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The Historicity and Educational Role of Muhammadiyah: A Qualitative Study of a Modernist Islamic Organization in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the historical and educational role of Muhammadiyah, founded by Ahmad Dahlan in 1912 in Yogyakarta as a modernist Islamic movement inspired by Muhammad Abduh and Jamal al-Din al-Afghani. The research aims to analyze Muhammadiyah's ideological foundations, institutional development, and contributions to education and social reform. Using a qualitative descriptive and interpretive design, secondary sources were analyzed through content analysis to trace their evolution. The findings reveal that Muhammadiyah integrates religious purification with rationalist theology and progressive education, establishing schools, universities, healthcare facilities, and community services. Its transition from strict puritanism to embracing pluralism, democracy, and human rights has enabled it to maintain relevance in contemporary Indonesia. This was achieved by harmonizing Qur'an-Sunnah-based principles with modern sciences and civic engagement. The study concludes that Muhammadiyah exemplifies Islamic modernism, demonstrating how educational empowerment and social responsibility can strengthen religious identity while advancing national development.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Muhammadiyah emerged in 1912 in Yogyakarta, founded by Ahmad Dahlan as a reformist Islamic organization with the mission of conducting religious outreach across Indonesia. Its establishment during the Dutch colonial period was a response to prevailing socio-economic inequalities, limited access to education, and widespread traditional religious practices that deviated from Islamic fundamentals. Muhammadiyah combined a hygienic religious perspective and rational teachings with social reform initiatives, medical services, and educational programs to improve the well-being of Muslim communities (Afsah & Kaneko, 2025).

The rise of Muhammadiyah was closely linked to broader Islamic modernization trends inspired by leading reformist thinkers such as Muhammad Abduh and Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, whose scholarship promoted scientific inquiry and rational understanding in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Ahmad Dahlan adapted these reformist ideas to the Indonesian context, rejecting superstitions and cultural practices deemed inconsistent with Islamic teachings, and instead prioritizing the Qur'an and Sunnah as the foundation of religious study (Hamzah & Bakar, 2025). This approach enabled Muhammadiyah to mature into a modern Islamic organization that embraced contemporary principles while safeguarding doctrinal authenticity.

In contemporary Indonesia, Muhammadiyah is recognized as a major socio-religious force, managing an extensive network of educational institutions, hospitals, universities, and nonprofit organizations (Dan *et al.*, 2024). Its contributions extend beyond religious life to shaping civil society, influencing public policy, and fostering interfaith dialogue. The historical trajectory of Muhammadiyah can be examined through qualitative inquiry into its foundational principles, organizational growth, and enduring influence on Indonesian culture (Febriana *et al.*, 2025).

The purpose of this study is to analyze the historical development, ideological foundations, and educational contributions of Muhammadiyah within the broader framework of Islamic reformism. The novelty of this research lies in its integrated approach, combining historical analysis with an emphasis on Muhammadiyah's role in advancing education as a vehicle for religious modernization and national development, thus offering a model for faith-based organizations in pluralistic societies. This study adds new information regarding Islamic education as reported elsewhere (Kayode & Jibril, 2023; Hidayat *et al.*, 2024; Daud, 2025; thoriq *et al.*, 2023; Fauji & Nugraha, 2024; Rohim & Nugraha, 2024).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The body of literature on Muhammadiyah highlights its effective synthesis of modernity and Islam. Scholars have examined the organization from multiple perspectives, framing it as a modern Islamic movement dedicated to social transformation, educational advancement, and the rational interpretation of religion. Ahmad Dahlan's transformative pilgrimage to Mecca exposed him to reformist movements, inspiring his mission to restore Islamic traditions across Indonesia.

Muhammadiyah's contribution to Muslim intellectualism is reflected in its elevation of civic leadership to academic recognition and the reshaping of religious authority (Bachtiar *et al.*, 2024). Its education system integrated natural sciences, mathematics, and civic education alongside secular subjects, distinguishing it from traditional Islamic boarding schools and cultivating a generation of professional, reformist Muslims (Making *et al.*, 2024).

