

The Historical Transformation Of Islamic Education In The Nusantara : From The Pre-Kingdom Era To Its Integration Into The National Education System

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Abstract

This study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the historical transformation of Islamic education in the Indonesian archipelago, spanning five crucial phases: the pre-kingdom era, the Walisongo era, the era of Islamic sultanates and kingdoms, the Dutch colonial period, and its formal integration into the contemporary National Education System. Using a historical-descriptive research method with a literature review and source criticism approach, this study explores how traditional institutions such as suraus, pesantrens, dayahs and madrasahs evolved in response to the socio-political dynamics of the times. The findings indicate that during the early phase and the Walisongo era, Islamic education developed organically on a cultural basis and adaptively through a humanistic approach. During the era of the sultanates, formal institutionalisation took place, democratising access to intellectual pursuits. Entering the Dutch colonial era, the pressure of discriminatory policies (such as the Guru Ordonansi and the Peraturan Sekolah Liar) triggered a defensive-modernist response in the form of the emergence of movement organisations such as Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama. In the post-independence era, up to the enactment of the National Education System Act No. 20 of 2003 and the Pesantren Act No. 18 of 2019, the dualism inherited from the colonial era was gradually bridged towards systemic integration, although challenges regarding substantive equality in quality and digital disruption still require the sustained acceleration of professional institutional management.

Keywords: History of Islamic Education, Walisongo, Colonial Policy, National Education System Law, Science Integration.

ملخص البحث

يهدف هذا البحث إلى إجراء تحليل شامل للتحوّل التاريخي للتعليم الإسلامي في أرخبيل النوسانتارا، والذي مرّ بخمس مراحل حاسمة: عصر ما قبل الممالك، وعصر واليسونغو، وعصر السلاطين/الممالك الإسلامية، وفترة الاستعمار الهولندي، وصولاً إلى اندماجه الرسمي في نظام التعليم الوطني المعاصر. من خلال منهجية البحث التاريخي الوصفي مع اتباع نهج دراسة المراجع ونقد المصادر، يستكشف هذا البحث كيف تطورت المؤسسات التقليدية مثل السراوي، والمدارس الدينية (البيسانترين)، والدنيا، والمدارس الإسلامية (المدارس) في مواجهة الديناميات الاجتماعية والسياسية للعصر. وتشير نتائج البحث إلى أن التعليم الإسلامي في المراحل المبكرة وعصر واليسونغو تطور بشكل عضوي قائم على الثقافة والتكيف من خلال نهج إنساني. في عصر الممالك، حدثت عملية مؤسسية رسمية أدت إلى إضفاء الطابع الديمقراطي على الوصول إلى المعرفة. ومع دخول العصر الاستعماري الهولندي، أدت الضغوط الناجمة عن السياسات التمييزية (مثل «قانون المعلمين» و«لائحة المدارس غير المرخصة») إلى رد فعل دفاعي-حديثي تمثل في ظهور منظمات حركية مثل «المحمدية» و«نهضة العلماء». وفي حقبة ما بعد الاستقلال وحتى إقرار قانون النظام التعليمي الوطني رقم 20 لعام 2003 وقانون المدارس الدينية (البيسانترين) رقم 18 لعام 2019، تم تدريجياً سد الفجوة

بين الثنائي الموروث عن الحقبة الاستعمارية نحو تحقيق التكامل المنهجي، على الرغم من أن التحديات المتعلقة بالمساواة الجوهرية في الجودة والاضطرابات الرقمية لا تزال تتطلب تسريعاً مستمراً لمهنية إدارة المؤسسات.

الكلمات المفتاحية: تاريخ التعليم الإسلامي، واليسونغو، السياسات الاستعمارية، قانون النظام التعليمي الوطني، التكامل العلمي.

A. Introduction

The most important and strategic tool for improving the quality of human resources for the common good, maintaining the dignity of civilisation, and enhancing national life is education. The historical contribution of Islamic education is inextricably linked to the educational processes in Indonesia. Traditional Islamic educational institutions, such as the pesantren in Java, the surau in Minangkabau, and the dayah in Aceh, were well-established as hubs for the dissemination of knowledge, the development of morality, and the basis of social cohesion within the communities of the Archipelago long before the formal notion of a single national education system emerged following independence.

