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RECONTEXTUALIZING ISLAMIC EDUCATION THROUGH CULTURAL RESILIENCE: PERSPECTIVES OF ULAMA AND CUSTOMARY LEADERS IN MANDAILING NATAL

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Article Info	Abstract
	The main issue lies in the lack of empirical studies on the dual leadership practices of ulama and traditional leaders in the management of Islamic education in Mandailing Natal, particularly concerning the integration of local cultural values. This study explores the dynamics of Islamic education management in Mandailing Natal, Indonesia, emphasising the integration of local cultural values and traditional leadership. Employing a qualitative ethnographic case study approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and institutional document analysis. The findings reveal a contextual and culturally-rooted model of Islamic education management in Mandailing Natal, where ulama function as religious leaders and customary authorities. Integrating indigenous values such as dalihan na tolu, hasuhutan, and marsialap ari into the educational system positions pesantren and madrasah as cultural preservation and character education centres. The collective leadership and participatory local curriculum demonstrate an organic and resilient management model, offering a culturally grounded alternative to the often centralised and homogenised Islamic education system. Conclusion: Integrating local culture into the governance of pesantren and madrasah enhances institutional relevance and provides a new perspective on educational leadership that merges religious authority with cultural legitimacy.

A. INTRODUCTION

Islamic education in Indonesia holds a significant historical and cultural role in shaping social structures and transmitting life values (Rohmadi, 2017). Beyond its function as a medium of Islamic propagation (*dakwah*), Islamic education also serves as a strategic instrument for character formation and preserving local cultures (Damayanti et al., 2021;

Ghofir & Khoiriyah, 2022). Across various regions, there has been an ongoing acculturation between Islamic teachings and local values, giving rise to distinctive education models. One prominent example can be found in Mandailing Natal Regency, North Sumatra, which has been historically recognised for the contributions of *ulama*, merchants, and traditional leaders in the spread of Islam (Hasibuan et al., 2023). Institutions such as *surau*, *pesantren*, and *madrasah* have become integrative spaces for Islamic values and local cultural elements such as *hasuhutan*, *dalihan na tolu*, and *marsialap ari* (Hidayat & Rafida, 2019; M. Lubis, 2018). This collaboration has produced a synergistic educational system that intertwines religion and tradition (Asrin, 2019; Sholeh, 2023).

Islamic education is critical in preserving local cultures by integrating religious values with traditional wisdom. In the Sasak community of Lombok, *pondok pesantren* have become centres of character education, combining Islamic teachings with local traditions, particularly in moral knowing, feeling, and action that shape balanced individuals (Nashuddin, 2020). Cultural traditions such as *Sorong Serah Aji Krame* are informal educational tools that embed Islamic moral values through customary ceremonies (Zulkarnain et al., 2025). Events like *Haolan Mbah Sholeh* in Benda Kerep village strengthen community identity and social cohesion by internalising Islamic values (Rusmana et al., 2024). Initiatives such as the *Greeting Gate* program in Pamekasan demonstrate how multicultural education can reinforce Islamic values within cultural diversity (Sahibudin et al., 2020). Despite challenges in Muslim minority communities, adaptations within cultures such as the Batak show that harmonising religion and tradition remains possible (Dasopang et al., 2022).

Recontextualising Islamic education through cultural resilience has become vital in addressing the challenges of modernity, globalisation, and the dominance of Western paradigms. A philosophical framework of Islamic education is necessary to reconstruct an education system that aligns with cultural and religious values (Ahmed & Chowdhury, 2025). The current pedagogical crisis underscores the need for a shift toward a more transformative and reflective model of Islamic education (Sahin, 2018). At the institutional level, curricula that incorporate local values and Islamic pedagogy support the emergence of a rooted national education system (Akrim et al., 2022). Family resilience has also become a crucial foundation, particularly during the pandemic, through values such as cooperation (*gotong royong*) and integrity (Kustati et al., 2024). Globalisation and ICT demand updates to teaching methods (Mohiuddin & Borham, 2024), while *santri* character culture strengthens Islamic identity (Sulhan & Hakim, 2023). In increasingly secular societies, dual consciousness and transformative skills are also outcomes of adaptive Islamic education (Alkouatli et al., 2023).

