

The Mass Production of Religious Authority: A Study on a Ma'had Aly Program in South Sulawesi, Indonesia

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Abstract

The rise of new Muslim organizations in Indonesia after the reform movement in 1998 has produced a new type of religious authority, particularly through the emergence of popular preachers. Television and social media platforms are among the key factors in helping these new sources of religious authority gain instant popularity in the Muslim community. Many of those fitting this new type of preacher are relatively junior, starting their career by delivering religious speeches to diverse Islamic study groups in urban areas before appearing on television and various social media platforms. Their popularity has influenced the way the Muslim communities in Indonesia view and respect the status and role of traditional Islamic authority (*ulama*). For a long time, the traditional type of *ulama* has functioned as the most authoritative source of religious knowledge and learning for the Muslim community. This paper describes the important role of the graduates of a tertiary Islamic education program for producing junior *ulama*, the Ma'had 'Aly As'adiyah, in the field of Islamic education and *da'wa* (Islamic preaching) and how it has adapted its teaching methodology to suit current developments in those fields. This research finds that while maintaining traditional *da'wa* methods for local communities, some Ma'had Aly graduates have also taken advantage of various new digital media platforms to reach more diverse and wider audiences. This research argues that Ma'had 'Aly As'adiyah has consistently trained and produced new *ulama* with high competence in various disciplines of Islamic knowledge and an ability to respond and adapt to contemporary socio-religious changes partly generated by the disruptive development of new media.

Keywords: pesantren As'adiyah, junior kiai, celebrity preacher, social media *da'wa*.

Introduction

In the early 20th century, the presence of print media altered the leaders and institutions of Islamic religious authority in Indonesia (Burhanudin and Baedhowi, 2003). Since the 1980s, the emergence of new media has further transformed religious authority in Indonesia. Religious institutions and authorities also experienced significant transformation due to the disruption posed by new media technology, producing what Anderson (2003) refers to as the ‘new Islamic translators.’ In Indonesia, this phenomenon was made possible by two interrelated structural factors: (1) the wave of political-economic liberalization during the socio-political reform period in 1998 which was simultaneously accompanied by (2) revolutionary developments in information and communication technology in the late 1990s (Slama, 2018). In Indonesia, these ‘new Islamic translators’ were associated with the emergence of ‘celebrity preachers’, who first appeared on national television media networks in the early 2000s and, were then later popularized through internet-based digital information and communication media.

Writing about the Christian context, Campbell and Teusner (2011) describe how the Internet has posed great challenges to traditional structures of religious authority and is transforming religious people’s understanding of authority by creating new positions of power, crushing traditional hierarchies, and providing new platforms that have democratized religious knowledge online. As Turner (2007) remarks, one of the factors that has prompted the crisis of religious authority is ‘the emergence of a struggle over religious audiences’. Other factors, he observes, are the changing relationship between traditional religious training and the growth of the secular university. Writing in the context of Islam, Turner discusses the decline of the religious authority in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (2007: 58).

In Indonesia, the transformation of religious authority, especially in the 20th century, has been an important, albeit complex, subject of investigation by many scholars (Burhanuddin and Baedhowi 2003). In South Sulawesi the transformation of Islamic authority was mainly prompted by the emergence, since the early 1990s, of Islamic educational institutions and local Islamic schools, such as pesantren and madrasa. Some of these educational institutions later developed or transformed into local Islamic educational foundations or organizations such as As’adiyah (established in 1930) and Darul Da’wah wal Irsyad in 1938 (Mattulada 1983). The religious landscape in this region is also influenced by social and political changes taking place at the national level. This includes the establishment of branches of national religious organizations or movements such as the Muhammadiyah and the Nahdlatul Ulama that were established around the same period. For example, the first local branch of the Muhammadiyah organization in South Sulawesi was established in Makassar in 1926 (Abu Hamid 1983).

In this paper, I attempt to analyze one of the factors that influenced the transformation of Islamic authority in South Sulawesi, namely the establishment of a special educational institution in a pesantren to educate and produce *ulama*, known as Ma'had Aly. Ma'had Aly (Ar. lit. tertiary Islamic boarding school) is a special educational institution for prospective *ulama* who have completed high school (I. madrasah aliyah) in a pesantren.

As a case study, this paper discusses the Ma'had Aly program at Pesantren As'adiyah in Sengkang, Wajo Regency, South Sulawesi. Pesantren As'adiyah is the oldest and remains the largest Islamic formal education institution in the province. It was founded by the Mecca-born Bugis *ulama*, KH. Muhammad As'ad al-Bugisi (1905-1952) in 1930. The pesantren's *ulama* education program is called al-Ma'had al-'Aly li al-Dirasat al-Islamiyah li al-As'adiyah (Ar. Lit. As'adiyah's tertiary boarding school for Islamic studies) or popularly known for short as Ma'had Aly. This paper attempts to describe the role played by alumni of Ma'had Aly As'adiyah (henceforth, MAA) in the preaching and teaching of Islam in the province and beyond. The main issue that this paper attempts to address is: what strategies are the alumni of this program utilizing to maintain their traditional role as junior *ulama* amid the socio-cultural changes prompted by technological developments in the field of communication and information? As mentioned above, since the early 2000s, new religious authorities have emerged in the field of Islamic *da'wa*. These new leaders do not originate from formal Islamic educational institutions, such as pesantren. Traditionally, pesantren have been seen as the most authoritative institution for educating and producing *ulama* in Indonesia (Burhanuddin and Baedhowi 2001). This study investigates the transformation or contestation in the field of religious knowledge in South Sulawesi prompted by the recent developments of digital information technology, especially since the beginning of the 21st century.

