

## **Education as a Da'wah Media: An Analysis of Ahmad Dahlan's Reform Movement**

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### **Abstract**

This article examines the educational reform ideas and movements of Ahmad Dahlan as an integral part of his Islamic da'wah mission. The study focuses on how Ahmad Dahlan formulated a modern education system that integrated Islamic values with the Western education system in response to the educational dualism prevalent during the colonial period. A qualitative-descriptive approach was employed. The findings show that Ahmad Dahlan not only purified Islamic teachings from irrelevant practices but also carried out reforms by establishing a progressive Islamic education system—despite initial opposition from many. He founded Madrasah Ibtidaiyah Diniyah Islamiyah in 1911 and established Muhammadiyah in 1912 as a vehicle for education-based da'wah. His innovations included an integrated curriculum combining religious and general sciences, systematic classical methods, and instilling exemplary values in teachers. Thus, for Ahmad Dahlan, education served as a strategic means of da'wah to educate, liberate, and advance the ummah spiritually and socially.

**Keywords:** da'wah; education; renewal; ahmad dahlan; muhammadiyah

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### **Introduction**

Da'wah and social issues, such as education, are closely related because education can be a tangible form of da'wah in society. This means that a dai (preacher) or reformer does not only deliver da'wah in the sense of inviting people to worship God and cultivate good morals, but also encourages the importance of education in people's lives and realizes it as an institutionalized form of da'wah (through education, schools, Islamic boarding schools, etc.). This is important because education is one of the main keys to building an advanced Islamic civilization.

In the context of da'wah, Islamic scholars, thinkers, or reformers must invite the people to love knowledge, engage in lifelong learning, and improve the quality of education. Da'wah must emphasize the importance of education as part of religious obligation, as Islam, stated in QS. Al-Mujadilah verse 11, strongly underscores the importance of knowledge, both for men and women. It is through education that society, and Muslims in particular, can escape the shackles of ignorance, the chains of poverty, and the confines of oppressive injustice.

Historically, the education system in Indonesia developed into two main paths. First, pesantren education focused on religious teachings. Second, Western education which was secular. By the early 20th century, the gap between those receiving secular and those receiving religion-based education became increasingly apparent. These differences were reflected in various aspects, such as social and intellectual activities, dress, speech, lifestyle, and mindset.

The dualistic education system created two distinct social classes. On the one hand, an elitist group emerged from modern colonial education. On the other hand, there were groups who held onto traditions and culture but tended to resist change. As a result,

Islamic sciences and general sciences developed in two opposite directions. This separation between religious and general sciences brought Indonesian education to a state of stagnation, rendering it unable to produce scientists responsible for social life or environmental sustainability. Similarly, religious education was too separate from the social sciences and humanities; this condition resulted in religious experts who were less sensitive to social problems and unprepared to face the challenges of modern times. Yet, from an Islamic perspective, true knowledge is essentially inherent in the content of the Qur'an (Huda, 2019).

In response to this reality, the Muhammadiyah Islamic organization founded by Ahmad Dahlan emerged as a movement seeking to overcome these differences and provide a new direction in education. The two education systems were based on two different sources of legitimacy: pesantren rooted in the legitimacy of Islamic society, while colonial Western education derived legitimacy from the government. Although from different sources, both shared a similar goal, namely to develop personalities and empower humans to sustain and advance their lives, while supporting the sustainability of their communities. Responding to these conditions, Muhammadiyah undertook concrete action, including the implementation of an integrated and progressive education system (Suryana, 2014).

The modern Western-style education in the archipelago at that time tended to produce graduates who were individualistic, elitist, intellectualist, and who ignored religious values and morality. This situation was a particular concern, especially given the discrimination in colonial education which caused many natives from the lower classes to be unable to receive any education at all, leaving their lives as lowly laborers for the Dutch. This condition troubled Ahmad Dahlan.

