



HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS OF MUHAMMADIYAH: ISLAMIC REFORM, EDUCATIONAL MODERNIZATION, AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION IN INDONESIA

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Abstract :

Muhammadiyah represents one of the most influential Islamic reform movements in Indonesia, playing a pivotal role in reshaping religious thought, education, and social engagement since the early twentieth century. This article examines the historical foundations of Muhammadiyah by analyzing the socio-religious context prior to its establishment, the intellectual formation of its founder K.H. Ahmad Dahlan, and the core ideological principles underpinning the movement. Employing qualitative historical analysis based on literature review, this study reveals that Muhammadiyah emerged as an integrated response to colonial educational marginalization, religious syncretism, and social inequality. The findings demonstrate that Muhammadiyah's reformist paradigm-grounded in tajdid, educational modernization, and organized social action-remains relevant in addressing contemporary challenges.

Keywords : Muhammadiyah, Islamic Reform, Education, Tajdid, Indonesia

INTRODUCTION

This section Islamic reform movements in Indonesia arose amid profound socio-religious and educational crises experienced by Muslim societies under colonial domination. These crises manifested in religious stagnation, educational backwardness, and socio-economic marginalization, which collectively constrained the capacity of Muslims to engage with modernity (Azra, 2004; Rahmat & Romelah, 2022).

Colonial education policies in the Dutch East Indies systematically prioritized Western secular schooling while marginalizing Islamic educational institutions. As a result, Muslim communities faced restricted access to modern knowledge and limited opportunities for social mobility, positioning Islamic education at the periphery of the colonial epistemic order (Asrori & Rusman, 2022; Steenbrink, 1995).

In the religious sphere, Islamic beliefs and practices were often intertwined with local traditions, producing syncretic forms of religiosity. Although culturally embedded, these practices were criticized by reformist scholars for deviating from scriptural foundations and weakening Islamic theological coherence (Ricklefs, 2012; Rohmansyah, 2023).

Muhammadiyah emerged in this context as a reformist Islamic movement founded by K.H. Ahmad Dahlan in 1912. It sought to reconstruct Islamic thought and practice through a return to the Qur'an and Sunnah while embracing



educational modernization and social reform (Khoirudin & Aulassyahied, 2025; Nakamura, 2012).

Despite extensive scholarship on Muhammadiyah, systematic analysis linking its historical foundations with contemporary relevance remains limited. This article aims to fill that gap by examining Muhammadiyah's emergence, ideology, and enduring reformist paradigm (Kurniawan, 2025; Rahmat & Romelah, 2022).

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative historical approach based on library research. Primary and secondary sources include scholarly books and peer-reviewed journal articles on Muhammadiyah, Islamic reform, and colonial education in Indonesia (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Zed, 2018).

Data were analyzed using historical interpretation and thematic analysis to identify patterns related to socio-religious context, intellectual formation, and ideological development. This method allows for a systematic reconstruction of Muhammadiyah's reformist discourse within its historical setting (Bowen, 2009).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Socio-Religious and Educational Context Before Muhammadiyah

Researchers The findings reveal that Muslim communities in the Dutch East Indies were subjected to systemic marginalization through colonial governance structures. Colonial authorities restricted access to quality education for indigenous Muslims, thereby limiting opportunities for intellectual advancement and socio-economic mobility (M. Asrori & Rusman, 2022; Steenbrink, 1995).

Pesantren and traditional madrasah functioned as primary centers of Islamic learning, preserving religious knowledge and moral discipline. However, their curricula largely excluded modern sciences and administrative knowledge, rendering graduates less competitive in the colonial socio-economic system (Kurniawan, 2023; Nasution & Rahman, 2022).

In religious life, syncretic practices persisted as Islam interacted with local traditions. While these practices fostered communal identity, they also reflected limited access to systematic religious instruction grounded in primary Islamic texts (Pahutar, et al., 2024; Ricklefs, 2012).

These conditions indicate that the stagnation of Muslim society resulted from the intersection of structural oppression and epistemological fragmentation. Educational marginalization inhibited critical thinking, while syncretic religiosity emerged as a byproduct of limited theological literacy (Azra, 2004; Rohmansyah, 2023).

The interdependence of educational exclusion and religious traditionalism created a reinforcing cycle that impeded reform. Addressing this crisis therefore required an integrated approach that combined educational reconstruction with theological renewal (Asrori & Rusman, 2022; Rahmat &

Romelah, 2022).

Colonial education theory explains how schooling systems were designed to serve colonial administrative needs rather than indigenous empowerment. Islamic education, consequently, was excluded from the production of colonial knowledge and authority (Altbach, 2009; Steenbrink, 1995).

Religious reform theory posits that reform movements emerge when a disjunction arises between normative doctrine and lived religious practice. Muhammadiyah developed as a corrective response to this disjunction within Indonesian Islam (Khoirudin & Aulassyahied, 2025; Rahman, 1982).