Research Method

Methodologically, this paper was part of a research project that the author conducted from 2012 to 2019 in South Sulawesi, particularly in Wajo regency, where the main Pesantren As'adiyah complex is located. In addition to studying the development of Pesantren As'adiyah in general, and its Ma'had Aly program more specifically, the research collected data through a series of in-depth interviews with several key informants, both through fieldwork in 2012 and virtual communication through social media platforms. Additional data was obtained through intermittent visits and digital ethnography from 2014 to 2019. In terms of the type of data collection and analysis, this is a qualitative study with an anthropological approach and a descriptive presentation.

Literature Review

There have been a significant number of studies on Ma'had Aly within Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia (among others Wahid 2005, Gazali 2009, Rosidin 2012, Halim 2015, Permana 2018, Wajdi and Aulia 2019, Mubarok 2020, Rozi 2021). Several scholars have also conducted research on Ma'had Aly As'adiyah from various perspectives (among others, Yunus 2006, Halim 2015, Halim 2018, Husein 2020, Wahidah 2011, Muchsin 2016, Idham 2017, Kamal 2019, Alwi, Parninsih and Hidayat 2021). These studies help us understand various aspects of Ma'had Aly As'adiyah, especially its historical development, learning models, curriculum, student profiles, and their contribution in the field of *da'wa* and Islamic education. However, these studies (except Halim 2018) have not specifically explored the broader aspects of the role of some of their alumni in using information technology and digital media to expand their careers as popular preachers or 'celebrity preacher'. This paper seeks to fill this gap in our understanding of the role of formal *ulama*-producing institutions such as MAA in the formation and reproduction of traditional Islamic authority. It also discusses the efforts made by MAA alumni to transform and adapt their *da'wa* methods to meet the complicated demands of a digital society.

Ma'had 'Aly: A Special Pesantren Education Program to Produce *Ulama*

Ma'had Aly, which is often referred to as *ulama* cadre education (I. pendidikan kader ulama), is a stream of tertiary education within the pesantren system. At the outset, Ma'had Aly were simply expected to be centers of excellence within pesantren to train and produce '*ulama*' in the traditional sense of the word, that is, scholars of Islamic religious knowledge. However, recently there have also been many *ulama* education programs that are not part of the pesantren system. As observed by Marzuki et al. (2000), the Ma'had Aly education program is almost entirely the same as other religious education programs within a traditional pesantren, including adopting the typical *halaqah* religious teaching method. *Halaqah* (Ar. lit. circle) is an education approach for studying classical Islamic texts written in Arabic via a teacher reading the text, providing a translation and explanation, and then students reading the text and writing down its translation into local languages or Indonesian (Dhofier 1999).

Ma'had Aly students, like students enrolling at the secondary education level in any pesantren, also live in dormitories, study in classrooms, attend *halaqah* in the mosque, and perform other regular activities. However, compared to students at the secondary education level, Ma'had Aly students are given more freedom and opportunities to pursue religious knowledge independently. For example, they are permitted and encouraged to read advanced religious texts, to publish their writings in various media, or to give religious talks outside the boarding school complex. In

other words, Ma'had Aly students are treated more as active learners rather than as passive learners. In addition, most of the texts they study are considered advanced. As Wahid (2005) explains, the qualifications expected of Ma'had Aly students are higher than that of students at the secondary high school level. They are required not only to read religious texts literally and understand their contents textually but also to apply content analysis (*dirasa tahliliya*), contextual reading (*qira'a siyaqiyya*), and criticism of the contents of the texts and any products of religious thought (*dirasa naqdiya*) (Wahid 2005, 100).

The Ma'had Aly was initially developed by the pesantren leaders as a result of their growing awareness of the limited ability of their pesantren's formal Islamic education programs at senior high school level to produce graduates with high-level religious knowledge. Over time, there has been a decline in students' levels of interest in studying Islamic knowledge beyond the regular study program in pesantren (Wahid 2015).

On 30 May 2016, the Ma'had Aly was officially acknowledged by the Minister of Religious Affairs (henceforth MORA) of the Republic of Indonesia, Lukman Hakim Saifuddin. The occasion was marked by the issuing of MORA Regulation (PMA) Number 71/2015 on the management of Ma'had Aly. The regulation stipulates that Ma'had Aly are Islamic religious tertiary education bodies that facilitate academic studies of Islamic religious knowledge (*tafaqquh fi al-din*) based on the classical texts written in Arabic (popularly known in Indonesia as 'kitab kuning', or yellow books) and are organized by and located in Islamic boarding schools (Mubarok 2022). Now formally recognized as tertiary education bodies, Ma'had Alys now share equal standing with longstanding tertiary Islamic education institutions, such as the state-run Perguruan Tinggi Keagamaan Islam Negeri (PTKIN), which include Sekolah Tinggi Agama Islam Negeri (Islamic Studies Colleges, STAIN), Institute Agama Islam Negeri (State Institutes for Islamic Studies, IAIN) and Universitas Islam Negeri (State Islamic Universities, UIN).

