is supplemented with secular sciences that are developing in the modern era so that graduates understand modern culture, thereby providing solutions to the problems arising in the modern era like today [21].

As for the curriculum content, it is prioritized towards the teaching and learning of foreign languages, including English, French, and Italian [22]. The reasons for this policy are: (1) in the modern era marked by the development of science and technology, everyone is required to master various foreign languages that can support the advancement of knowledge, (2) it is not enough for everyone to master their own country's language, but it is also important to learn the languages of other countries. (3) sending scientific ambassadors to Western countries. With this program, Middle Eastern scientists can learn about and understand the scientific developments in the West, so they can be applied in Middle Eastern education. (4) building a large number of educational facilities. The educational facilities that need to be built are learning spaces. In this regard, Thaha Husein urged the government to promptly realize the construction of learning spaces, so that these efforts could create ideal conditions between the number of classrooms and schools in accordance with the number of students. This effort was successfully carried out by the government by building 2,600 learning spaces and waiving the initial school fees for secondary education.

**C.    Al-Azhar after the 2011 Egyptian Revolution**

The religious discourse of al-Azhar changed drastically after the 2011 Egyptian revolution. Professor Ahmad al-Ṭayyib was appointed as the Grand Imam of al-Azhar

by Mubarak less than a year before the Egyptian revolution in 2011. Al-Azhar has played an important role in the national debate since Mubarak's fall. However, immediately after the Egyptian revolution, a group of Al-Azhar sheikhs demanded that the institution be independent from political interference [23].

Al-Azhar, under the leadership of Ahmad al-Ṭayyib, is making institutional adaptations to respond to contemporary social, political, and educational challenges. As a leading Islamic educational institution, Al-Azhar has various main units such as the Senior Scholars Council, Al-Azhar University, and Al-Azhar Institutes (al-Maʿāhid al-Azhariyyah), all of which are under the control of the Rector. Ahmad al-Ṭayyib led the reforms by emphasizing the revitalization of tradition (turāth) within the educational and institutional structure, including the strengthening of the riwāq system as a traditional learning method [24].

Institutional reforms are also evident in changes to the education system, such as the reduction of the traditional fiqh curriculum burden and the consolidation of several subjects into a simpler book. This step aims to make the educational structure more efficient and aligned with the needs of modern students. In addition, the introduction of new subjects such as Islamic Heritage (Al-Thaqāfah al-Islāmiyyah) is part of the institutional strategy to strengthen tolerance, national unity, and combat extremism.

Research Ofratos [25] presenting several findings from the higher education system at Al-Azhar Cairo as follows:

1. The educational goals of Al-Azhar prioritize three main aspects: (1) preserving and developing the wealth of Islamic knowledge, (2) preparing a generation of scholars with a strong foundation in faith, morals, and character in accordance with Islamic teachings, as well as possessing deep Islamic knowledge, (3) preparing preachers as Islamic missionaries to the entire world.

2. All the lecturers at Al-Azhar mostly master the subjects they teach, and they also deeply understand and appreciate the academic traditions and culture at Al-Azhar, as most of them are alumni of Al-Azhar.

3. The curriculum implemented at Al-Azhar adopts a tiered system, which sets the number of courses between nine to ten courses offered in the study program. Except for the mandatory courses that must be chosen, which are the Quran courses applied in every study program at Al-Azhar. The Quran courses also require students to memorize several surahs according to their program level.

4. The learning method applied at al-Azhar adopts a yearly level system and is conducted face-to-face through lectures, discussions, and the search for Islamic law through bahtsumasa'il. Meanwhile, the final project requirement is to produce a scientific thesis, or in Indonesian terms, a thesis, thesis, and dissertation.

5. The evaluation of learning at Al-Azhar University:
   a. The courses taken must all be passed, both from the first semester and the second semester, with four opportunities to take the exam. If you still haven't passed, then you will have to drop out, whether you like it or not.

b. The Qur'an is a priority subject that must be mastered or memorized by the students.

c. The sources of literature used to compile final theses and other assignments utilize turats literature, which are primary sources from classical texts compiled by earlier Salafi scholars.