Based on this description, it is necessary to examine the education reform movement developed by Ahmad Dahlan through the Muhammadiyah organization. Therefore, this article aims to examine the reform of Islamic education undertaken by Ahmad Dahlan. This article uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive-narrative method.

## **Method**

This study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive-analytical method. The qualitative approach was chosen to enable an in-depth exploration of Ahmad Dahlan's educational reform ideas as a historical and social phenomenon within the context of Islamic da'wah. The descriptive-analytical method is used to systematically describe Ahmad Dahlan's thoughts and movements while analyzing their significance for the development of Islamic education in colonial Indonesia.

The data in this study consist of secondary sources, including books, journal articles, biographical writings, historical documents, and official publications related to Ahmad Dahlan and Muhammadiyah. Primary data sources include authoritative biographical works on Ahmad Dahlan, Muhammadiyah organizational records, and contemporary historical accounts from the early 20th century. Additional data were

obtained from academic journals and online resources published by recognized institutions, including the official Muhammadiyah website.

Data collection was conducted through library research (*studi pustaka*), which involved identifying, selecting, and critically evaluating relevant literature. The collected data were then analyzed using content analysis techniques. The analytical process followed three stages: first, data reduction, which involved selecting and simplifying information relevant to the research focus; second, data display, which presented the condensed information in a coherent narrative form; and third, conclusion drawing and verification, which involved interpreting the findings and ensuring their consistency with the evidence.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, source triangulation was applied by comparing information from multiple independent sources. Furthermore, the analysis maintained a historical-contextual perspective, situating Ahmad Dahlan's thoughts within the social, political, and educational conditions of early 20th-century Indonesia.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Biographical Background of Ahmad Dahlan**

Ahmad Dahlan, whose real name was Muhammad Darwis, was born on August 1, 1868 in Kampung Kauman, Yogyakarta, into a religious family environment. His father, Kiai Abu Bakar, was the imam and khatib at the Grand Mosque of the Yogyakarta Palace, while his mother, Siti Aminah, was the daughter of Kiai Ibrahim, a court official at the Yogyakarta Palace. Ahmad Dahlan was the 12th descendant of Maulana Malik Ibrahim, one of the Wali Songo instrumental in spreading Islam in Java. From an early age, he was known as an intelligent child of noble character and a soft heart. By the age of eight, he could read the Qur'an fluently and often helped his peers in solving various problems (Rahman & Nelson, 2025, p. 76).

### **Muhammadiyah as a Multi-Dimensional Organization**

Muhammadiyah, founded by Ahmad Dahlan, conducts activities in the fields of tablig, education, social, economic, and political affairs. Thus, to outsiders, Muhammadiyah is known as a religious, social, and educational organization. This multifaceted character of Muhammadiyah (*dzu wujuh*) — to borrow a term from Mukti Ali — is a logical consequence of the conception of da'wah that it adheres to. For Muhammadiyah, da'wah is the entire process of inviting people to Islam and can be done through various aspects of community development activities. In this case, Muhammadiyah's activities in the fields of tablig, education, socio-economics, and politics are held for the interests and purpose of da'wah. In this regard, it can be said that under its various guises, Muhammadiyah is displayed for *wijhah*, namely da'wah. It can also be understood that the dimension of da'wah in Muhammadiyah's activities is present in material fields, such as education, social, economic, and political affairs. Muhammadiyah's activities in these fields carry the same importance as conventional da'wah (Syamsuddin, 1990, pp. vii-viii).

### **Ahmad Dahlan as a Practical Thinker**

Ahmad Dahlan's renewed thinking on education is not written in books because he was not a writer. Rather, he is better known as a practical figure in the Islamic movement. His thoughts can be known through books written about his life by the next generation and his closest associates, who are sources of information (Lenggono, 2018).