However, previous studies on Islamic education in Mandailing Natal (Madina) leave important gaps. Asrin's (2019) research on the revitalisation of religious education emphasises the need for institutional strengthening, but does not explore how traditional leadership and *ulama* interact in managerial practices. Similarly, the study by Hidayat & Rafida (2019) discusses religious values and respect within the Mandailing-Angkola community. However, it limits its analysis to normative dimensions without exploring their application in educational governance. Meanwhile, Hasibuan et al. (2023) highlight the early historical spread of Islam in Madina but do not address the contemporary dynamics of education management. These methodological and thematic limitations have left the strategic roles of *ulama* and traditional leaders in managing Islamic education in Madina underexplored.

The context of Mandailing Natal is particularly worthy of investigation due to its dual leadership model: *ulama* as religious authorities and *harajaon* as representatives of local culture. Their interaction in decision-making, curriculum development, and institutional management forms a governance model that reflects cultural resilience. This model offers a new perspective in the development of Islamic education that is not only adaptive to the challenges of modernisation but also deeply rooted in local wisdom. These dynamics are locally and nationally relevant in constructing a contextual and sustainable Islamic education system. Based on this research gap, this study raises the central question: *How do ulama and traditional leaders in Mandailing integrate local cultural values into the management of Islamic education in Madina, and how does this practice contribute to the cultural resilience of Islamic education amidst the currents of modernisation?* This question forms the basis for further analysis.

B. RESEARCH METHOD

This study was conducted in Mandailing Natal Regency, North Sumatra, which is *historically* recognised as an early centre of Islamic dissemination along the west coast of Sumatra. The location was selected purposively due to its unique cultural characteristics and the strong integration of local values within the Islamic education system, particularly in *pesantren* and *madrasah* institutions. Employing a descriptive qualitative approach with an ethnographic design, this research explores the dynamics of Islamic education management rooted in local culture. The researcher conducted three months of fieldwork (January–March 2025), with research subjects selected purposively, including *kiai* (Islamic scholars), traditional leaders, *madrasah* principals, senior teachers, and community figures who hold authority in Islamic education.

Data collection techniques included semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. Interviews with 20 key informants comprising ulama, traditional leaders, madrasah heads, and senior teachers were conducted to explore their experiences and perspectives regarding integrating local cultural values in Islamic education management. Participant observation was conducted over six months, focusing on institutional activities such as decision-making meetings, learning processes, and customary educational events. The researcher gradually engaged in observation, from passive to limited participation, to understand the social context and leadership dynamics. Document analysis encompassed institutional archives, local curricula, minutes of customary assemblies, and historical manuscripts on Islamic education in Mandailing Natal.

Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles and Huberman, consisting of three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Data reduction involved sorting information by thematic categories such as managerial strategies, cultural practices, and institutional resilience. The data were presented in narrative descriptions, thematic matrices, and direct quotations from informants. Conclusions were drawn by identifying relational patterns between local cultural values and education management practices. Data validity was ensured through source triangulation (*ulama*, traditional leaders, teachers, documents) and methodological triangulation (interviews, observation, documentation), member checking, and audit trails. Reflexivity was maintained through the researcher's field notes and reflective journals.

A triangulation approach was employed to ensure data validity and to obtain a holistic understanding of the integration of customary values into the Islamic education system. Triangulation was conducted regarding sources and methods by comparing interviews, observations, and document analysis data. Instrument validation was carried out through peer debriefing with fellow qualitative researchers in the field of Islamic education, in order to test the clarity, relevance, and consistency of interview questions. In addition, a limited pilot interview was conducted with two informants prior to the main data collection to assess the effectiveness of the instruments and adjust them to the local context. These measures ensured the accuracy and credibility of the data.

C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. The Leadership of Ulama as a Bridge Between Islamic and Customary Values: A Contextual Model of Islamic Education Management in Mandailing Natal

The leadership role of the *ulama* is pivotal as a bridge connecting Islamic values and local customs in Indonesia. The *ulama*, particularly through the Indonesian Ulama Council (*Majelis Ulama Indonesia*), maintain the system of fatwas related to halal products, applying Islamic legal principles within both traditional and modern Muslim communities (Daki et al., 2021). In Mandailing Natal, *ulama* leverage their religious authority to influence political behaviour through traditional forums and digital platforms, emphasising leadership integrity, justice, and civic responsibility (Azhar et al., 2025). Furthermore, the leadership role of *ulama* in education has been deeply rooted since the golden age of Islam, shaping leadership practices and theories that promote cooperation between Muslim and non-Muslim communities (Arar & Haj-Yehia, 2018). In Aceh, *ulama* also function as social mediators, addressing social issues by utilising the power of traditional institutions to enhance community welfare (Jamil, 2020).