The idea of institutionalizing Ma'had Aly had its roots in the pesantren community's realization that it faced increasing challenges and difficulties in providing the Muslim community with *ulama* with a strong mastery of Islamic sciences (Ali 2005). Today there is a sense of crisis among pesantren leaders regarding the quality of religious teaching within the pesantren, particularly for students at the secondary school level. Unlike in the past, pesantren do not regularly produce high-quality *ulama*. At the same time, the Muslim community is faced with increasingly complex socio-religious problems that require authoritative religious preachers and scholars, who were traditionally produced by pesantren, to offer relevant religious guidance.

Within this new socio-religious context, the educational program at Ma'had Aly is aimed at preserving the 'kitab kuning' learning tradition, unique to the pesantren system. Each Ma'had Aly program only specializes in one major area

of Islamic knowledge (*takhasshus*). PMA 71/2015 states that 9 (nine) fields of Islamic study programs can be covered by each Ma'had Aly program, namely: *al-Qur'an wa 'ulumuhu* (Qur'ān and Qur'ānic sciences), *tafsir wa 'ulumuhu* (exegesis and its sciences), *hadith wa 'ulumuhu* (*hadith* and the science of *hadith*), *fiqh wa ushuluhu* (Islamic jurisprudence and its principles), *'aqidah Islamiyyah wa falsafatuha* (Islamic faith and philosophy), *tashawwuf wa tariqatuhu* (Sufism and *tariqa*), *'ilm falaq* (Islamic astronomy), *tarikh Islamy wa tsaqafatuhu* (Islamic history and culture), and *lughah 'arabiyyah wa adabuhu* (Arabic language and literature). This is what separates Ma'had Aly from other PTKIN, where the former only covers one field of Islamic knowledge as its specialization. PTKINs, meanwhile, have academic programs for a comprehensive study of Islam. PTKINs that have been upgraded into universities (UIN) have the additional task of developing Islamic sciences as part of their epistemological orientation to integrate religious and general subjects. Ma'had Aly are expected to fill the empty space left by PTKIN which have now shifted from focusing only on studying Islamic sciences to also managing study programs in general subjects.

Pesantren have long been known for their consistent use of the *halaqah* model in teaching traditional texts. The pesantren community in Java refer to this method of learning as "bandongan" (Dhofier 1999). In South Sulawesi, the *halaqah* model has been referred to as "mangaji kita" (learning the book), "mangaji tudang" (learning in a sitting position on the floor) or later, "mappasanreng" (attending a pesantren's *halaqah*). Pesantren are also often seen as receptive and adaptive to local wisdom and able to accommodate new things that have a positive social influence for the wider Muslim community. The PMA on Ma'had Aly seeks to institutionalize pesantren values, particularly maintaining positive traditions and accepting better new developments (*al-muhafadzah 'ala al-qadim as-shalih wa al-akhdzu bi al-jadid al-ashlah*).

In summary, Ma'had Aly are seen as important formal institutions to produce religious scholars through the provision of a distinctive, independent education curricula. Ma'had Aly focus on producing qualified graduates in one field of Islamic scholarship (*mutafaqqih fiddin*). In turn, Ma'had Aly graduates are expected to be able to respond to actual religious issues within the Muslim community based on their solid understanding of the authoritative religious texts and their interpretations from authoritative Muslim scholars. Therefore, the main concern of Ma'had Aly is addressing declining morality in the Muslim community resulting from the ever-changing values in society. Ma'had Aly are expected to deal with and resolve socio-religious issues in society rather than simply running education programs with pragmatic goals while disregarding the contextual needs of the communities living in and around the pesantren (Mubarok 2022).

Around 13 Ma'had Alys, were granted official permits by MORA in 2016. They are located in the provinces of Jakarta, Jambi, West Sumatra, Aceh, South Sulawesi, South Kalimantan, East Java, Central Java, and West Java (nu.or.id). As mentioned earlier, each Ma'had Aly is required to specialize in Islamic sciences. In addition to this first group of 13 Ma'had Alys, a further 74 Ma'had Alys have subsequently registered with MORA. The Ma'had Aly that have already been registered under MORA are home to 1,179 lecturers. and 15,443 students (Emispendis 2022).

One of the Ma'had Aly that has received official MORA recognition as a university-level formal religious program is the Ma'had Aly in Pesantren As'adiyah, in Sengkang, Wajo Regency, South Sulawesi. The recognition of Ma'had Aly As'adiyah (MAA) as a tertiary Islamic educational institution providing the equivalent of a bachelor's degree program is based on MORA Directorate-General of Islamic Education Decree No. 3002 of 2016. The MAA is tasked with providing an academic education program based on classical texts covering Islamic religious sciences (*tafaqquh fiiddin*) with a specialized program (*takhassus*) in *Tafsir wa Ulum al-Tafsir* (Qur'anic exegesis and the science of exegesis).