Even so, the essence of deep thought and reflection is still present in every step of his struggle. Ahmad Dahlan was a combination of a thinker and a practitioner who grounded the teachings of the Qur'an through concrete actions, yet still based on intellectual processes and contextual understanding. He is considered a prophetic social scientist because he was able to formulate a concept of social change that remains relevant to this day. The intellectual principles that he bequeathed—such as a return to the Qur'an and Sunnah as a way of liberation, revitalization of *ijtihad*, rationality in religion, and dialogue between civilizations—have become the foundation of the Muhammadiyah intellectual movement. Through this spirit, Muhammadiyah continues to move and adapt to the changing times, making the legacy of Ahmad Dahlan's thoughts and actions an inspiration to bring progress and renewal in the lives of the people and the nation (Inspiration, 2023).

### **Teaching in Dutch Schools**

Ahmad Dahlan's first educational reform idea was to include Islamic religious education in schools run by the Dutch government. At that time, the Dutch government included only general knowledge in education. He asked the Dutch government for permission to teach religious sciences in its modern school. The request was immediately approved by the Dutch government because it thought that Ahmad Dahlan's efforts would be in vain. The Dutch government thought this way because, at that time, students were more interested in general knowledge alone, and Islam was seen negatively and as outdated compared to modern Dutch schools. However, the Dutch government's thinking proved wrong because it was Ahmad Dahlan's first step in realizing his dream to improve the nation's education (Arofah & Jamu'in, 2015).

### **Periodization of Muhammadiyah Educational Renewal**

In fact, the renewal of Muhammadiyah's education can be divided into four main periods: the pioneering period (1900-1923), the development period (1923-1970), the institutionalization period (1970-1998), and the transformation period (1998-present). The pioneering period began when Ahmad Dahlan pioneered modern Islamic education as a solution to the backwardness of the natives, by establishing *Madrasah Ibtidaiyah Diniyah Islamiyah* (1911) and Muhammadiyah (1912). He combined the *pesantren* system with Western school methods, although he initially faced rejection. This idea became an important milestone in the reform of Islamic education. The development period was marked by the expansion of Muhammadiyah schools amidst political turmoil and increasing acceptance of the integration of religious and general sciences. During the

institutionalization period, Muhammadiyah schools grew rapidly to reach remote parts of the country, although they tended to follow the pattern of government schools. Meanwhile, the transformation period brought new challenges due to the free school policy and the emergence of other private Islamic schools (Editorial Team, n.d.). Although the madrasah founded by Ahmad Dahlan was small and simple, education management was carried out in a modern manner using new methods and curriculum. Learning facilities also followed modern styles, such as benches, whiteboards, and chairs (Saerozi, 2013).

### **Integrating Religious and General Sciences**

Through Muhammadiyah, Ahmad Dahlan designed a modern education that taught not only religion and nationalism, but also general knowledge and life skills relevant to the times. Ahmad Dahlan's thought, born from criticism of the dualism of colonial and traditional education, gave birth to a modern Islamic education model that bridges the two. He combined classical methods, modern teaching materials, and the building of strong student personalities as the foundation of the nation's progress. The education movement that he pioneered not only provided access to education for the natives, but also instilled the spirit of change, making Muhammadiyah a pioneer of the national education system that remains progressive and relevant (Hidayatullah, 2020).

In carrying out his mission, Ahmad Dahlan applied a *self-corrective* approach to Muslims. He believed that most Muslims, especially traditional groups, were too focused on the spiritual aspects of daily life. As a result, there was stagnation and even regression in various areas of people's lives, especially when compared to the progress of other groups in economic and social aspects. Ahmad Dahlan's interest in the effectiveness and power of the Western education system, as seen in Dutch schools, inspired him to develop a similar educational pattern. However, this pattern was not applied rawly; on the contrary, he strengthened the system with progressive Islamic values, which became the main foundation of Muhammadiyah education (Husin, 2023).

