

The Historical Roots of Islamic Education in Indonesia: A Study of Pre-Islamic Education

Ulil Albab¹

Islamic Religious Education, Faculty of Islamic Studies,
Wahid Hasyim University, Semarang, Indonesia

Myalbab321@gmail.com

Abstract

This study aims to investigate the historical foundations of Islamic education in Indonesia by examining educational systems and practices that developed prior to the arrival of Islam. The study employs a library research method using a historical-qualitative approach. Data were collected from various relevant sources, including scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, historical records, and other academic documents. The collected data were analyzed through content analysis to identify the characteristics, values, and developmental patterns of educational practices in pre-Islamic Indonesian society. The findings reveal that educational practices had already been established before the emergence of Islam in Indonesia, primarily through family-based education, indigenous communities, and educational institutions influenced by Hindu-Buddhist traditions. These educational systems functioned not merely as mechanisms for transmitting knowledge but also as means of cultivating moral values, spiritual awareness, social responsibility, and practical life skills. Furthermore, educational relationships were characterized by close and personal interactions between educators and learners, reflecting the strong integration of education with the social and cultural life of local communities. The arrival of Islam did not completely eliminate the educational traditions that had previously developed. Rather, the process of Islamization involved adaptation, accommodation, and integration between existing local values and Islamic teachings. This historical process contributed to the emergence of distinctive characteristics of Islamic education in Indonesia, particularly its inclusive, adaptive, and culturally rooted nature. Therefore, pre-Islamic educational traditions constitute an important historical foundation for understanding the development of Islamic education in Indonesia and demonstrate how educational transformation can occur through cultural continuity, contextual adaptation, and the integration of religious values with local traditions.

Keywords: Pre-Islamic education, Islamic education, History of education, Indonesia, Acculturation.

A. Introduction

Education is a crucial element in the civilizational development of a nation. It serves not only as a means of transferring knowledge but also as a medium for transmitting societal values, culture, and character. In the Indonesian context, the evolution of Islamic education cannot be separated from the social

¹ 2520011006

and cultural conditions that existed prior to the arrival of Islam. Consequently, examining pre-Islamic education is essential for understanding the historical roots of the Islamic education system in Indonesia.²

Before Islam flourished in the region, Indonesian society already practiced both informal and formal education systems. Informal education took place within the family and community through the transmission of values, customs, and life skills. Meanwhile, during the era of Hindu-Buddhist kingdoms, educational institutions such as padepokan, mandala, and asrama emerged, serving as centers for learning religion, philosophy, literature, and leadership. These educational systems positioned the teacher as a central figure a respected individual who served as a role model for students.³

The arrival of Islam in Indonesia brought about changes in various aspects of life, including education. However, the development of Islamic education did not entail the elimination of pre-existing educational systems. Instead, Islamic scholars and propagators developed accommodative outreach strategies through a process of cultural acculturation. Various forms of Islamic educational institutions such as surau, langgar, and pesantren evolved by adopting educational models already familiar to the community and integrating them with Islamic teachings.⁴

Research into the history of Islamic education has generally focused on the development of pesantren, madrasah, and other Islamic institutions established after the advent of Islam. In contrast, studies examining the relationship between pre-Islamic educational systems and the emergence of Islamic education in Indonesia remain relatively limited. Yet, understanding this continuity is crucial to demonstrating that the development of Islamic education in Indonesia was the result of a gradual process of cultural adaptation and transformation. Based on the foregoing, this article aims to examine the historical roots of Islamic education in Indonesia by analyzing the educational systems of the pre-Islamic era. This study is expected to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of education in Indonesia and to demonstrate that Islamic education evolved through a process of integrating Islamic values with educational traditions already established within the community.

B. Methods

This study employs a library research method with a qualitative-historical approach. This method was selected because the research focuses on examining various literature regarding the Indonesian education

² Hasbullah, *Sejarah Pendidikan Islam di Indonesia: Lintasan Sejarah Pertumbuhan dan Perkembangan* (Jakarta: PT RajaGrafindo Persada, 1999), hlm. 1–8.

