

## K.H. Ahmad Dahlan and the Reform of Islamic Education in Colonial Indonesia

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Received: 26 Januari 2026

Revised: 1 Februari 2026

Accepted: 5 Februari 2026

### Abstract:

This article analyzes the educational thought of K.H. Ahmad Dahlan in the context of Islamic educational reform in Indonesia during the colonial period. This study employs a qualitative library research method with a historical-conceptual approach. The findings indicate that Ahmad Dahlan's educational reform emerged as a response to the dualism of the colonial education system and the stagnation of traditional Islamic educational methods. He proposed a modern Islamic education model that integrates religious and general sciences, applies a classical learning system, and emphasizes the internalization of Islamic values through social practice. This educational concept is grounded in the Islamic understanding of human creation as *'abd Allah* (servant of God) and *khalifah fi al-ardh* (vicegerent on earth), which requires a balance between spiritual, intellectual, and social dimensions. These ideas were institutionalized through Muhammadiyah as a movement of *dakwah* and *tajdid* (renewal) that played a strategic role in the development of modern Islamic education in Indonesia. This study affirms that Ahmad Dahlan's educational thought remains relevant in addressing contemporary educational challenges, particularly in character education, knowledge integration, and the reform of Islamic education systems.

**Keywords:** K.H. Ahmad Dahlan, Islamic Education Reform, Muhammadiyah

### Abstrak:

Artikel ini menganalisis pemikiran K.H. Ahmad Dahlan dalam konteks pembaruan pendidikan Islam di Indonesia pada masa kolonial. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode studi kepustakaan dengan pendekatan historis-konseptual. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa pembaruan pendidikan yang dirumuskan Ahmad Dahlan merupakan respons terhadap dualisme sistem pendidikan kolonial dan stagnasi metode pendidikan Islam tradisional. Ia mengusulkan model pendidikan Islam modern yang mengintegrasikan ilmu agama dan ilmu umum, menerapkan sistem pembelajaran klasikal, serta menekankan internalisasi nilai-nilai keislaman melalui praktik sosial. Konsep pendidikan tersebut berlandaskan pada tujuan penciptaan manusia sebagai *'abd Allah* dan *khalifah fi al-ardh*, yang menuntut keseimbangan antara dimensi spiritual, intelektual, dan sosial. Implementasi pemikiran ini diwujudkan melalui Muhammadiyah sebagai gerakan dakwah dan tajdid yang berperan strategis dalam pengembangan pendidikan Islam modern di Indonesia. Kajian ini menegaskan bahwa gagasan pendidikan Ahmad Dahlan memiliki relevansi berkelanjutan dalam penguatan pendidikan karakter, integrasi keilmuan, dan reformasi sistem pendidikan Islam di era kontemporer.

**Kata Kunci:** K.H. Ahmad Dahlan, Pembaruan Pendidikan Islam, Muhammadiyah

## INTRODUCTION

KH. Ahmad Dahlan lived from 1868 to 1923 and was an important figure in the history of Islamic education in Indonesia. He lived during a period of transition between the 19th and early 20th centuries, a period marked by social, political, and intellectual upheaval in Indonesia. At that time, Indonesia was under Dutch colonial rule, and the education system was still very limited.

The arrival of Dutch colonial rule greatly influenced the pattern of Islamic education in Indonesia. During the colonial period, schools were established solely for the benefit of the Dutch colonizers. At that time, the Dutch colonial government established secular schools, which aimed to educate the children of the *priyayi* (nobility) to become low-level clerks and bookkeepers as employees who could assist their Dutch employers in the fields of trade, engineering, and administration. In these schools, students were not introduced to Islamic education at all, resulting in graduates (even though they were generally Muslim) whose thinking and behavior were far from Islamic teachings (Nelly Yusra 2018). This was one of the factors that led Ahmad Dahlan to want to establish Islamic education.

Islamic education experienced three periods of glory. There are two different perspectives on Islamic education. There are two types of thinking: traditional thinking that focuses on textual understanding of revelation (Sufi pattern), and rational thinking that focuses on empirical contextual understanding of revelation. These two factors contributed to the formation of the Islamic golden age. The education system established by KH. Ahmad Dahlan focused on modern education and used classical methods. Islamic educational institutions at that time never did such a thing. It combined the Dutch and traditional education systems (Hery Sucipto 2010).