The learning media used in lectures at Al-Azhar can be said to seem incomplete and inadequate, because the academic culture and traditions at Al-Azhar still maintain handwritten methods in the administration and assessment of its students.

## D. Comparison of the Islamic Education System at Al-Azhar University Cairo and UIN Sunan Kalijaga Indonesia

The efforts to modernize the education system at Al-Azhar University can be seen through several aspects, including the transformation of ideology from the Shia sect to the Sunni sect. When Napoleon expanded into Egypt, it caused an assimilation of Western culture with Middle Eastern culture. This also influenced the changes that occurred at Al-Azhar University. Meanwhile, the emergence of several modernization figures at Al-Azhar University, spearheaded by Muhammad Rasyid Ridha, Muhammad Abduh, and Muhammad Ali Pasha, impacted the addition of secular scientific subjects from the West into the Al-Azhar curriculum [26] which makes al-Azhar rapidly develop and become the center of Islamic modernization in the field of education [27].

Educational reform at Al-Azhar can also be seen during Ahmad al-Ṭayyib's era. It represents a significant step in balancing Islamic tradition (turāth) with the demands of modernity (muʿāṣarah). Amid social, political, and ideological challenges, this reform has successfully introduced relevant innovations without sacrificing the core values of Islam. These changes include the simplification of the curriculum, the introduction of new subjects such as Islamic Heritage (Al-Thaqāfah al-Islāmiyyah), and efforts to improve teaching methods to better align with the age and comprehension levels of the students.

Pedagogically, this reform aims to enhance students' accessibility and understanding of the curriculum, particularly through the modification of classical fiqh books that were previously considered too complex. Ideologically, this reform reaffirms Al-Azhar's commitment to combating extremism, promoting tolerance, and strengthening national unity. The reforms also reflect efforts to maintain Al-Azhar's relevance as a global center of Islamic education, preserving its traditional identity while addressing contemporary challenges.

On the institutional side, this reform strengthens Al-Azhar's position as an institution relatively independent from political pressure, while still contributing to social stability and national harmony. The revitalization of traditional systems such as riwāq has become one of the ways Al-Azhar maintains the heritage of Islamic scholarship while adapting to the needs of the times. Educational reforms under Ahmad al-Ṭayyib reflect an integrative vision that harmonizes tradition and renewal. These measures not only maintain the relevance of Al-Azhar at both local and global levels but also strengthen its role as a guardian of moderate Islamic tradition in the modern era.

Al-Azhar University has become a leading institution in the religious field, focusing on Islamic sciences such as tafsir, fiqh, hadith, and sharia. Nevertheless, general subjects are still taught, although their proportion is smaller compared to secular education. The secular higher education system provides more academic freedom to faculties to design study programs, with an emphasis on science, technology, and applied sciences. However, the higher education system in Egypt faces a number of challenges. One of them is the mismatch between graduates' competencies and the needs of the modern job market, especially in the fields of science and technology. The Al-Azhar education system, which is heavily centered on traditional values, is sometimes less adaptive to global changes [28].

Meanwhile, in its mission, UIN Sunan Kalijaga, in an effort to modernize the Islamic Education system, has established seven faculties: the Faculty of Adab, the Faculty of Dakwah, the Faculty of Syari'ah, the Faculty of Tarbiyah, and the Faculty of Ushuluddin, as well as a Postgraduate program. With the presence of twenty-four departments or study programs and continuously improved and perfected curriculum content, this ensures that the system at Sunan Kalijaga State Islamic University remains in line with the demands of modern times.