³ Edi Sedyawati dkk., *Sejarah Pendidikan di Indonesia Sebelum Kedatangan Bangsa-Bangsa Barat* (Jakarta: Direktorat Jenderal Kebudayaan, 1991), hlm. 15–42.

⁴ Hasbullah, *Sejarah Pendidikan Islam di Indonesia: Lintasan Sejarah Pertumbuhan dan Perkembangan* (Jakarta: PT RajaGrafindo Persada, 1999), hlm. 15–28.

system during the pre-Islamic era and its connection to the development of Islamic education.⁵ The historical approach is utilized to trace educational events, ideas, and developments based on relevant historical sources. The research data consists of secondary data obtained from books, scholarly journal articles, proceedings, and historical documents related to pre-Islamic education and the history of Islamic education in Indonesia. Data collection was conducted through documentary study, involving the identification, inventorying, and classification of various literature sources in accordance with the research focus.⁶ Data analysis employed the content analysis technique examining, comparing, and interpreting information from various sources to gain a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between pre-Islamic educational systems and the development of Islamic education in Indonesia. The findings are presented through a descriptive-analytical approach, thereby providing an overview of the historical roots of Islamic education in Indonesia.⁷

C. Finding, Analysis/ Discussion

1. The State of Education in Indonesia during the Pre-Islamic Era

Prior to the arrival of Islam, societies in the Indonesian archipelago already possessed educational systems that had evolved in alignment with their prevailing social conditions, cultures, and belief systems. Education during this era was not conducted in the form of schools as we know them today; instead, it took place organically within the family, the community, and religious institutions. The primary objective of education was to instill moral values, customs, beliefs, and the life skills necessary for communal living.⁸ In the early stages of societal development, education occurred informally through the transmission of culture from the older generation to the younger one. Parents and traditional leaders played pivotal roles in guiding children in matters ranging from social norms, etiquette, and methods of farming and hunting to the conduct of communal deliberations and traditional ceremonies. This educational model demonstrates that the family served as the primary educational institution, functioning to shape character while simultaneously preserving the continuity of the community's cultural values.⁹

⁵ Lexy J. Moleong, *Metodologi Penelitian Kualitatif*, Edisi Revisi (Bandung: PT Remaja Rosdakarya, 2018), hlm. 6–11.

⁶ Mestika Zed, *Metode Penelitian Kepustakaan* (Jakarta: Yayasan Obor Indonesia, 2004), hlm. 3–5.

⁷ Sugiyono, *Metode Penelitian Kualitatif: Untuk Penelitian yang Bersifat Eksploratif, Interpretif, Interaktif, dan Konstruktif* (Bandung: Alfabeta, 2021), hlm. 161–172

⁸ Edi Sedyawati dkk., *Sejarah Pendidikan di Indonesia Sebelum Kedatangan Bangsa-Bangsa Barat* (Jakarta: Direktorat Jenderal Kebudayaan, 1991), hlm. 1–20.

⁹ Edi Sedyawati dkk., *Sejarah Pendidikan di Indonesia Sebelum Kedatangan Bangsa-Bangsa Barat*, hlm. 21–35

The landscape of education shifted as Hindu-Buddhist kingdoms began to flourish in Indonesia. Education was no longer confined to the family sphere but was also conducted through religious institutions such as padepokan, asrama, mandala, and vihara. These institutions served as centers for the study of religion, literature, philosophy, Sanskrit, and leadership ethics. Teachers or resi held highly respected positions, acting not merely as transmitters of knowledge but also as spiritual guides and moral role models for their student. Although education during the Hindu-Buddhist era was largely reserved for the nobility, the clergy, and specific social groups, the system fostered a robust scholarly tradition. Close teacher-student relationships, learning through example, and an emphasis on character and spiritual development were the defining characteristics of education during this period. This tradition subsequently became a factor that facilitated the adoption of Islamic education as Islam began to spread across Indonesia. Thus, the state of education in pre-Islamic Indonesia demonstrates that society already possessed a structured educational system suited to the era. The existence of educational institutions, the central role of teachers, and the instilling of moral and spiritual values formed a crucial foundation that subsequently influenced the development of Islamic education in Indonesia.