In the current era of globalization and technological revolution, where the flow of information and foreign cultural influences are so strong, character building through education has become increasingly crucial. Efforts to instill moral, ethical, and civic values through formal and informal education are a response to the challenges of moral degradation faced by many modern societies (Ushie Uswatun hasanah 2024). In this case, K.H. Ahmad Dahlan's thoughts on character education can be a valuable source of inspiration.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This research uses a qualitative library research method with a historical-conceptual approach. Data were obtained from primary and secondary sources related to K.H. Ahmad Dahlan's educational thought and the development of Muhammadiyah. The data were analyzed descriptively and analytically to identify key concepts and contributions to Islamic educational reform in Indonesia.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Biography Of K.H Ahmad Dahlan

This section is the main part of the research article that presents the results of the research. The material reported is the results of the analysis and the results of hypothesis testing. In addition, tables and graphs can also be displayed to verbalize the verbal narrative. Tables and figures should be commented or discussed. Details of qualitative research are written in several sub-topics that are directly related to the focus category.

Ahmad Dahlan was born in Kauman, Yogyakarta, in 1285 AH/1869 AD, the fourth of six children of a woman named Siti Aminah. His name during childhood was Muhammad Darwis, but it was changed to Ahmad Dahlan after he performed the hajj. While performing the Hajj(Arofah 2015), he took the opportunity to study under scholars to learn fiqh, hadith, and master various books. One of K.H. Ahmad Dahlan's teachers was his own father, who taught him reading and writing(Opcit hal. 117), among other things.

K.H. Ahmad Dahlan passed away after several bouts of illness, precisely on February 23, 1923. A few months before his death, Kyai established a mosque and performed Friday prayers in Tretes, Malang. Together with his friends, the leaders of Muhammadiyah, Kyai established the first hospital. This hospital later became known as the PKU Muhammadiyah Hospital, which was inaugurated on January 13, 1923 (Achmad Muta`ali 2023).

His mother was the daughter of a religious judge, and according to his family history, one of Dahlan's ancestors was Maulana Malik Ibrahim, the first and most famous of the Walisongo, who is believed by most Indonesians to be a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad. His father was KH. Abu Bakar, a prominent scholar and preacher at the Grand Mosque of the Sultanate of Yogyakarta during his time. Ahmad Dahlan's genealogy is K.H. Ahmad Dahlan bin K.H. Abubakar bin K.H. Muhammad Sulaiman bin Kyai Muthodho bin Kyai Teyas bin Demang Jurang Kapindo ke-2 bin Demang Jurang Sapisan ke-1 bin Maulana (Kiangeng Gresik whose tomb is in Jati Anom, Klaten, Central Java) bin Maulana Fadhlullah (Sunan Prapen bin Maulana Ainul Yaqin (Sunan Giri) bin Maulana Ishak and so on until Saidina Husin, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad SAW(Opcit hal. 112).

### Ahmad Dahlan's Intellectual Journey and Teacher

During his childhood, Ahmad Dahlan did not receive formal education due to the attitude of the Islamic community at that time, which prohibited children from attending government schools. Instead, he learned to recite the Quran from his father and continued his studies of tafsir, hadith, Arabic, and fiqh with several scholars, including Muhammad Saleh, Muhsin, K.H. R. Dahlan, Mahfudz, Syaikh

Khayyat Sattokh, Syaikh Amin, and Said Bakri. Despite not receiving a formal education, Dahlan was able to master various Islamic disciplines at a relatively young age (Achamd Muta`ali 2023).

Ahmad Dahlan's teachers in his homeland:

1. Studied the Qur'an and other religious texts with his father, K.H. Abu Bakar
2. Studied fiqh with KH. Muhammad Saleh
3. Studied nahwu with KH. Muhsin
4. Studied astronomy with KH. R. Dahlan
5. Studied hadith under KH. Mahfuz and Sheikh Khayyat Sattokh
6. Studied qiraat under Sheikh Amin and Sheikh Sayyid Bakri.

He also studied under several Indonesian scholars residing in Mecca, such as Sheikh Muhammad Khatib al-Minangkabawi, Kyai Nawawi al-Bantani, Kyai Mas Abdullah, and Kyai Fakih Kembang (Erjati Abbas 2020). Before Muhammadiyah was founded, K.H Ahmad Dahlan had been involved in various religious and missionary activities. In 1907, Kyai pioneered the Musyawarah Alim Ulama (Council of Religious Scholars). At the first meeting of the Musyawarah Alim Ulama in 1907, Kyai stated his opinion that the direction of the qibla at the Grand Mosque of Yogyakarta was not correct. Since then, the direction of the qibla at the grand mosque has been shifted slightly to the right by the students of Kyai Ahmad Dahlan (Arofah 2015).

### **Background of Ahmad Dahlan's Thoughts**

Muslims were economically, socially, and politically disadvantaged because they did not have access to government sectors and private companies during the Dutch colonial period. This condition became a concern for Ahmad Dahlan, who sought to improve the Islamic education system (Abrina Maulidnawati 2022). Ahmad Dahlan's thoughts and ideas were influenced by his travels to various places such as Mecca and Cairo to seek knowledge. It was during this time that he met many Islamic reformers, including Sayid Jamaluddin Al Afghani, Muhammad Abduh, and Rasyid Ridha (Defti Arlen).