The pre-Muhammadiyah socio-religious context constituted a structural crisis that necessitated organized reform. These conditions laid the historical groundwork for Muhammadiyah's emergence as a transformative Islamic movement (Azra, 2004; Nakamura, 2012).

Intellectual Formation of K.H. Ahmad Dahlan

K.H. Ahmad Dahlan's intellectual development was shaped by his early religious education in Kauman, Yogyakarta, which exposed him to the realities of religious conservatism and socio-economic inequality (Handayani, 2024; Nakamura, 2012).

His studies in Mecca introduced him to reformist Islamic thought emphasizing rationality, *ijtihad*, and the integration of religious and modern sciences. These ideas significantly influenced his vision of Islamic reform (Akhyar, 2024; Azra, 2004).

Rather than adopting Middle Eastern reformist ideas wholesale, Ahmad Dahlan contextualized them within Javanese society. This process of selective adaptation enabled reformist principles to be translated into practical educational and organizational initiatives (Nakamura, 2012; Sina, 2024).

His leadership combined religious authority with organizational strategy, transforming reformist ideas into sustainable institutional practices through Muhammadiyah (Koswara, 2020; Purwanto, 2024).

Transnational Islamic network theory highlights Mecca as a hub for the circulation of reformist ideas among Southeast Asian scholars, facilitating intellectual exchange and contextual reinterpretation (Akhyar, 2024; Azra, 2004).

Transformational leadership theory explains how charismatic religious leaders mobilize collective action by integrating moral vision with institutional innovation (Burns, 1978; Pakaya & Malae, 2020).

Ahmad Dahlan's intellectual formation constituted the ideological core of Muhammadiyah, enabling the institutionalization of Islamic reform grounded in both tradition and modernity (Nakamura, 2012; Rahmat & Romelah, 2022).

Core Ideological Foundations of Muhammadiyah

Muhammadiyah's ideological framework is anchored in *tajdid*, educational modernization, social responsibility, and organized *da'wah*. These principles collectively shaped its reformist identity (Khoirudin & Aulassyahied, 2025; Rahmat & Romelah, 2022).

Education functioned as the central instrument for internalizing reformist values, while social services translated religious ideals into tangible community

benefits (Koswara, 2020; Marsudi & Zayadi, 2021).

Tajdīd within Muhammadiyah is understood as dynamic reinterpretation rather than rigid purification, allowing engagement with modern challenges while maintaining scriptural fidelity (Kurniawan, 2025; Rahmat & Romelah, 2022).

This ideological flexibility enabled Muhammadiyah to sustain relevance across different historical periods without abandoning its foundational principles (Nakamura, 2012; Sugiat et al., 2025).

Islamic reform theory emphasizes harmonizing continuity and change, a balance exemplified by Muhammadiyah's approach to theology, education, and social action (Kurniawan, 2025; Rahman, 1982).

Religious social movement theory explains Muhammadiyah's organizational resilience through resource mobilization and bureaucratic rationalization (Koswara, 2020; Pakaya & Malae, 2020).

Muhammadiyah's ideological foundations represent a holistic reform paradigm integrating theology, education, and social engagement within a modern organizational framework (Khoirudin & Aulassyahied, 2025; Marsudi & Zayadi, 2021).

Contemporary Relevance of Muhammadiyah

In the contemporary era, Muhammadiyah remains relevant through digital da'wah, educational innovation, and humanitarian engagement, reflecting the continuity of its reformist ethos (Agung, et al., 2025; Huda et al, 2022).

The adoption of digital platforms represents a strategic adaptation to changing modes of knowledge consumption, enabling Muhammadiyah to reach younger audiences while maintaining doctrinal coherence (Agung et al., 2025; Hasnahwati et al., 2025).

Religion and modernity theory suggests that religious movements endure by negotiating tradition and innovation, a process evident in Muhammadiyah's contemporary strategies (Casanova, 1994; Rahmat & Romelah, 2022).

Muhammadiyah's continued relevance demonstrates the enduring capacity of its reformist ideology to address evolving social and technological challenges (Khoirudin & Aulassyahied, 2025; Sormin et al., 2025).

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Muhammadiyah emerged as an integrated Islamic reform movement responding to colonial educational marginalization, religious syncretism, and social inequality. Its reformist paradigm-anchored in tajdīd, educational modernization, and organized social action-constituted a holistic response to multidimensional crises faced by Muslim society.

The intellectual leadership of K.H. Ahmad Dahlan enabled the institutionalization of reformist ideas through sustainable educational and social structures. Muhammadiyah's ability to harmonize scriptural fidelity with contextual adaptation explains its longevity and contemporary relevance.

Ultimately, Muhammadiyah represents a living model of Islamic reform that continues to offer conceptual and practical insights for addressing modern educational, religious, and social challenges in Indonesia and beyond.

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