2. Characteristics of Pre-Islamic Educational Institutions and Systems

The evolution of education in Indonesia during the pre-Islamic era reveals an increasingly organized educational system, particularly during the time of the Hindu-Buddhist kingdoms. Beyond the education that took place within family and community settings, educational institutions emerged to serve as centers for religious learning, the advancement of knowledge, and the cultivation of character and leadership. These institutions took various forms such as padepokan, asrama, mandala, and vihara where teachers or sages (resi) instructed students in accordance with the religious teachings and traditions prevalent at the time.¹⁰

The Hindu-Buddhist educational system was characterized by a focus on character building, the mastery of knowledge, and spiritual development. The curriculum encompassed religious teachings, philosophy, literature, Sanskrit, ethics, law, and astronomy, alongside various practical skills required for life in society. Instruction was delivered through lectures, dialogue, rote memorization, practical application, and the teacher acting as a role model; consequently, the relationship between teacher and student transcended the purely academic, reflecting a profound moral and spiritual bond.¹¹

¹⁰ Edi Sedyawati dkk., *Sejarah Pendidikan di Indonesia Sebelum Kedatangan Bangsa-Bangsa Barat* (Jakarta: Direktorat Jenderal Kebudayaan, 1991), hlm. 36–52.

¹¹ Abuddin Nata, *Sejarah Pendidikan Islam* (Jakarta: Prenada Media, 2022), hlm. 25–38.

Teachers or *resis* (sages) held a highly respected position, viewed as both sources of knowledge and guides for life. Students lived with their teachers for a set period, ensuring a continuous educational process. This educational model fostered discipline, self-reliance, and respect for both knowledge and educators. These characteristics subsequently influenced the development of Islamic educational institutions particularly *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools) which position the *kiai* (religious teacher) as the central figure in learning and the character development of *santri* (students).¹² Although access to education during the Hindu-Buddhist era was largely restricted to the nobility, royalty, and religious groups, the system gave rise to intellectual traditions that flourished across various royal centers. These educational institutions served not only as vehicles for transmitting religious teachings but also as hubs for the development of culture, literature, and ethical values that strengthened the community's social fabric. This deeply rooted educational tradition facilitated the adaptation of Islamic education when religious scholars introduced Islamic teachings through approaches that were peaceful and accommodating of local culture.¹³

Thus, the characteristics of educational institutions and systems in the pre-Islamic era demonstrate that Indonesian society already possessed a relatively well-established educational tradition prior to the arrival of Islam. The existence of educational institutions, the respected status of teachers, learning based on role modeling, and the instilling of moral and spiritual values constitute an important legacy that subsequently contributed to the formation of the Islamic education system in Indonesia.

3. The Transformation of Education at the Onset of Islam's Arrival in Indonesia

The arrival of Islam in Indonesia brought significant changes to the educational system; however, these changes occurred gradually and did not eradicate pre-existing educational traditions. Merchants, religious scholars, and preachers disseminated Islamic teachings through peaceful means, utilizing trade routes, marriage, Sufism, and education. This accommodative approach facilitated Islam's acceptance among the populace, as it did not directly conflict with deeply rooted local cultural values.¹⁴ Initially, Islamic education was conducted in a simple manner within mosques, *surau* (prayer houses), *langgar* (small prayer halls), and the homes of religious scholars. These venues served as centers for learning the Quran,

¹² Hasbullah, *Sejarah Pendidikan Islam di Indonesia: Lintasan Sejarah Pertumbuhan dan Perkembangan* (Jakarta: PT RajaGrafindo Persada, 1995), hlm. 3–12

¹³ Edi Sedyawati dkk., *Sejarah Pendidikan di Indonesia Sebelum Kedatangan Bangsa-Bangsa Barat* (Jakarta: Direktorat Jenderal Kebudayaan, 1991), hlm. 53–68; Abuddin Nata, *Sejarah Pendidikan Islam* (Jakarta: Prenada Media, 2022), hlm. 39–47