Pesantren As'adiyah and the Reproduction of New Religious Authority in Contemporary South Sulawesi

The MAA is an educational institution for *ulama* in Pesantren As'adiyah in Sengkang. This pesantren is one of the oldest and most influential Islamic schools in South Sulawesi. The pesantren was founded in Sengkang, Wajo, South Sulawesi, in 1930 by a Meccan-born Bugis ulama, Muhammad As'ad al-Bugis (1907-1952) (Walinga 1981). Kiai As'ad began teaching using the *halaqah* method with a small number of students in 1928. The *halaqah* sessions were then developed into a formal school called al-Madrasah al-'Arabiyyah al-Islamiyyah (or abbreviated as MAI). Around two decades before the establishment of MAI, several traditional Islamic schools teaching Muslim children to read and memorize the Qur'ān had been established in South Sulawesi. In some cases, these non-formal learning institutions also taught the basics of Arabic grammar and syntax. Before As'ad, several *ulama* had also taught religious sciences using the *halaqah* method in the Salemo island of South Sulawesi. However, MAI is believed to be the first Islamic school in the region combining the *halaqah* learning method with the classical madrasa education system. After Kiai As'ad died in 1952, two of his most senior students, KH Daud Ismail and KH Muh. Yunus Martan took up the leadership of the MAI. The MAI was later renamed as Madrasah As'adiyah. Initially, Madrasah As'adiyah ran only a few learning programs: Al-Awaliyah (1 year, trial education for prospective students who have taken Qur'ān recitation classes elsewhere), Tahdiriyah (3 years, preparation for Ibtidaiyah), Madrasah Ibtidaiyah (4 years, elementary school level), I'dadiyah

(1 year), Tsanawiyah (3 years, junior high school level), and Madrasah Aliyah (high school level). Later, As'adiyah also established public schools from kindergarten to university level where religious and general subjects were taught according to the national curriculum (Pasanreseng 1992, Rama 2003). In its subsequent development, Madrasah As'adiyah morphed into a pesantren and was renamed Pondok Pesantren As'adiyah.

Since the mid-20th century this pesantren has educated a new generation of religious authorities (*ulama*) in South Sulawesi. As mentioned above, Pesantren As'adiyah not only teaches subjects in the traditional fields of Islamic knowledge with the *halaqi* method but has also established modern classes that adopt the classical school system (*madrasah*), like schools founded by the Dutch colonial government and modernist Muslim organizations such as Muhammadiyah (Abu Hamid 1983, Mattulada 1983, Rama 2003). Pesantren As'adiyah also has a Tahfidz Al-Qur'ān program and an *ulama* education program called Ma'had 'Aly li al-Dirasat al-Islamiyyah li al-As'adiyah. The Tahfidz program has produced many Qur'ān memorizers (Ar. *hafidz*) who have become *ulama*, Qur'ān teachers, and imams. Many have also been successful in national and international Qur'ān memorization contests (MHQ) (Surur 2011, Halim 2015, Halim 2021).

Ma'had Aly As'adiyah and the Mass Production of Junior Ulama

Kiai As'ad had been always very conscious of the importance of training and producing *ulama* since he arrived in South Sulawesi in 1928. While teaching *halaqah* to MAI students in Masjid Jami' (the oldest local public mosque in the city), Kiai As'ad also taught advanced religious lessons to a small group of his most senior and talented students. Kiai As'ad provided special training to these students since they were prepared to teach at the MAI. Kiai As'ad also expected them to become *ulama* like himself. Among the students who received this special training were KH. Abdurrahman Ambo Dalle (1900-1996), KH. Daud Ismail (1908-2006), KH. Muh. Yunus Maratan (1906-1986), KH. Muhammad Abduh Pabbaja (1908-2009), KH. Abdul Muin Yusuf (1920-2004), KH. Marzuki Hasan (1917-2006), and many others (see Arief 2007). These men eventually became respected *ulama* and founded their own pesantren in their home villages or places of origin.

Under the leadership of KH. Yunus, a forum or coordinating body between four Islamic boarding schools founded by KH. As'ad's first students was established and given the name Hay'ah al-Takaful li Munadhdhamah al-Tarbiyyah al-Islamiyyah. The four pesantren under this coordination body were Pesantren As'adiyah (in Wajo), Pesantren DDI (Pare-pare), Pesantren Yathrib (Soppeng), and Pesantren Ma'had Hadith (Bone). The main objective of Hay'atut Takaful was to improve Islamic education and preaching in South Sulawesi (Kadir

1998). One of Hay'atut Takaful's programs was the establishment in 1966 of the first school producing *ulama* in South Sulawesi, called Ma'had al-Dirasah al-Islamiyyah al-'Ulya (Ar. lit. boarding education for tertiary Islamic studies), usually abbreviated as Ma'had 'Ulya, which aimed to train gifted students to become junior *ulama* (Kadir 1998). This served as the forerunner to the Ma'had 'Aly As'adiyah program in Sengkang, which began in 1982. On 16 students formed the first cohort, coming from the four pesantren mentioned above. In the 1985/1986 academic year, the Ma'had Ulya graduated one batch of alumni. Several years later this program ended due to various factors, particularly a lack of funds and qualified teachers (Wahidah 2011).

In 1995, under the leadership of KH Abdul Malik Muhammad (1988-2000), Pesantren As'adiyah reopened an *ulama* education program, called the Al-Ma'had al-'Aly li al-Dirasat al-Islamiyyah li al-As'adiyah (Ar. lit. As'adiyah's tertiary boarding school for Islamic Studies), commonly abbreviated as Ma'had Aly As'adiyah. The curriculum, funding, and admissions process for MAA students were fully designed and organized by Pesantren As'adiyah. At the beginning of its operation, Ma'had 'Aly only admitted students once in three academic years. In other words, the MAA would accept a new batch of students only after one batch completed three years of study or graduated.