Historically, the development of Islamic education in Indonesia has followed a highly complex dialectical path. Beginning with non-formal and informal patterns during the pre-kingdom era, driven by networks of Muslim merchants traversing the oceans, this educational process subsequently evolved into a cultural and accommodative movement under the guidance of the Walisongo. When formal political institutions in the form of maritime sultanates were established across various regions of the Nusantara, Islamic education gained structural patronage that shifted the exclusivity of elite education from the Hindu-Buddhist era towards the principle of democratising access to intellectual pursuits. However, the penetration of Dutch colonial imperialism reversed this situation by imposing a dualistic system that deliberately marginalised religious institutions and gave rise to a dichotomy between secular and religious knowledge.

The dichotomous legacy of the colonial period generated structural problems within the development of Islamic education in Indonesia, many of which have persisted into the contemporary era. During the colonial period, Islamic education developed largely within a distinct institutional and sociocultural domain, separate from the formal educational system established by the colonial administration. This historical separation contributed to the formation of a dualistic educational structure between religious education provided through Islamic institutions, particularly pesantren and madrasahs, and general education administered through the state education system. The consequences

of this dualism extended beyond institutional arrangements and affected curriculum orientation, pedagogical practices, educational governance, and the broader social positioning of Islamic education within the emerging national education system.

Following independence, the Indonesian government gradually sought to address this historical dualism through a series of educational policies and legal reforms. These efforts were directed toward establishing a regulatory framework that would provide Islamic education with a more equitable and legitimate position within the national education system. One important milestone was the 1975 Joint Ministerial Decree, which contributed to the formal recognition and standardisation of madrasah education within the national educational framework. This process was further strengthened through Law No. 2 of 1989 on the National Education System and subsequently through Law No. 20 of 2003 on the National Education System. Collectively, these regulatory developments reflected a significant transformation in the state's approach to Islamic education, from a historically differentiated position toward greater institutional recognition and integration within the national education system (Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, 1975; Republic of Indonesia, 1989, 2003).

However, substantive equality among educational institutions has not always followed from formal legal acceptance. Islamic educational institutions still face issues with curriculum creation, institutional governance, teacher professionalism, educational quality, and the fair distribution of facilities. Disparities in institutional capability and educational quality persist despite the legislative framework's growing recognition of Islamic education. This situation suggests that the structural disparities that have emerged as a result of Indonesian education's historical trajectory cannot be eliminated by regulatory integration alone. As a result, the evolution of Islamic education should be analysed from the perspectives of institutional capability, educational quality, and social change in addition to legal recognition.

The contemporary era has introduced an additional layer of complexity to the development and sustainability of Islamic education. Rapid technological advancement, digital transformation, changing patterns of communication, and the emergence of technology-mediated learning have fundamentally altered the educational environment. Islamic educational institutions are therefore required to develop adaptive strategies that enable them to preserve their religious and cultural foundations while responding to the demands of technological transformation. Digitalisation provides significant

opportunities to expand access to educational resources, facilitate innovative pedagogical practices, and strengthen educational networks. At the same time, it generates challenges concerning educators' digital competencies, institutional readiness, digital literacy, the credibility of religious content disseminated through digital platforms, and the ability of Islamic educational institutions to respond critically to rapidly changing social and technological conditions.

From a historical and sociological perspective, the transformation of Islamic education in the Indonesian Archipelago cannot be adequately understood as a linear process of institutional development resulting solely from government intervention. Rather, it represents a complex historical process shaped by the interaction of Islamic intellectual traditions, local sociocultural dynamics, colonial intervention, reformist movements, state policies, and broader processes of social transformation. Islamic educational institutions have demonstrated considerable adaptive capacity by maintaining their religious identity while simultaneously responding to changing social circumstances. The historical development of pesantren and madrasahs, for example, illustrates how Islamic educational institutions have negotiated between the preservation of established traditions and the adoption of new forms of knowledge, organisation, and pedagogy. Therefore, examining the historical trajectory of Islamic education is essential for understanding the processes of continuity, resistance, adaptation, negotiation, and institutional reconstruction that have shaped its development.