¹⁴ A. Mustafa dan Abdullah Aly, *Sejarah Pendidikan Islam di Indonesia* (Bandung: CV Pustaka Setia, 1998), hlm. 21–35; Hasbullah, *Sejarah Pendidikan Islam di Indonesia: Lintasan Sejarah Pertumbuhan dan Perkembangan* (Jakarta: PT RajaGrafindo Persada, 1995), hlm. 13–24

theology (aqidah), acts of worship (ibadah), ethics (akhlaq), and the fundamentals of Islamic knowledge. As the number of Muslims grew, educational activities became more organized with the emergence of the pesantren an Islamic educational institution characterized by a more structured system of instruction, curriculum, and student guidance.¹⁵

The transformation of Islamic education in Indonesia is inseparable from the process of acculturation between Islamic values and local educational traditions. Certain educational patterns established during the Hindu-Buddhist era such as the close bond between teacher and student, the practice of living with the educator, learning through role modeling, and the instilling of moral values were retained and adapted to Islamic teachings. Consequently, the pesantren (Islamic boarding school) did not emerge as a completely new institution; rather, it evolved through a process of adapting to educational systems with which the community was already familiar.¹⁶

Furthermore, Islamic education served as a vehicle for social transformation. Religious scholars (ulama) did not merely teach religious knowledge; they also instilled values such as honesty, tolerance, responsibility, and a spirit of consultation (musyawarah) within the community. Education became a primary means of shaping a Muslim society grounded in good character while simultaneously strengthening Islamic identity across various regions. The success of this educational process helped accelerate the spread of Islam throughout the archipelago without causing significant conflict with local cultures.¹⁷ The transformation of education during the early arrival of Islam in Indonesia demonstrates a continuity between pre-Islamic and Islamic educational systems. This process of adaptation gave rise to a distinctive model of Islamic education one capable of integrating Islamic teachings with local wisdom thereby laying the foundation for the development of Islamic educational institutions, particularly pesantren, which remain a vital part of the national education system to this day.

4. The Contribution of Pre-Islamic Education to the Development of Islamic Education in Indonesia

Pre-Islamic education made a significant contribution to the formation of the Islamic education system in Indonesia. Although Islamic teachings introduced educational values, concepts, and objectives

¹⁵ Haidar Putra Daulay, *Pendidikan Islam di Indonesia: Historis dan Eksistensinya* (Jakarta: Kencana, 2019), hlm. 15–32; Hasbullah, *Sejarah Pendidikan Islam di Indonesia: Lintasan Sejarah Pertumbuhan dan Perkembangan*, hlm. 25–40

¹⁶ Abuddin Nata, *Sejarah Pendidikan Islam* (Jakarta: Prenadamedia Group, 2022), hlm. 41–58; Hasbullah, *Sejarah Pendidikan Islam di Indonesia: Lintasan Sejarah Pertumbuhan dan Perkembangan*, hlm. 33–48.

¹⁷ Moh. Romzi, Shobihatul Fitroh Noviyanti, Juri Wahananto, dan Fitriani, "The Transformation of Islamic Education in Indonesia: A Historical Review and Educational Policy," *Transformation of Islamic Management and Education* 1, no. 2 (2025): 84–96.

that differed from prior belief systems, the process of their dissemination did not eradicate the educational traditions that had already developed within the community. Instead, religious scholars adopted various local educational elements that aligned with Islamic values, thereby creating an educational system that was widely accepted by the public.¹⁸

One key contribution of pre-Islamic education was the establishment of a tradition of respect for teachers as sources of knowledge and guides for life. During the Hindu-Buddhist era, teachers or *resi* held a high status and served as role models for their students. This tradition persisted in Islamic education through figures such as *kiai*, *ustaz*, and *ulama*, who not only taught religious knowledge but also guided the development of the *santri* (students') character, spirituality, and personality. The close bond between educators and students remains a distinctive characteristic of Islamic education in Indonesia to this day.¹⁹