Islamic education in Mandailing Natal does not occur in isolation from the local cultural context; instead, it grows and develops closely with it. Customary values such as *dalihan na tolu* (kinship system), *hasuhutan* (social solidarity), and *marsialap ari* (moral responsibility for one's words) play important roles as ethical social frameworks integrated into Islamic educational practices. Institutions such as *pesantren* and *madrasah* fulfil religious functions and actively adopt local cultural structures in their management systems. Leadership patterns in *pesantren* reflect the distinctive Mandailing relationship, where *ulama* serve as educators and as respected customary figures. Educational decision-making processes consider institutional rationality and values of social harmony and cultural legitimacy, thereby rendering Islamic education contextual and deeply rooted in local tradition.

The process of recontextualising Islamic education in Mandailing Natal is reflected in local curricula that integrate Islamic values with local culture. For example, some *pesantren* have developed subjects such as "Mandailing Ethics in Islam" and "Local Fiqh," which link Islamic jurisprudence teachings with cultural practices such as customary marriage, funeral rites, and family deliberation procedures. Students understand Islamic texts through this approach and are encouraged to interpret religious values within their social realities. Islamic education has thus undergone a paradigm shift from merely transmitting religious doctrine to a holistic and contextual character formation process.

Classrooms in Islamic educational institutions have become arenas for cultural dialectics, ethics, and social interpretation. *Ulama* act as agents of change who not only convey normative teachings but also enliven them within the dynamics of society.

However, the leadership of *ulama* faces various challenges and adaptations in the modern context. In Malaysia, the role of *ulama* has fluctuated due to state control and political opportunities, affecting the dynamics of conservatism and state-Islam relations (Abdullah, 2021). In Singapore, *ulama* have avoided formal political roles to maintain religious harmony within a multi-ethnic society (Mostarom, 2017). Despite a diminished position within the legal system and higher education, *ulama* continue to uphold religious authority by adapting to modern changes without compromising traditional integrity in legal, educational, and gender aspects (Raqib, 2020). In West Sumatra, collaboration between *ulama* and customary leadership structures has strengthened social resilience by addressing illegal activities, such as gold mining, through moral approaches and customary sanctions (Sahrul & Daulay, 2025).

The recontextualization of Islamic education in Mandailing Natal is not a form of cultural compromise with *sharia*, but rather an epistemological and managerial strategy that strengthens the existence of Islamic educational institutions as relevant, rooted, and transformative social pillars. In this context, customary values are not positioned as passive heritage but as active cultural forces that shape grounded and resilient Islamic educational character capable of facing social change dynamics. The integration of customary values and Islamic teachings demonstrates that contextualization does not weaken Islamic principles; on the contrary, it strengthens the normative integrity of Islam and expands its effectiveness in multicultural societies. Through this approach, Islamic education functions not only as a means of transmission of religious knowledge but also as a space for forming social ethics that is adaptive, reflective, and deeply rooted in local wisdom.

2. Cultural Resilience as a Pillar of the Local Islamic Education System

Cultural resilience is a fundamental pillar for the sustainability of Islamic education in Mandailing Natal. Customary values such as *dalihan na tolu* (kinship system), *hasuhutan* (social solidarity), and *marsialap ari* (moral responsibility for one's words) function not only as cultural symbols but have become deeply embedded within the structures and dynamics of Islamic educational institutions. These values are internalised across various aspects of institutional management, ranging from decision-making processes and pedagogical models to strategies for character development among *santri* (students). Islamic education in this region is inseparable from its socio-cultural context; instead, it leverages local wisdom as a source of strength to maintain its relevance and resilience. Thus, integrating Islamic values with local customs creates a contextualised education system firmly rooted in society and capable of responding sustainably to social changes.

Pesantren and *madrasah* in Mandailing Natal play a dual and significant role as religious educational institutions and centres for preserving local culture. This role is manifested in various daily practices that demonstrate cultural resilience, such as the recitation of local poetic verses with Islamic nuances during religious studies, the use of the Mandailing language in the learning process, and the conduct of teacher deliberations that uphold the principle of *marsialap ari* as a moral foundation. Leadership patterns in *pesantren* also show a close association with the social structure of *dalihan na tolu*, where

respect for *ulama* aligns with reverence for customary order. In this context, *ulama* act as religious instructors and customary authorities with legitimacy in maintaining social cohesion. This underscores that Islamic education in Mandailing Natal does not merely transmit religious teachings but also reinforces cultural roots and builds social harmony based on local values.