Against this historical and sociological backdrop, this article aims to critically analyse and systematically reconstruct the transformation of Islamic education in the Indonesian Archipelago through five major historical phases. The proposed periodisation is intended to identify patterns of continuity and change in the development of Islamic education, encompassing its historical foundations, the evolution of traditional educational methodologies, patterns of resistance and adaptation during the colonial period, the process of institutional integration into the national education system, and the contemporary prospects and challenges confronting Islamic education. This periodised approach enables the transformation of Islamic education to be examined as a dynamic historical process rather than as a simple transition from traditional to modern forms of education.

The significance of this study lies in its attempt to provide a comprehensive historical interpretation of the transformation of Islamic education by positioning it not merely as the development of religious institutions but also as a broader social, political, and educational phenomenon closely connected to the

formation of Indonesia's national education system. A critical examination of the historical foundations of integration, traditional educational methodologies, patterns of resistance to colonial educational policies, and the subsequent negotiation between Islamic traditions and state regulations is necessary to explain the contemporary position of Islamic education. Such an approach provides an opportunity to move beyond a linear understanding of educational modernisation and instead examine the historical process as one characterised by continuity, contestation, adaptation, and institutional transformation.

Furthermore, the study seeks to demonstrate that the contemporary challenges facing Islamic education cannot be separated from the historical structures that have shaped its development. Issues concerning educational quality, professional governance, educator competence, curriculum relevance, and technological disruption should therefore be understood within a broader historical context. Such an approach is important because contemporary policy responses that overlook these historical dimensions may address immediate institutional problems without adequately confronting the structural conditions underlying them. The historical examination of Islamic education consequently provides an analytical foundation for understanding both the achievements and limitations of its integration into the national education system.

Ultimately, understanding the transformation of Islamic education requires moving beyond a normative assessment of its formal legal recognition. While the progressive development of the national legal framework has strengthened the institutional position of Islamic education, substantive challenges continue to influence its quality, relevance, and sustainability. The future development of Islamic education therefore requires an approach that simultaneously recognises its historical and religious foundations, strengthens institutional and professional capacity, and responds strategically to contemporary social and technological transformations. In this regard, a historical understanding of Islamic education's transformation can provide a critical foundation for developing an educational system that remains rooted in Islamic intellectual and cultural traditions while maintaining relevance within the framework of national educational policy and the rapidly changing demands of contemporary society.

B. Methods

This study employs a historical-descriptive approach, closely integrated with library research. The research procedure was carried out through the four stages of the standard historical method, namely:

(1) heuristics, involving the collection of primary sources such as colonial policy documents (the Guru Ordonantie 1905, the Wilde Scholen Ordonantie 1932), drafts of national education legislation (Law No. 2/1989, Law No. 20/2003, and Law No. 18/2019), as well as texts on the historiography of traditional Islamic education; (2) verification or source criticism, comprising both external criticism to test the physical authenticity of documents and internal criticism to validate the credibility of the data's content; (3) interpretation, involving the chronological synthesis and conceptual contextualisation of data that has passed verification; and (4) historiography, the organisation of the results of historical reconstruction into a coherent and comprehensive structure for a scholarly journal article.

C. Discussion

1. The Dawn of Early Islamic Education: The Pre-Kingdom Era and Patterns of Organic Diffusion

In the early pre-establishment phase of the Islamic sultanates in the Archipelago, the processes of Islamisation and the transmission of knowledge took place organically, culturally, and were inherent to international economic activity. Historians note that the initial penetration of Islam occurred between the 7th and 13th centuries CE through Arab, Persian and Gujarati maritime trade networks. The sociological implication of this model of interaction was the absence of rigid formal educational institutions. Early religious education took a non-formal and informal form, relying entirely on the daily conduct of Muslim merchants, which reflected the principles of honesty, transactional justice and moral simplicity.