Ahmad Dahlan created a modern school imbued with the teachings of Islamic education. According to him, fixing the native education system was the best way to build a nation. The goal of a truly perfect education according to Ahmad Dahlan was to produce people who not only understand worldly material and general science, but also understand spirituality, religious science, and the science of the hereafter. At that time particularly, Ahmad Dahlan combined two education systems—the Dutch education system with the conventional education system—which was something that had never been done by Islamic educational institutions before (Husin, 2023).

With the establishment of an organization, Ahmad Dahlan hoped to ensure the sustainability of Madrasah Ibtidaiyah Diniyah Islamiyah. The organization was named Muhammadiyah with the hope that its members could emulate the Prophet Muhammad SAW. Then, in 1918, Ahmad Dahlan pioneered a high school called Al-Qismul Arqa and in 1920 changed its name to Pondok Muhammadiyah, which was the forerunner of cadre

education for Muhammadiyah Mualimin and Mualimat. He dared to borrow the classical system and tools or elements of Dutch education, including integrating secular and religious sciences simultaneously. This new Islamic education experiment initially received a strong reaction from students because it was considered too Dutch and potentially damaging to the structure of Islamic education. However, because of Ahmad Dahlan's patience and persistence in fighting for Islamic education and helping the natives of Indonesia rise from ignorance, Ahmad Dahlan's idea was finally accepted by the community (Al-Aydrus et al., 2022).

According to Ahmad Dahlan, many Islamic practices in society were not in accordance with the teachings of the Qur'an and Hadith, which motivated him to build Islamic education. In addition, his extensive interaction with different types of people pushed him to make changes in various fields, including education (Mayarisa, 2016).

### **Educational Objectives and Methods**

The Islamic education designed by Ahmad Dahlan aimed to return the thinking of the Indonesian people to a correct understanding of Islamic sharia and keep them away from the destructive influences of Christianization, liberalization, and heresies that were very rampant at that time. Furthermore, the educational goals designed by Ahmad Dahlan also aimed to free the community from ignorance and poverty of mind so that it could re-ignite the fighting spirit necessary to fight against colonialism. The learning materials used by Ahmad Dahlan included faith, worship, muamalah, morals, and science. As for his teaching method, it was not only in-class through texts, but also involved direct practice; for example, when studying surah Al-Maun, Ahmad Dahlan told his students to look for orphans in the market to support (Akhyar et al., 2024).

In the field of education, Ahmad Dahlan truly tried his best to overhaul the Islamic education system, which at that time was known as the cottage system that was obsolete and considered outdated compared to Dutch education. The education system was then replaced with one in accordance with the needs of the times. Hence, modern educational institutions were born that in practice were able to combine religious sciences (Islam) with modern sciences in accordance with the development and demands of the times (Santosa, 2007, p. 12).

Ahmad Dahlan was a true teacher. His concern for education arose not only from his concern for the condition of Muslims who were ignorant, dichotomous, and backward at that time, but also from his belief that Islam would automatically advance if the minds of its people were enlightened. Ahmad Dahlan established an integrative school that brought together Western religious education and science in what he named the madrasah system. However, before establishing the school, his teachers advised Ahmad Dahlan to establish a permanent organization that would oversee it. The purpose of the organization was none other than to avoid the fate of many Islamic boarding schools that ceased operating after the owner or leader died.

Therefore, Ahmad Dahlan joined an organization called Budi Utomo in 1909. Apart from being a da'wah strategy to enable Islamic lessons to be taught in Budi Utomo's office, government offices, and Dutch government schools that were difficult to access for teachers from the majority of the native population, Ahmad Dahlan's joining of Budi Utomo was a concrete effort to learn about organizational systems and modern management governance (Anshoriy, 2010).