Cultural resilience in Islamic education in Mandailing Natal is clearly reflected in the internal process of *pesantren teacher* and caretaker succession, which occurs within families or communities. This process is grounded in the values of *maradat* (custom adherence) and *maruhum* (respect), fostering intergenerational connections and ensuring the continuity of cultural values within the educational system. Modernisation is selectively adopted, where administrative digitalisation and online learning are implemented only in technical aspects without compromising the cultural substance that constitutes the core of education. This approach safeguards the contextuality of education and prevents it from being uprooted from its social foundations. Hence, cultural resilience functions as a means of tradition preservation and a strategic foundation to create adaptive, transformative, and sustainable Islamic education. *Pesantren* and *madrasah* thus become bastions of values and arenas for shaping characterful and competitive generations.

Local culture has proven to be a critical pillar in the Islamic education system, particularly in character formation, tradition preservation, and strengthening social cohesion. In Bone, South Sulawesi, Bugis cultural values such as *siri' na pacce* are integrated into the curriculum of private Islamic schools to preserve cultural identity while reinforcing religious values. This is a primary reason parents prefer educational institutions that combine local culture and religious teachings (Aziz et al., 2024). In Yogyakarta, the Pathok Negara Mosque adopts Javanese cultural principles, including architectural elements and the concept of *tridarma*, in Islamic education practices to preserve local traditions (Salim et al., 2024). Meanwhile, in the Indonesian-Malaysian border region, local values such as cooperation (*gotong royong*), deliberation (*musyawarah*), and tolerance are integrated into education to strengthen social solidarity and community participation (Imran et al., 2025).

3. **Cultural Leadership in Community-Based Islamic Education Management in Mandailing Natal**

Cultural leadership in the management of Islamic education is an approach that integrates Islamic values and principles into leadership practices to shape individual and organisational behaviour holistically. These values include *shidi* (honesty), *tabligh* (communication), *amanah* (trustworthiness), and *fathonah* (wisdom), as elaborated in the Qur'an and Hadith (Farihin, 2023). Within the context of pesantren (Islamic boarding schools), Sufistic principles such as *hablu minallah* (relationship with God) and *hablu minannas* (relationship with fellow human beings) also serve as foundational elements in the spiritual leadership style (Hasibuan et al., 2025). The Islamic-Oriented Educational Leadership (IOEL) model emphasises the significance of ethical and religious integrity in shaping a holistic leadership mindset (Alazmi & Bush, 2024). Moreover, a humanistic leadership style encourages inclusive communication, mutual respect, and collective decision-making, enhancing student motivation and social-emotional development (Rahmi et al., 2025; Bourne & Alanazi, 2025).

Islamic education in Mandailing Natal operates within a distinctive cultural

framework, where religious teachings and customary values do not negate each other but reinforce one another. This integration creates an educational ecosystem that is religious and deeply rooted in local wisdom. Values such as *dalihan na tolu* (kinship system), *hasuhutan* (social solidarity), and *marsialap ari* (moral responsibility for one's words) function not only as social ethics within the community but also as ethical foundations in the management of Islamic educational institutions. In this context, the administration of education is inseparable from the living cultural structures of society, instead serving as normative and strategic foundations. These customary values shape relational patterns, decision-making systems, and participatory, contextual teaching practices, thus producing Islamic education that is authentic, sustainable, and responsive to social dynamics.

The leadership pattern in pesantren in Mandailing Natal is deeply rooted in the distinctive local social and cultural structure. The leadership of the *ulama* (Islamic scholars) in this context is based not only on religious authority but also on cultural legitimacy as an integral part of the Mandailing customary system. The *ulama* hold a dual role: as *mursyid who* guides Islamic teachings, and as *harajaon* or customary leaders respected within community deliberations. This dual role positions the *ulama* strategically in maintaining a balance between religious norms and customary values. Institutionally, every significant decision the pesantren takes generally involves a consultative process with customary leaders and the parents of students. This indicates that Islamic education in Mandailing Natal is not isolated from social life but is closely connected to the community structure, positioning pesantren as a pivotal node in shaping morality, cultural identity, and social cohesion.