As Muslim communities took shape in the coastal port cities of Sumatra and Java, the intensity of learning evolved from personal contact to embryonic institutions such as household study circles, regular religious gatherings, and the use of simple prayer halls or suraus. The teaching material during this pioneering phase focused on essential areas, namely the instilling of pure monotheism (aqidah) to supplant the old theology, guidance on practical worship (fiqh), such as the procedures for wudhu and prayer, and a basic introduction to the Hijaiyah alphabet for reading the Qur'an. Teaching methods were dominated by the oral tradition (lectures), the memorisation (tahfidz) of short verses, and the direct demonstration of exemplary behaviour (uswah hasanah) within social interactions.

2. Acculturation and Cultural Engineering: The Construction of Education in the Walisongo Era

By the 15th century CE, the pattern of religious diffusion had undergone a revolutionary methodological leap under the leadership of a council of scholars known as the Walisongo on the island of Java. The

Walisongo formulated a concept of Islamic education that was highly inclusive, humanistic, and accommodating of indigenous customs steeped in Hindu, Buddhist and animist influences. They did not view local traditions as entities to be eradicated outright, but rather utilised them as instruments for the enculturation of Islamic teachings.

The application of the Walisongo's educational methods took on unique forms through each figure. Maulana Malik Ibrahim (Sunan Gresik) pioneered a welfare and agricultural approach, teaching modern farming techniques and providing free medical services, whilst also establishing a boarding school in Leran, Gresik. This strategic initiative was continued by Sunan Ampel in Ampel Denta, who introduced the theological-practical formula 'Mo Limo' (no gambling, no drinking, no stealing, no drug abuse, no adultery) as a form of moral resistance against the social degradation of the late Majapahit era.

On the other hand, the genius of cultural engineering is reflected in the strategies of Sunan Bonang and Sunan Kalijaga, who adapted forms of folk performing arts. Sunan Bonang reconstructed the aesthetics of Javanese gamelan by adding the bonang instrument and composing the song 'Tombo Ati', which is imbued with the nuances of transcendental dhikr. Meanwhile, Sunan Kalijaga utilised performances of the traditional wayang kulit—whose plots were adapted from the epics of the Mahabharata and the Ramayana—and then incorporated interpretations of tawhid, sharia, and sacred terms such as Layang Kalimasada (the Shahada). Through this system of cultural infiltration, dialogue and Tut Wuri Handayani, the indigenous people absorbed Islamic values persuasively and consciously without losing their cultural identity.

3. Institutionalisation and Democratisation: Islamic Education in the Era of Kingdoms and Sultanates

When the socio-religious foundations laid by the Walisongo and the coastal preachers crystallised into a political force, Islamic sultanates emerged across the archipelago, such as Samudera Pasai, Aceh Darussalam, Demak, Cirebon, Banten, Islamic Mataram, and Gowa-Tallo. The establishment of this formal political authority had a significant impact on the structuring of Islamic education. Educational institutions, which had initially been sporadic in nature, began to be systematically institutionalised with financial and policy support from the Sultans (umara).

During this period, there was a paradigm shift from the elitist education of the Hindu-Buddhist era—which was centred within the inner circles of the palace and reserved for the warrior and Brahmin castes—towards the principle of the democratisation of education. Every citizen, regardless of social background, had an equal right to pursue knowledge in mosques, suraus, dayahs, and pesantrens established by ulama with the full support of the sultanates. Palaces and grand mosques were transformed into centres of excellence on an international scale, serving as meeting places for domestic and foreign ulama to analyse literature on fiqh,

dogmatic theology and even philosophical Sufism. The curriculum structure also began to be organised in a tiered manner, combining in-depth study of classical texts with practical knowledge of socio-politics, governance and maritime navigation.

4. Hegemony, Resistance and Modernism: Islamic Education during the Dutch Colonial Period

The stability and autonomy of Islamic educational institutions came under severe strain when the Dutch colonial government established its economic and political imperialist hegemony from the early 19th century onwards. Recognising that Islamic institutions—particularly pesantren—were the epicentre of the formation of anti-colonial consciousness and collective solidarity amongst the Muslim community, which gave rise to armed resistance (such as the Diponegoro War of 1825–1830 and the Padri War of 1821–1837), the Dutch implemented repressive and systematic restrictive policies.