Ahmad Dahlan also studied under the scholar and preacher of the Grand Mosque, Sheikh Ahmad Khatib al-Minangkabawi from Minang Kabau, and was friends with Kyai Nawawi (Banten), Kiyai Mas Abdullah (Surabaya), and K.H. Faqih (Maskumambang). In addition, he also studied fiqh with Sheikh Shaleh Bafedal and Sheikh Sa'id Yamani, astronomy with Kyai Asy'ari Bawean, and qiraah with Sheikh Ali Misri Mekkah (Achmad Muta`ali 2023).

For Ahmad Dahlan, the application of Western civilization and lifestyle was not in accordance with Islamic principles. Therefore, Islam did not allow its adoption. Ahmad Dahlan also emphasized that knowledge should be applied properly so that good results could be achieved, with a clear perspective and method, using standard religious principles that could be accepted by common

sense. Thus, for Dahlan, knowledge must be practiced and developed in accordance with the demands of the times. He rejected religious practices that were not in accordance with the Qur'an and Sunnah and encouraged Muslims to think rationally, openly, and progressively.

Ahmad Dahlan carried out reforms in the field of education, motivated by his concern about the low level of knowledge among Muslims. According to Ahmad Dahlan, Islamic educational institutions must be improved with better systems and methods. The learning models that had been applied in Islamic boarding schools, namely the *bandongan* and *sorogan* models, needed to be replaced with a classical learning model so that the objectives and goals of learning activities were more focused and measurable (Abdul Mut'hi *et al* 2015).

### **Education from Ahmad Dahlan's Perspective**

K.H. Ahmad Dahlan stated that education must be built upon a strong foundation. This foundation functions as a philosophical framework for formulating the concepts and objectives of ideal Islamic education, both horizontally and vertically (Khaliq). In the Islamic worldview, the purpose of human creation consists of two roles: as *'abd Allah* (servant of God) and *khalifah fi al-ardh* (vicegerent on earth). In the process of creation, God endowed humans with *al-ruh* (spirit) and *al-'aql* (intellect); therefore, education must serve as a means to develop the potential of the spirit in guiding humans to submit and obey their Creator. Here, reason is a fundamental potential possessed by students that must be nurtured and developed to construct theoretical and methodological frameworks for regulating harmonious vertical and horizontal relationships in accordance with the purpose of creation (Mar'ati Zarro 2020).

Ahmad Dahlan viewed education as a strategic means to liberate the Muslim community from stagnant patterns of thought toward progressive and dynamic thinking. Returning to the Qur'an and Hadith, encouraging comprehensive understanding of Islamic teachings, and mastering various branches of knowledge were, in his view, the keys to advancing the Muslim ummah (Ramayulis 2010). Strategically, these efforts could be realized through education. The education envisioned by Ahmad Dahlan was oriented toward modern education, employing a classical system. This idea was implemented through the establishment of educational institutions that integrated Western and Islamic education (general schools and pesantren).

Islamic education according to Ahmad Dahlan aimed to shape Muslims with noble character, deep religious knowledge, broad perspectives, an understanding of worldly sciences, and a willingness to strive for the advancement of society. One of his central educational ideas was the integration of religious sciences and general sciences. He rejected the dichotomy between religious knowledge and secular knowledge that prevailed at the time. For him, both forms

of knowledge were equally important and should be studied simultaneously (Ushie uswatun 2024).

The education pioneered by Dahlan combined faith and progress, producing generations capable of facing the challenges of different eras. In integrating Dutch education with pesantren education, Dahlan was labeled a “kafir kyai” for imitating non-Muslim educational systems. Nevertheless, he persisted in implementing this educational model in pursuit of his ideals and objectives. In Indonesia, there were two dominant educational systems: pesantren education and Western education. Dahlan identified two fundamental problems related to educational institutions among Muslims, particularly pesantren (Husin 2023). One of these concerned learning methods at that time, pesantren primarily used traditional methods such as *sorongan*.

Another aspect of K.H. Ahmad Dahlan’s thought that resonates strongly with contemporary education is his emphasis on practice-oriented education. He stressed the importance of applying knowledge, not merely understanding it theoretically. K.H. Ahmad Dahlan frequently criticized religious education that focused solely on memorization and ritual without deep comprehension and practical implementation in daily life. This perspective aligns with contemporary educational trends that emphasize experiential learning and project-based learning. In today’s context, where the workforce demands graduates who possess not only theoretical knowledge but also practical skills and soft skills, practice-oriented education has become increasingly essential (Ushie Uswatun 2024).