### **Ahmad Dahlan's Teaching Method**

In addition to thinking farsightedly by initiating the concept of madrasah, Ahmad Dahlan was an ideal teacher who always had various teaching variations. When his madrasah was boycotted by the community because it was considered un-Islamic, causing students to be absent, Ahmad Dahlan did not hesitate to come to the students' homes to personally bring them to school. He did not remain silent even though the conditions were not conducive. In addition, he often invited his students to study outside the classroom in excursion activities; as reported by *the Bromartani newspaper* on September 15, 1915, Ahmad Dahlan was pickpocketed when he invited students to Sriwedari Park in Solo (Afandi, 2022). Ahmad Dahlan did not only teach religious science or various general knowledge in the classroom but also picked up students who could not come to school, and even combined lessons with excursion activities, making the teaching process smooth and fun.

### **Adaptive Method and Colonial Challenges**

The transformation of Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia made a significant leap through the reform movement spearheaded by Ahmad Dahlan. Starting from traditional models such as pesantren and madrasas, Muhammadiyah creatively and adaptively designed a modern Islamic education system that combined religious values with general knowledge. Researchers such as Karel A. Steenbrink have honestly acknowledged that after the 1930s, the most prominent Islamic education movement in the country was the one carried out by Muhammadiyah.

Even so, Muhammadiyah's efforts to educate Muslims and break down social barriers did not always go smoothly because it had to deal with restrictive colonial regulations, such as the Teachers' Ordinance (1905) which controlled the content and standards of religious teaching, and the Wild School Ordinance (1932) which restricted the operation of bumiputra (native) schools. These colonial policies posed a severe challenge to many Islamic educational institutions, which eventually experienced much stagnation and even closure. However, Muhammadiyah schools survived and even developed rapidly because they had high adaptability, the ability to carry out educational ijtihad, and the ability of their managers to negotiate with the colonial authorities. Their toughness in translating the concept of foreign education into a contextual and relevant system made Muhammadiyah schools superior and dominant in the development of Islamic education in Indonesia at that time. This

success is clear evidence that Muhammadiyah played a key role in the progressive transformation of Islamic education (Mu'arif, 2024a, pp. 8-9).

### **Legacy and Impact of Ahmad Dahlan's Educational Reform**

Without ruling out the contributions of other Indonesian Muslim intellectuals, Ahmad Dahlan's thoughts on Islamic education can be considered the initial milestone of the revival of Islamic education in Indonesia (Mainuddin & Septiani, 2022). More than a hundred years after its pioneering, the modernization of education that integrates Islamic moral values with Western science has had a great impact on the educational progress of the Indonesian nation. Muhammadiyah, as a movement pioneered by Ahmad Dahlan, has played an important role in shaping an Indonesian society that is not only noble but also intellectually intelligent. Ahmad Dahlan emerged throughout his life as a reformer and reviver of Islam in Indonesia, considering that the light of Islam in the early 20th century began to fade due to the behavior of the people. Therefore, Ahmad Dahlan urged Muslims to return to being guided by the Qur'an and authentic hadith so that the ummah would be ready and strong to face the challenges of the times (Abror, 2025, p. 13).

Through Ahmad Dahlan's hard work, tens of thousands of educated people have been born from all levels of Muhammadiyah education, ranging from kindergarten to higher education. His idea to modernize Islamic education has now shown remarkable results. Based on data from the Muhammadiyah Primary and Secondary Education Council (Dikdasmen), to date, 163 universities, 554 vocational schools, 558 high schools, 1,128 junior high schools, and 1,094 kindergartens have been established throughout Indonesia. Ahmad Dahlan's noble ideal of providing quality education for the natives has now been realized. The modernization of Islamic education carried out by Muhammadiyah does not mean fully adopting the Western system without criticism, but rather combining it with strong Islamic moral values. This is what makes Muhammadiyah education different: modern, but still rooted in Islamic teachings. Muhammadiyah education is also inclusive and open not only to Muslims, but it serves students from various religious backgrounds, including thousands of international students studying at Muhammadiyah universities in various regions. In the context of national education, Ahmad Dahlan is recognized as one of the important figures who made a real contribution to educating the nation's life. Through the Muhammadiyah education movement that he founded, he left a great legacy for the future of Indonesia (Wasitaatmadja, 2025).