Based on the intellectual blueprint of the Orientalist Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje, the colonial government implemented a policy of isolation against political Islam and educational Islam. The legal instruments introduced included the 1905 Guru Ordonantie, which required all teachers of the Islamic faith to obtain written permission from the colonial bureaucracy before teaching, as well as the 1932 Wilde Scholen Ordonantie (Regulation on Unlicensed Schools), which granted officials unilateral authority to dissolve deemed subversive. Simultaneously, the Dutch established a modern, secular and dualistic Western school system, intended specifically for the aristocracy/priyayi. This dualistic system created sharp socio-economic segregation: graduates of Dutch schools were guaranteed strategic bureaucratic positions, whilst graduates of pesantren were structurally marginalised.

Faced with this pressure, Muslims launched a dynamic cultural resistance through institutional reform (defensive modernism). This movement manifested itself in two main forms: (1) The modernisation of madrasahs through the adoption of a classroom system, desks and chairs, and the integration of a general education curriculum, pioneered by the Adabiyah School (1909) in Padang and the Muhammadiyah organisation (1912) under the leadership of K.H. Ahmad Dahlan; (2) The consolidation of traditional defence based on an organised network of pesantren, driven by Nahdlatul Ulama (1926) under the leadership of K.H. Hasyim Asy'ari. In addition, the emancipation of Islamic women's education emerged through the establishment of Kautamaan Istri in Pasundan and Diniyah Puteri in Padang Panjang by Rahmah el-Yunusiyah in 1923, which combined religious doctrine with life skills for women.

5. Bridging Dualism: Legal Recognition and Contemporary Academic Integration

Following Indonesia's independence, the fundamental challenge faced by the nation's founders was to unify the dualistic education system inherited from the colonial era into a single, integral National Education

System. The initial steps were taken through Law No. 4 of 1950 in conjunction with Law No. 12 of 1954, which began to accommodate religious education in state schools. The struggle for recognition reached a crucial milestone with the issuance of the 1975 Joint Ministerial Decree, which equated the value of madrasah certificates with those of state schools, opening up opportunities for upward mobility for graduates of Islamic religious institutions.

Comprehensive legal reinforcement took place during the New Order era through Law No. 2 of 1989, which was subsequently refined during the Reform era through Law No. 20 of 2003 on the National Education System. Under the 2003 National Education System Act, the status of madrasahs is explicitly and normatively recognised as equivalent to state schools within the formal education system (for example: Madrasah Ibtidaiyah is equivalent to primary school, Madrasah Tsanawiyah to lower secondary school, and Madrasah Aliyah to upper secondary school). The existence of pesantren has also gained full legitimacy through the enactment of Law No. 18 of 2019 on Pesantren, which guarantees their affirmative role, facilitates funding, and ensures the recognition of graduates through the Muadalah system.

From an academic perspective, this regulatory shift demands a change in the scientific paradigm, moving from a dichotomous model towards one of scientific integration (the interconnection between *hadlrah al-nash*, *hadlrah al-‘ilm* and *hadlrah al-falsafah*). Nevertheless, substantive issues remain on the ground. Disparities in regional budget allocation, limited supporting infrastructure, and the pedagogical competence of teachers in some private madrasahs and pesantren continue to reflect sociological inequalities. In the contemporary era, these challenges are compounded by digital disruption, which requires Islamic educational institutions to undergo a transformation towards technology-based management systems, whilst retaining the moral and spiritual pillars that form their historical roots.

D. Conclusion

Islamic education in the Archipelago is not merely a static religious entity, but rather a dynamic cultural, intellectual and political movement that safeguards the nation's existence. The long journey from non-formal practices in the pre-kingdom era, through the flexible acculturation of the Walisongo, the democratic institutionalisation of the sultanate period, to the modernist resistance against Dutch colonial hegemony, demonstrates the extraordinary resilience of indigenous Islamic institutions. From a formal legal perspective, the restructuring of the legal system following independence, culminating in the enactment of the National Education System Act No. 20 of 2003 and the Pesantren Act No. 18 of 2019, has successfully brought an end to the dualism in Indonesia's education law. However, this normative-legal integration still leaves

unresolved issues regarding the achievement of substantive equality in academic quality, institutional governance and funding.

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