In 2001, based on Religious Ministerial Decree No. 284/2001, Ma'had Aly's was granted similar status to tertiary Islamic educational institutions. The regulation on Ma'had Aly was then followed by Decree of the Director General of Islamic Education No. E/179/2001 concerning the Basic Guidelines for the Operation of Ma'had Aly (Ma'had Aly 2006). This set of guidelines states that Ma'had Aly can provide formal and non-formal education. Following the pattern of formal tertiary education institutions, the Ma'had Aly's must offer a regular academic program. In other words, the Ma'had Aly must admit students every year and organize academic study programs with a minimum of 140 academic credits. Following the Director General's decision, from the 2009/2010 academic year, the MAA program began to provide formal Ma'had Aly education by accepting students every year and the extending the education program period from three to four years. The formal title for graduates of this program is "Kiai Muda" (Ind. junior or young *ulama*, or in Bugis, gurutta maloloe).

Since accepting the MORA guidelines and regulations, the MAA has regularly admitted new students every year. The students of this program come from various districts in South Sulawesi and beyond, including from East Kalimantan. To enroll in the MAA, a potential student must have completed high school. In some cases, however, university graduates have applied to study at Ma'had Aly and were accepted. Furthermore, a prospective MAA student must pass a special entrance exam which includes Arabic language skills, fluency in reading the Qur'an, and a

psychological interview.

Initially, the MAA student learning center and dormitory were located within the PT Radio Suara As'adiyah building complex, a radio station owned and run by Pesantren As'adiyah. This building is located next to the Ummul Qura Grand Mosque of Sengkang, which is in the heart of Sengkang city. Since 2015, the Ma'had 'Aly has had its own building complex as part of Campus IV of Pesantren As'adiyah, located around three kilometers north of the city of Sengkang. In this relatively large area, there are already several buildings for dormitories, classrooms, and a mosque for students.

MAA teachers or advisers are alumni of Pesantren As'adiyah who are highly-qualified as Muslim scholars or *ulama*. Among the qualifications that a Ma'had Aly teacher must possess are: (1) vast knowledge of Islam; (2) a high level of proficiency in Arabic, particularly reading; and (3) the charisma of a kyai so that they can become a role model for MAA students and the Muslim community at large (Wahidah 2011). In addition to teaching in the MAA's formal classes, most lecturers also provide *halaqah* sessions for MAA students at the mosque.

The MAA utilizes two learning systems, the *madrasati* (classical) and *halaqah*. The classical teaching system takes the shape of formal lectures in a classroom, with question-and-answer sessions or discussions between the teacher and students, as well as by giving independent assignments to students. The MAA curricula have been designed according to the standards provided by MORA for Ma'had Aly. However, the textbooks are chosen by MAA managers or advisers. The initial objective of utilizing the classical system was to develop student competence in both religious and general subjects. In practice, however, the MAA still places greater emphasis on studying religious sciences. The MAA seems to adopt the classical method in terms of teaching methodology and curriculum design rather than content.

Classroom learning sessions at the MAA run from Saturday to Thursday, from 8:00 to 12:00. Therefore, MAA students have free time between the noon prayer and sunset prayer. However, this free time is deliberately provided to allow MAA students to enroll in the undergraduate formal education program at Sekolah Tinggi Agama Islam As'adiyah (As'adiyah Islamic College). In fact, almost all MAA students are also STAI As'adiyah students. This was especially the case before MAA formally attained status as a formal Islamic tertiary education institution in 2016. In fact, Ma'had Aly's programs at other pesantren in Indonesia, particularly in Java, also provide students with the same opportunity to attend Islamic colleges at the same time, both public and private (Rosidin 2012). As an MAA teacher explained, "Naiyyaro ma'hade'é untu' akhéra'mu, iyyatosi kuliamu ri STAI untu' linomu" (Bug. Your MAA program is a provision for your afterlife, while your study at STAI is for your worldly life).

In addition to taking courses in various subjects, MAA students must also take part in extracurricular activities in the form of evening class meetings (after evening prayers), which aim to improve their skill in reading classical texts. That is why the subjects for this extracurricular session focus on developing students' understanding of difficult Arabic vocabulary, syntax, language rules and methods for reading academic texts. *Halaqah*, meanwhile, remain the core program for MAA students seeking to obtain Islamic knowledge. The importance of the *halaqah* system in training and producing highly-qualified Muslim scholars or *ulama* has deep roots in the pesantren community. KH. Muh. Haritsa, an alumnus of Pesantren As'adiyah who founded Pesantren An-Nahdah in Makassar, for example, said that the *halaqah* system in pesantren has produced many *ulama*, adding that only a "real *ulama*" (*ulama* sejati) can lead a *halaqah* session, and "only *ulama* can produce *ulama*" (Halim 2015).

Halaqah sessions for MAA students are held every night between the sunset and evening prayers and after the dawn prayer time except on Friday. The texts read and studied in the MAA *halaqahs* are generally those that deal with Qur'anic exegesis (*tafsir*), prophetic traditions (*hadith*), Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), and Sufi morality (*akhlaq-tasawwuf*). Texts on hadith include: (1) *Sāhīh al-Bukhārī*, (2) *Riyāḍ al-ṣālihin min Kalām Sayyid al-Mursalīn*, (3) *Bulūg al-Marām min Adillah al-Ahkām*, and (4) *Syarh Sahīh Muslim li al-Nawawī*. For the group of texts on *fiqh*, three texts are used, namely: (1) *Irsyād al-'Ibād Ilā Sabīl al-Rasyād*, (2) *Al-Muhażżab fī Fiqh al-Imām al-Syāfi'i*, (3) *Tanwīr al-Qulūb fī Mu'āmalah 'Allām al-Guyūb*. These books were written by scholars who are classified as leading *fiqh* experts, so are very helpful for students seeking to deepen their knowledge on the science of *fiqh*. Two Sufi texts are also used, namely: (1) *Syarh al-Hikam al-'Aṭṭā'iyyah li Ibn 'Aṭṭā'illāh al-Sakandarī*, (2) *Mau'iżah al-Mu'minīn min Ihyā' 'Ulm al-Dīn*.