Furthermore, the residential education systems known through *padepokan* (traditional hermitages) and *asrama* (dormitories) during the pre-Islamic era influenced the emergence of the *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school). In the *pesantren* system, students (*santri*) live alongside the *kiai* (religious teacher) to receive continuous education encompassing the study of religious texts, acts of worship, and the cultivation of daily habits. This educational model demonstrates continuity between local educational traditions and the Islamic education system that subsequently developed. The distinction lies in the substance of the teachings, which are grounded in the Qur'an and Sunnah, while the methods of guidance and social interaction preserve positive local values.²⁰

Another contribution is evident in the educational approach that emphasizes character building. Pre-Islamic education instilled values such as courtesy, discipline, responsibility, and respect for norms and customs. As Islam spread across Indonesia, these values were enriched by teachings on *tauhid* (monotheism), *akhlaq* (moral character), honesty, trustworthiness, and *ukhuwah Islamiyah* (Islamic brotherhood). This synthesis gave rise to an educational system oriented not merely toward the mastery of knowledge, but also toward shaping individuals who possess faith and noble character, and who contribute meaningfully to society.²¹

¹⁸ Hasbullah, *Sejarah Pendidikan Islam di Indonesia: Lintasan Sejarah Pertumbuhan dan Perkembangan* (Jakarta: PT RajaGrafindo Persada, 1999), hlm. 29–45.

¹⁹ Abuddin Nata, *Sejarah Pendidikan Islam* (Jakarta: Prenadamedia Group, 2022), hlm. 49–63.

²⁰ Haidar Putra Daulay, *Pendidikan Islam di Indonesia: Historis dan Eksistensinya* (Jakarta: Kencana, 2019), hlm. 33–49.

²¹ Azyumardi Azra, *Pendidikan Islam: Tradisi dan Modernisasi Menuju Milenium Baru* (Jakarta: Kencana, 2012), hlm. 17–35.

In the context of contemporary Islamic education, understanding the historical roots of pre-Islamic education is crucial for grasping the nature of Islamic education in Indonesia which is characterized by moderation, adaptability, and respect for cultural diversity. The process of acculturation that occurred during the early Islamic period demonstrates that education can evolve without erasing a society's cultural identity. Therefore, the modern development of Islamic education in Indonesia must preserve local values that align with Islamic teachings while simultaneously addressing the challenges posed by advancements in science and technology. Pre-Islamic education cannot be viewed as a system disconnected from the evolution of Islamic education in Indonesia. On the contrary, pre-Islamic education serves as one of the historical foundations that shaped the character, institutional structures, and learning culture of the community. Through processes of adaptation and integration undertaken by religious scholars, a distinct Indonesian Islamic education system emerged one that continues to evolve to this day.

D. Conclusion

Education in pre-Islamic Indonesia evolved as an integral part of the community's social, cultural, and religious life. Educational systems operating through families, indigenous communities, and Hindu-Buddhist institutions such as padepokan, asrama, mandala, and vihara demonstrate that a structured educational tradition already existed prior to the arrival of Islam. Education during this era focused on character building, the mastery of knowledge, the instilling of moral values, and respect for teachers as sources of knowledge and role models for life.

The arrival of Islam in Indonesia did not eradicate the existing educational systems; instead, it adapted and integrated local educational elements that were compatible with Islamic teachings. This process of acculturation gave rise to Islamic educational institutions such as surau, langgar, and pesantren, which preserved values such as the teacher as a role model, the close bond between teacher and student, and an educational approach centered on character and moral development. This illustrates that the evolution of Islamic education in Indonesia was the result of a peaceful and gradual transformation. Thus, pre-Islamic education made a significant contribution to shaping the character of Islamic education in Indonesia. The legacy of educational values, traditions, and institutions that developed during the pre-Islamic era served as one of the historical foundations for the emergence of an Islamic education system that is moderate, adaptive, and capable of acculturating with local culture. Understanding these historical roots is essential for

developing an Islamic education system that remains grounded in Islamic values while simultaneously responding to societal dynamics and the changing times.