### **"Be a Progressive Kiai"**

The educational reform pioneered by Ahmad Dahlan embodied the idea of "progressive Islam" which is now the spirit of the Muhammadiyah movement. This was affirmed by the Chairman of the Central Executive of Muhammadiyah, Syamsul Anwar, who stated that the concept is not new, but has been alive since the birth of Muhammadiyah. In one teaching meeting with female students, Ahmad Dahlan delivered a message in Javanese: "*Dadiyo kyai sing maju lan aja kesel nyambut*

*gawe kanggo Muhammadiyah*", which means, "Be a progressive kiai and never get tired of working for Muhammadiyah." This message reflects his vision of the importance of the spirit of progress in preaching and building civilization. The idea of progressive Islam emerged as a response to the condition of Muslims in his time who were still trapped in traditional educational patterns. In the midst of this reality, Ahmad Dahlan presented a revolutionary idea: combining the modern European-style education system with Islamic values. Even though he faced rejection from some segments of the community, he remained firm and wise in responding to it. With a creative and open approach, Ahmad Dahlan succeeded in building a new education system that is modern, rational, but still based on Islamic teachings. From here, the foundation of the revival of Islamic education in Indonesia began to grow and develop (Echo, 2023).

On another occasion, Ahmad Dahlan also conveyed advice that reflected the spirit of education and service: "Muhammadiyah today is different from the Muhammadiyah of the future. So continue to go to school to study knowledge anywhere. Become a teacher, return to Muhammadiyah. Become a doctor, return to Muhammadiyah. Become a master, engineer, etc., return to Muhammadiyah" (Mu'arif, 2024b, p. 10).

Towards the end of his life, Ahmad Dahlan's health declined. In 1922, he was advised to rest in Tretes, Malang. However, despite his illness, he was still present and gave a speech at the opening of the Muhammadiyah annual meeting in 1923. In his will, Ahmad Dahlan emphasized the importance of continuing to strive to uphold the teachings of Islam and correct deviations through Muhammadiyah. He died on February 23, 1923 and was buried in Yogyakarta. After his death, Muhammadiyah continued to grow and develop by establishing a number of autonomous organizations such as the Muhammadiyah Student Association (IPM), Muhammadiyah Youth, Tapak Suci, Nasyiatul Aisyiyah, and the Muhammadiyah Student Association (IMM) (Tim Redaksi, 2009, p. 11).

## **Conclusion**

Ahmad Dahlan was a reformer of Islamic education who successfully transformed the traditional education system into a modern one relevant to the needs of his time, marked by the establishment of modern madrasas. Through his integrative ideas, he combined Islamic values with the Western education system, thereby bridging the educational dualism between pesantren and colonial secular schools. His educational reforms included curriculum innovation, practical teaching methods, a dialogical approach, and the application of teacher ethics that prioritized exemplary behavior and partiality toward the native population. The main contribution of this study lies in its systematic analysis of how Ahmad Dahlan operationalized education as a strategic da'wah medium, moving beyond conventional preaching to institutional transformation.

His reform began when he taught religion in Dutch schools, founded Madrasah Ibtidaiyah Diniyah Islamiyah (1911), and established Muhammadiyah (1912) as a forum for education-based da'wah. Ahmad Dahlan built a modern madrasah system oriented not only to the mastery of religious knowledge but also to general knowledge and life skills—

an unprecedented approach at the time. This model has now expanded widely through thousands of Muhammadiyah schools throughout Indonesia. The implications of this study suggest that integrating religious and general sciences within a single educational framework remains a viable strategy for addressing educational dualism in contemporary Muslim societies. Ahmad Dahlan's educational model thus serves as an important milestone in the history of progressive national education reform.

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