In addition to improving their Arabic language skills through *halaqah*, MAA students are also expected to learn from and adopt the intellectual, moral, and spiritual spirit of the *kiai* (religious leader) who teaches the *halaqah* (Besse 2011, Kamal, Abunawas and Marjuni 2019). For the pesantren community, teaching religious texts with the *halaqah* system has become an important means to receive *barakah* (or *barekka'* in Bugis) of knowledge from *ulama*. The term *barakah* is a key concept in studying Islamic knowledge in pesantren. In the pesantren tradition, the opportunity to obtain the blessing of deep understanding from a teacher is not only related to a student's intelligence but also to his or her attitude towards their teacher, for example by obeying and serving him. Meticulously and consistently attending all *halaqah* sessions during their pesantren life is an indication of a pesantren students' devotion to their teacher. The same rule is true and applicable to MAA students (Halim 2015).

Ma'had Aly, the Rise and Challenge of New Religious Authority

In the South Sulawesi Bugis-Makassar kingdoms of the early 20th century, religious officials, or functionaries (Bug. *parewa sara'*) still played an important role, especially because they became part of the royal bureaucracy. Since Islam was accepted as the official religion in the Bugis-Makassar kingdoms in the early 17th century, Islamic *Shari'a* (*sara'*) was integrated into their cultural institutions (*pangngaderreng*) which previously only consisted of four elements, namely: local customs (*ade'*), patrons of attitudes and behavior (*rapang*), the judicial system (*bicara*), social strata (*wari/sare'*). *Shari'ah* (*sara'*) was later added as the fifth element (Pelras 1996).

MAI and later Pesantren As'adiyah accommodated students from all walks of life, regardless of their age, level of religious knowledge, or their social status according to the *pangngaderreng*. In the past, social and cultural capital to pursue Islamic knowledge as a prerequisite to become a religious official in the kingdom was limited to the children of nobles and wealthy families only. With the establishment of MAI, the opportunity to pursue Islamic knowledge was open to anyone. The MAI provided opportunities for the emergence of a new religious elite who originated from all walks of life with different social statuses. This new epistemic group, in turn, played an important role in society, particularly in religious life.

Before the 1930s, religious officials who came from aristocratic families were the only religious authorities on whom the Muslim community in South Sulawesi depended to solve problems associated with Islamic law. Later, the scholars or *ulama* who were trained in or graduated from MAI or Pesantren As'adiyah became new authorities which subordinated and took over the roles played by religious officials (*parewa sara'*). In other words, the *ulama* produced by Pesantren As'adiyah succeeded in becoming a new religious authority in the South Sulawesi Muslim community as well as becoming a new elite group since the mid-20th century (Halim 2015). MAA graduates continue this traditional role and function of Pesantren As'adiyah but in a more varied way.

Upon the completion of their study programs, MAA graduates are obliged to serve in the Muslim community, particularly in Eastern Indonesia, for at least two years. During that period, alumni are expected to play a role as religious teachers and preachers in their assigned community. After completing this mandatory service, MAA graduates are free to choose whatever profession and career they want. However, they are still expected to become religious scholars who can devote their lives to Islamic education and *da'wa* in the Muslim community. In fact, many choose to stay and continue their religious service in their first assigned locations, either because they are asked to do so by the local community or of their own accord. Some alumni also return to their hometowns or home villages to serve as junior *ulama*, establishing or leading their own pesantren.

In many cases, MAA alumni have expanded their roles from just being religious teachers and preachers to becoming junior *ulama* who are socially acknowledged and admired by the community. Here the author provides three examples: KM (for *Kiai Muda*) Agustan Ranreng from Wajo regency, KM Hamzah Israil from Bulukumba regency, and KM Ibrahim from Luwu Raya regency. After graduating from the MAA, they returned to their hometowns and built their own pesantren or led and taught at other pesantren. In recent years, KM Hamzah Israel, for example, was appointed as the Grand Imam of the Great Mosque of Bantaeng regency (interview with KM Tarmizi Tahir). The grand imam of Ummul Qura grand mosque (the Wajo regency public mosque), KMH Abdul Waris Ahmad, is also a graduate of the MAA. For several years he has served as an MAA lecturer. He teaches not only regular classes but also *halaqah* learning sessions, indicating that he possesses high-level qualifications in Islamic sciences, particularly in Qur'ānic sciences and exegesis (interview with KMH Abdul Waris Ahmad).