Table 1. Synthesis of Data on Education during the Pre-Islamic Period in Indonesia

Aspect	Research Findings
Forms of Education	Education was conducted through families, indigenous communities, <i>padepokan</i> (traditional learning centers), residential schools, <i>mandala</i> , and <i>vihara</i> (Buddhist monasteries).
Educational Objectives	To instill moral and religious values, customary traditions, leadership skills, and practical life skills.
Educators	Parents, indigenous community leaders, <i>Brahmins</i> , <i>rishis</i> , and Buddhist monks.
Learners	Family members, members of the wider community, prospective leaders, members of the nobility, and prospective religious teachers or priests.
Learning Materials	Religion, ethics, literature, Sanskrit, philosophy, leadership, agriculture, and practical life skills.
Learning Methods	Lectures, role modeling, memorization, discussion, direct practice, and habituation.
Values Developed	Discipline, responsibility, respect for teachers, spirituality, and morality.

Table 2. Transformation from Pre-Islamic Education to Islamic Education

Pre-Islamic Education	Islamic Education
<i>Padepokan</i> (traditional learning center)	<i>Pesantren</i> (Islamic boarding school)
Residential learning	<i>Pondok santri</i> (student dormitory)
<i>Resi/Brahmana</i> (sages/Brahmins)	<i>Kiai/Ulama</i> (Islamic scholars and religious teachers)
The <i>Vedas</i> and <i>Tripitaka</i>	The Qur'an, Hadith, and classical Islamic texts
Teacher role modeling	<i>Kiai</i> role modeling
Character education	Islamic moral education
Spiritual education	<i>Tawhid</i> and worship education

Table 3. Key Research Findings

Focus of Analysis	Analytical Findings
The State of Pre-Islamic Education	Education had developed through both informal and formal forms, particularly within Hindu-Buddhist religious institutions.
Characteristics of Education	Education emphasized character formation, spirituality, and close relationships between teachers and learners.

Focus of Analysis	Analytical Findings
Transformation Following the Arrival of Islam	Islam adapted existing local educational systems while preserving cultural traditions that were compatible with Islamic teachings.
Contribution to the Development of Islamic Education	These traditions provided an important foundation for the emergence of <i>pesantren</i> , residential education systems, respect for teachers, and character education.

References

- Azra, A. (2012). *Pendidikan Islam: Tradisi dan Modernisasi Menuju Milenium Baru*. Jakarta: Kencana Prenada Media Group.
- Daulay, H. P. (2019). *Pendidikan Islam di Indonesia: Historis dan Eksistensinya*. Jakarta: Kencana.
- Hasbullah. (1999). *Sejarah Pendidikan Islam di Indonesia: Lintasan Sejarah Pertumbuhan dan Perkembangan*. Jakarta: PT RajaGrafindo Persada.
- Moleong, L. J. (2018). *Metodologi Penelitian Kualitatif* (Edisi Revisi). Bandung: PT Remaja Rosdakarya.
- Mustafa, A., & Aly, A. (1998). *Sejarah Pendidikan Islam di Indonesia*. Bandung: CV Pustaka Setia.
- Nata, A. (2022). *Sejarah Pendidikan Islam*. Jakarta: Prenadamedia Group.
- Romzi, M., Noviyanti, S. F., Wahananto, J., & Fitriani. (2025). The Transformation of Islamic Education in Indonesia: A Historical Review and Educational Policy. *Transformation of Islamic Management and Education*, 1(2), 84–96.
- Sedyawati, E., dkk. (1991). *Sejarah Pendidikan di Indonesia Sebelum Kedatangan Bangsa-Bangsa Barat*. Jakarta: Direktorat Jenderal Kebudayaan, Departemen Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan.
- Sugiyono. (2021). *Metode Penelitian Kualitatif: Untuk Penelitian yang Bersifat Eksploratif, Interpretif, Interaktif, dan Konstruktif*. Bandung: Alfabeta.
- Zed, M. (2004). *Metode Penelitian Kepustakaan*. Jakarta: Yayasan Obor Indonesia.