The primary objective of Islamic education is to form a community with strong character, profound religious understanding, openness in belief, and the ability to comprehend contemporary issues. In addition, Islamic education aims to enable individuals to serve and contribute to society. Ahmad Dahlan emphasized that character formation is the central goal of education. Without good character, achieving well-being in this world and the *akhirah* is difficult (Sri Rezki 2024). This formulation of educational goals represents a reform of pesantren education objectives, which previously focused solely on forming pious individuals and teaching religious sciences.

### **Muhammadiyah as a Movement for the Reform of Islamic Education**

Muhammadiyah is an Islamic movement committed to *dakwah amar ma’ruf nahi munkar* (Rajiah Rusydi). It also carries out the mission of *dakwah* and *tajdid* (renewal) to realize a truly Islamic society. Ahmad Dahlan’s social thought was embodied in the Muhammadiyah movement, which he founded on November 18, 1912. This organization is characterized as a socio-religious movement. Initially, its struggle focused on purifying Islamic teachings and advancing education. Muhammadiyah has had a deep-rooted influence in efforts to eradicate *bid’ah* (unwarranted religious innovations), *khurafat* (superstitions), and *tahayul* (myths).

The factors behind the establishment of Muhammadiyah include:

1. Subjective factors, namely the primary and decisive factor motivating the founding of Muhammadiyah, which was Ahmad Dahlan's deep study of the Qur'an. After understanding the message of Surah Ali Imran verse 104, he was moved to establish an association or organization dedicated to carrying out Islamic dakwah.
2. Objective factors, consisting of internal and external elements. The internal objective factor was the impurity of Islamic teachings, where the Qur'an and Sunnah were no longer used as the sole references by the Muslim community. The external objective factors included the increasing Christianization movement within Indonesian society and European colonial penetration (Erjati Abbas 2020).

Through Muhammadiyah, Ahmad Dahlan actively contributed to the field of education from its founding in 1912 for the advancement of the nation, long before the Republic of Indonesia was established in 1945. Muhammadiyah's contributions include: (1) building a modern Islamic education system (2) reforming Islamic thought (3) renewing the mindset toward progress and modernity (4) the Al-Ma'un movement (social welfare and humanitarian assistance) (5) safeguarding Muslims from external threats (6) modernizing social life and (7) pioneering the advancement of Muslim women into the public sphere.

A key characteristic and pioneering achievement of Muhammadiyah and the educational institutions it established is the integrated or holistic modern Islamic education system. This means that Islamic education introduced by Muhammadiyah integrates religious education and general education into a unified system, whether in general schools, madrasahs, or pesantren. Furthermore, Muhammadiyah pursued methodological renewal through a cultural dakwah approach. This cultural approach does not imply legitimizing superstition, bid'ah, or khurafat that contradict pure Islamic creed, but rather aims to enrich dakwah methods to avoid excessive confrontation that could alienate the broader Muslim community (Erjati Abbas 2020).

In the field of social welfare, Ahmad Dahlan repeatedly emphasized to his students that they should not only understand the message of Surah Al-Ma'un (Chapter 107) but, more importantly, practice its teachings in daily life. He urged them to reflect on the suffering of their neighbors and emphasized the importance of helping the poor. Inspired and motivated by these Qur'anic verses, he established a special body known as the "Department for Assistance to the Poor," tasked with providing services and aid to orphans, the poor, and the sick. The establishment of orphanages, clinics, and Muhammadiyah hospitals reflects the founding spirit and struggle of Ahmad Dahlan (Ahdar 2019).

## CONCLUSION

This section summarizes the results and discussion with reference to the research objectives. Thus, new main ideas, which are an important part of the research findings, should be presented. Ahmad Dahlan was an Islamic reformist figure who emerged from the context of Muslim decline during the colonial era. His intellectual experiences in Mecca and his encounter with Islamic modernist ideas shaped his rational and progressive thought. In the field of education, Dahlan emphasized the integration of religious and general sciences, modern teaching methods, and an orientation toward action and social practice. These ideas were realized through the establishment of Muhammadiyah schools, which became pioneers of modern Islamic education in Indonesia. According to Ahmad Dahlan, the goal of education is to form individuals with deep religious understanding, an inclusive attitude through engagement with general knowledge, and readiness to strive and serve Muhammadiyah by applying religious values for the benefit of society. Ahmad Dahlan's thought remains relevant today, particularly in the development of character education, Islamic philanthropy movements, religious moderation, and dakwah organizational management. Thus, his ideas are not only historically significant but also serve as an enduring inspiration for the development of Islamic civilization in the contemporary era.

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