Generally, most MAA graduates choose to become religious teachers (I, guru agama). Some work as government employees (ASN), others as teachers in private-run schools. Many who are not ASN devote themselves to teaching at Pesantren As'adiyah's madrasas, especially at junior and senior high school levels, located both in Sengkang and in As'adiyah branches in Wajo regency and beyond. MAA graduates, especially males, also provide religious sermons for various social and religious occasions and gatherings such as Friday prayers, Islamic study groups, wedding ceremonies, celebrations for new homes, rituals for Hajj and so on. The role of MAA students and graduates as preachers or imams is particularly pronounced during the fasting month of Ramadan. During this month they provide religious lectures before the performance of tarawih prayers (*ceramah tarawih*) and after the dawn prayer (*kuliah subuh*). Every Ramadan, most if not all, of the students and graduates of MAA are invited or assigned as 'contracted' preachers ('*mubalig kontrak*') or as *imam tarawih* (leader of tarawih prayers) in one or several mosques in remote areas in provinces as far away as Papua and West Papua, Southeast Sulawesi, Central Sulawesi, West Sulawesi, East Kalimantan and even Sumatra (Jambi and Riau).

In South Sulawesi, in particular, and in many parts of eastern Indonesia more generally, junior *kiai* (*kiai muda*) produced by Ma'had Aly programs appear to receive greater appreciation and acknowledgment from local Muslim communities as a highly-qualified religious figures, including graduates of the MAA. Usually, the local mosque communities or committees in places mentioned above would first request a *kiai muda* from MAA to be assigned by the Central Executive Board of As'adiyah to their location during the month of Ramadan. As mentioned, every year during Ramadan, Pesantren As'adiyah assigns hundreds of religious preachers (*Tim Mubalig Ramadhan*) to many locations in South Sulawesi and other parts in eastern

Indonesia to provide religious sermons and lessons in various religious gatherings. Those assigned comprise not only MAA students and graduates but also students from the junior and senior high schools (*madrasah*) in the pesantren. However, MAA graduates were the most sought-after preachers by the Muslim communities in the areas mentioned above (Halim 2015; Halim 2018).

The Diffusion of Religious Authority in the Local Context

What I have described above can be seen the conventional method for an aspiring religious student to establish his or her religious authority through formal religious training in classical Islamic knowledge, particularly Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*). However, the rise of celebrity preachers in contemporary Indonesia as well as throughout the Muslim world, has now led to what Hirschkind (2006, 55) has called the ‘dispersing of the loci of religious authority’. Much earlier, Eickelman and Piscatory (1996) argued this ‘fragmentation’ of religious authority was a result of the global Islamic revival of the late twentieth century in the Muslim world. As Meuleman (2011, 262) describes, *da’wa* in Indonesia represents not only “the distinctive attribute of a particular tradition or interpretation of Islam”, but also become the locus for “competition for authority and power” not only among many *da’wa* organizations but also among religious and social leaders and organizations.

The new celebrity preachers represent a shift away from traditional forms of religious authority in Indonesia. In the Indonesian context, Hoesterey (2008, p. 97) refers to this type of preacher as ‘tele-dai’, since most of these preachers are first popularized through national television channels.¹ The most popular preachers of this type in Indonesia over the past two decades ago include Abdullah Gymnastiar (Aa Gym), Jefri Al-Buchori, Arifin Ilham, Yusuf Mansur, M. Subki Al-Bughury, Abdul Somad, Muhammad Nur Maulana, Adi Hidayat, Khalid Basalamah, Arrazi Hasyim, Das’ad Latif and many others.² This new trend has also emerged in South Sulawesi, as indicated the inviting of some of these preachers to speak at various religious gatherings and events. This is despite the fact that many pesantren, including Pesantren As’adiyah, still have a strong presence and are able to provide many preachers to address practically all kinds of religious ceremonies. I had the opportunity in 2012 to witness two big religious events in Sengkang and another in Wajo that were organized by the Wajo regency government, in which celebrity preachers were invited to address congregations or to attract larger crowds.

The first event was the Zikir Akbar dan Do’a Istighosah (Grand Chanting and Prayer

1 Dai is an Indonesian word from Arabic *da’i* meaning ‘one who invites people to the faith, to the prayer, or to Islamic life’ (Esposito, 2003, p. 61, as cited in Hoesterey 2008, p. 97).

2 For this phenomenon of popular preachers in contemporary Indonesia, see among others, Hoesterey (2012) and Rijal (2020).

of Supplication) on March 25, 2012, in Anabanua, a village in Tanasitolo sub-district. The event was organized by the Wajo regency office as part of the celebration of the regency's 613th anniversary. The public officials present included South Sulawesi Governor Syahrul Yasin Limpo, the regent of Wajo and his deputy as well as the heads of all sub-districts in Wajo. The preacher who addressed the audiences that night was the late Ustaz Arifin Ilham, a popular preacher with a national profile who regularly appeared on national TV channels. He utilizes *dhikr* (chanting as a means of remembering God) as his *da'wa* specialty or marketing brand. The event venue, a football field, was almost full with around 4,000 people coming not only from the Anabanua area but also from the city of Sengkang and surrounding regencies such as Sidrap and Soppeng. They mostly wore white garments, likely following the example of Ustaz Ilham Arifin who always wore a white long-sleeved shirt for his public appearances.

The second event was the celebration of Isra' Mi'raj (the Prophet Muhammad's ascension from earth to heaven) on 2 June 2012 in Sengkang's Merdeka Square. The speaker was Ustaz Muhammad Nur Maulana, who was then a rising star on the national stage, especially since he had hosted a daily Islamic *da'wa* session on one of the national TV channels. He was from Makassar and a graduate of Pesantren An-Nahdah in the northern part of Makassar, a pesantren that was established by KH Muhammad Haritsah, a graduate of Pesantren As'adiyah. Ustaz Nur Maulana began his career as a preacher at various religious ceremonies and family events in Makassar city and surrounding areas. His sermons often featured jokes, attracting praise from people in both rural and urban areas. As a result, he received many invitations to speak at various events conducted in locations across South Sulawesi and beyond.