The modernization of Islamic Education at Sunan Kalijaga State Islamic University Yogyakarta is achieved by developing a curriculum with the spider-web-based Integration-Interconnection concept pioneered by M. Amin Abdullah. The integration-interconnection concept aims to demonstrate that religious knowledge and general knowledge are interconnected and can be linked to each other [29].
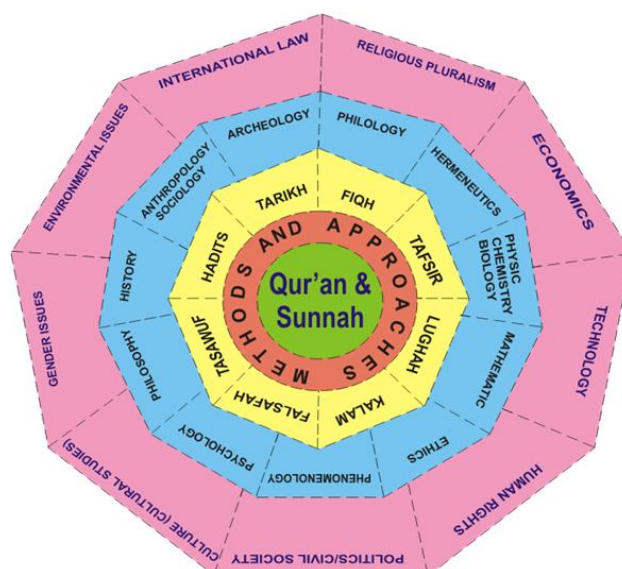


**Figure 2.** Scientific concept of integrating interconnection in a spider web model.

According to Amin Abdullah, academic activities at Religious Higher Education Institutions across the country, especially IAIN and STAIN, are limited to the inner circle and the second-layer circle (Kalam, Philosophy, Sufism, Hadith, History, Jurisprudence,

Exegesis, and Language), in accordance with the current state of affairs. Even then, it can only be referred to within the domain of classical humanities. In most cases, IAIN generally has not been able to engage in discussions of contemporary social sciences and humanities as depicted in the second circular path (Anthropology, Sociology, Psychology, Philosophy with the various approaches they offer) [30]. With the transformation of the state Islamic institute into the Sunan Kalijaga State Islamic University, it is hoped that the efforts to modernize the Islamic education system in the institution can be optimized [31].

**Table 1.** Comparison of the modernization of Al-Azhar University and UIN Sunan Kalijaga.

| Aspect | Universitas Al-Azhar | UIN Sunan Kalijaga |
|---|---|---|
| Focus of Modernization | Preservation of Islamic traditions | Integration of religious and secular sciences |
| Curriculum | Based on classical Islamic texts (turats) | Multidisciplinary |
| Institutional Structure | Hierarchy led by scholars (sheikhs) | Good governance |
| Use of Technology | Limited | Digitalization of administration and learning |
| Scope of Influence | Global, especially in the Sunni Islamic world | National and Southeast Asia |

## CONCLUSION

**Fundamental Finding :** The modernization characteristics of Universitas Al-Azhar and UIN Sunan Kalijaga highlight distinct approaches. Universitas Al-Azhar emphasizes preserving Islamic traditions with limited secular adaptations, while UIN Sunan Kalijaga focuses on innovation and knowledge integration. Both institutions share a common goal of making Islamic education relevant to contemporary changes, yet social, political, and cultural contexts distinctly shape their modernization trajectories. **Implication :** These findings suggest that modernization in Islamic education is not monolithic but context-dependent. For policymakers and educators, understanding the balance between tradition and innovation is crucial for developing adaptable and inclusive educational frameworks that respect local and global needs. **Limitation :** This study is limited to the comparative analysis of two institutions, which may not fully capture the diversity of modernization efforts in Islamic education globally. Broader studies involving more institutions and regions would provide a more comprehensive understanding. **Future Research :** Future research could explore the long-term impacts of these modernization approaches on student outcomes, curriculum development, and societal perceptions of

Islamic education. Comparative studies involving other countries with similar dualities in tradition and innovation could also enrich the discourse.

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