The close correlation between customary values and the Islamic education system in Mandailing Natal is clearly reflected in the design of a contextual and participatory local curriculum. Several pesantren actively develop subjects such as "Mandailing Adab in Islam" and "Locality Fiqh," which not only convey Islamic teachings normatively but also link them to relevant social practices within the community, such as family deliberation procedures, traditional marriage ceremonies, and funeral rituals. The curriculum development process involves collaboration among teachers, school principals, *ulama*, and customary leaders, resulting in an academic learning structure that reflects the community's collective identity. This curriculum bridges the educational realm and the living socio-cultural reality, positioning Islamic education as a dialectical space between text and context, religious values and evolving local wisdom.

The management of Islamic educational institutions in Mandailing Natal adopts a strong participatory approach in its implementation. Program planning is conducted through local deliberative forums, where the community, *ulama*, and village officials actively provide insights and proposals. Institutional performance evaluation is not solely based on academic achievement but also encompasses character formation, social integrity, and civility in accordance with local customary values. These findings demonstrate that Islamic educational institutions in Mandailing Natal do not operate within a rigid bureaucratic framework but rather develop an organic management model that is flexible, deeply rooted in local wisdom, and responsive to the social dynamics of the community. This model renders educational institutions adaptive entities capable of maintaining harmony between religious values and local culture.

A strong organisational culture combined with an Islamic leadership style significantly increases organisational commitment within Islamic educational institutions. This commitment is influenced by work motivation, leadership style, and a healthy work environment (Mukhtar et al., 2019). Nevertheless, the dominance of Western leadership theories and models remains apparent due to accreditation requirements and limited local resources (ElKaleh, 2019). Integrating local values such as *sipakatau* and *siri na pacce* has strengthened leadership character and student loyalty to the institution (Astuti, 2024). Strategic management practices such as Total Quality Management (TQM) in institutions like Pesantren KHAS Kempek include collaborative planning, capacity building, technology utilisation, and systematic evaluation to ensure educational quality and sustainability (Zakaria et al., 2025). Visionary leadership development is also necessary to build curricula based on Islamic ideology and strengthen academic freedom within the framework of Islamic intellectual heritage (Yaqin et al., 2021; Derbesh, 2023).

The role of *ulama* and customary leaders as agents of value renewal is crucial to the resilience of Islamic education in Mandailing Natal. The *ulama* function as conveyors of religious doctrine and interpreters of Islamic values in a dynamic local context. They perform a social hermeneutic function by interpreting teachings based on community experiences. Their success in maintaining social and spiritual cohesion through educational institutions demonstrates that cultural resilience is a vital managerial strategy to uphold the relevance of Islamic education. Islamic education in Mandailing Natal is not merely the dissemination of religious knowledge but also an arena for preserving local values and cultivating civil character. The recontextualization of education through cultural leadership, community participation, and the integration of customary values is not a compromise but rather an epistemological maturity and managerial strength that grounds divine values in a real and dynamic social context.

D. CONCLUSION

Islamic education in Mandailing Natal functions not merely as a means of disseminating religious teachings but as a social practice deeply rooted in the local cultural structure. Customary values such as *dalihan na tolu*, *hasuhutan*, and *marsialap ari* colour social interactions within the community systematically integrate into institutional management, leadership patterns, and curriculum formulation in pesantren and madrasahs. The emerging leadership model reflects a synergy between religious authority and customary legitimacy, where *ulama* fulfil spiritual roles and act as guardians of cultural values that sustain social harmony. Decision-making processes within these institutions are conducted collectively through deliberation, strengthening social cohesion among educational stakeholders.

The curriculum is contextual and participatory, designed through dialogue between Islamic values and local wisdom. This approach enables learners to understand religious teachings within their social and cultural context and fosters awareness of personal and communal identity. Meanwhile, modernisation responds to current trends selectively and critically; new technologies and methods are adopted without sacrificing essential local values. These findings indicate that cultural resilience is a strategic foundation for the sustainability of adaptive and relevant Islamic education. Active community involvement, the central roles of *ulama* and customary leaders, and the capacity to adapt to change render Islamic educational

institutions in Mandailing Natal resilient in facing globalisation challenges and capable of creating a transformative educational model firmly rooted in local culture.

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