The organizing committee claimed around 7,000 people attended this event from Sengkang and the surrounding regencies of Soppeng, Bone and Sidrap. Ustaz Nur Maulana was accompanied by several national TV crews who recorded his sermons as well his activities during his visits in Sengkang to be broadcast nationally several months later. In the first part of his speech, Ustaz Nur Maulana honestly expressed his gratitude for the invitation to address the audience in the city. He said, 'ever since I became a preacher, I always wished that one day I would be able to give a religious sermon in that great mosque (pointing towards the Ummul Qura Grand Mosque on the west side of the square). 'Now', he said, 'Alhamdulillah (praise be to God), I am very grateful because my wish has come true even though I am just speaking in front of it [the mosque]'.

I argue that to some extent, these two events represent a further transformation in the perception of local leaders and the common Muslim people regarding what constitutes a source of religious authority. Before the recent wave of celebrity preachers at both national and regional (provincial) levels, preachers and *ulama*

from Pesantren As'adiyah would be always the first invited to deliver sermons at most of the religious ceremonies organized by the local government and religious institutions. Nowadays, popular preachers from Jakarta and Makassar and other districts in South Sulawesi have made frequent visits to Sengkang to deliver sermons at various religious and family events held by Sengkang residents. In other words, to some extent, they have bypassed the local *ulama* and preachers, who are mostly leaders and teachers from Pesantren As'adiyah.

Most of these celebrity preachers are not graduates of traditional pesantren (except Ustaz Nur Maulana). They neither teach at nor lead pesantren. As mentioned above, having a pesantren education background and/or an active engagement with a pesantren, for example by teaching *halaqah*, was usually a determining factor in a person's ability to establish himself as a religious authority and to be acknowledged by the Muslim community as a *kiai*. However, celebrity preachers garner a particular form of religious authority through their ability to refashion and transform diverse forms of religious knowledge into practical and contextual wisdom and deliver them in ways that general audiences enjoy the most.

When I inquired about this trend, a senior teacher in Pesantren As'adiyah said that this was a real challenge for the leaders and teachers in his pesantren and, in fact, they had been concerned about how to develop innovative *da'wa* programs or methods to win back local audiences' attention. "The challenge is how to reform and refashion our *da'wa* methodology so that it can meet the fast-changing situation in our community". However, he continued, while trying to find better and more suitable ways to deliver *da'wa*, they should not in any circumstances overhaul their traditional learning methods and their pure, sincere intention to disseminate Islam to the Muslim community. "It is that [traditional way of learning Islam] which makes us different and is still needed by the ummah" (interview in 2012).

Several MAA graduates have anticipated this challenge and are now attempting to follow the road to fame taken by celebrity preachers. KM.H. Usman Pateha is probably the best example. A graduate of MAA, he started his career as a preacher at the local community level as well as serving as a teacher at Pesantren As'adiyah. He later took advantage of social media platforms, such as Facebook and YouTube, to post his religious sermons online. Thanks to social media, he received many invitations to preach in the Muslim community beyond his previously limited audiences, including in Papua and East Kalimantan provinces. For the past six years, he has also served as a regular preacher on a special religious program broadcast on a national television channel based in Jakarta (Halim, 2017; 2018). Other MAA graduates who are trying to utilize internet-based media platforms such as Facebook and YouTube to share their religious sermons in various social and religious offline gatherings are KM. Muslimin Bukhari in Bantaeng regency, KM. Mazdawi in North Luwu regency,

KM. Tan Mullis in Sengkang and KM. Hasan Basri Syarif, also in Sengkang (interview with KM Abdul Waris in 10 July 2022).

Conclusion

The Ma'had Aly is a special Islamic educational program established by Pesantren As'adiyah to train and produce highly-qualified *ulama*. The embryo of this *ulama* education program was created in 1930 by KH Muhammad As'ad al-Bugis (1907-1952), the founder and first leader of this pesantren. Ma'had Aly As'adiyah has gone through several stages of development. In each of these stages, MAA has trained and produced authoritative junior *ulama* who dedicate their lives to Islamic education and *da'wa* in South Sulawesi and many parts of eastern Indonesia. Many MAA graduates were, in turn, able to achieve a significant reputation and qualifications as *ulama* in their own right, for example, by establishing their own pesantren and being dedicated to preaching Islam among Muslim communities in South Sulawesi and beyond.

With hundreds of madrasas established in Sengkang and other locations in South Sulawesi and other provinces in eastern Indonesia, including the Ma'had Aly, Pesantren As'adiyah has played a significant role in the process of transforming religious authority in Wajo regency in particular, and in South Sulawesi more generally. In fact, since its establishment in 1930, Pesantren As'adiyah has served as a new source of religious authority at a time when the Muslim community in this region has been facing a 'crisis of *ulama*', which they see as one of the causes of the various complicated socio-religious issues emerging in the region . MAA has been Pesantren As'adiyah's pioneering attempt and major program to regularly produce *ulama* and to ensure that they will have the capability to serve their community's needs for Islamic education and *da'wa*, and in ways and methods relevant to and compatible with contemporary socio-religious conditions, such as through new media.

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