The ideological evolution of Muhammadiyah included an early reluctance toward collaborative approaches before embracing pluralism and national development objectives (Hidayat *et al.*, 2025). The organization has maintained Islamic teachings while supporting democratic values and human rights (Hidayat *et al.*, 2025). Anthropological research reveals how Muhammadiyah's scientific theology clashed with mystical elements in traditional Javanese Islam, yet succeeded in establishing a rational religious identity popular among the urban middle class.

Muhammadiyah is also recognized as a cultural force in shaping Islamic discourse during Indonesia's democratic era, promoting interfaith activities, social equity, and disaster relief programs (Rijal, 2025). A comprehensive understanding of Muhammadiyah requires examining both its local heritage and its engagement with global Islamic thought.

In a transnational context, Islamic reformist ideas traveled through global networks and influenced Muslim organizations, including Muhammadiyah, across Southeast Asia (Fauzia, 2018). The organization redefined Islamic authority and integrated modern learning into religious education, producing a new cadre of professional Muslim leaders (Latief & Nashir, 2020). Muhammadiyah's ideological adaptation over time has balanced religious foundations with political and social change (Arifin *et al.*, 2022). The movement's engagement with Javanese traditions appealed to the urban middle class through rationalist and puritanical teachings (Zulfa *et al.*, 2025).

Muhammadiyah's role in civil society and democracy is evident in its humanitarian programs, educational and health services, and facilitation of interfaith dialogue as part of its commitment to national progress and social justice (Arifin *et al.*, 2025). Its ecological initiatives, including the establishment of the Environmental Council in 2005 and the Muhammadiyah Disaster Management Centre in 2007, demonstrate a "Green Faith" model based on thorough understanding, voluntary participation, and financial independence, offering a blueprint for environmental responsibility in Muslim communities worldwide (https://Papers.Ssrn.Com/Sol3/JelJour_Results.Cfm?Form_name=journalBrowseandjournal_id=4735798, 20 March 2025, 18.).

3. METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research design that combined descriptive and interpretative approaches. The analysis relied on secondary data from scholarly works on Muhammadiyah, including journal articles, books, and historical documents, to construct a comprehensive understanding of its development as a modern Islamic organization within the Indonesian context (Afsah & Kaneko, 2025; Hamzah & Bakar, 2025; Dan *et al.*, 2024; Febriana *et al.*, 2025; Hidayat *et al.*, 2025).

A qualitative content analysis was applied to examine textual materials, enabling the identification of semantic meanings and the tracing of ideological and institutional developments over time. This approach was chosen because it aligns with interpretivist paradigms in historical and sociological studies of religion, emphasizing contextual understanding rather than numerical measurement.

The study was guided by four main research questions:

- (i) How did Muhammadiyah emerge and evolve within the context of Islamic reformism in Indonesia?
- (ii) What are the key ideological and institutional characteristics that distinguish Muhammadiyah as a modernist Islamic organization?
- (iii) How have Muhammadiyah's contributions to education, social welfare, and civic engagement shaped its role in contemporary Indonesian society?

- (iv) In what ways have scholars interpreted the historical significance and adaptability of Muhammadiyah over time? (Hamzah & Bakar, 2025)

The overall analysis was framed by a theoretical model that views Muhammadiyah simultaneously as a religious organization and a socio-political movement rooted in Islamic reformism. Its intellectual origins are linked to the reformist ideas of Muhammad Abduh and Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, while its current practices reflect a balance between doctrinal purity and social transformation (Afsah & Kaneko, 2025).

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Object of The Research

This research focuses on Muhammadiyah as a significant organization within modernist Islam that has guided Indonesia toward shaping its religious national identity, developing its education system, and contributing to socio-political progress. It examines the historical development, ideological foundations, and transformative impact of Muhammadiyah within the broader framework of Islamic reformism.

Muhammadiyah was founded in 1912 in Yogyakarta by Ahmad Dahlan with the mission to cleanse Islam from syncretic practices and false beliefs while simultaneously promoting modern medical and educational programs (Afsah & Kaneko, 2025). Under Dahlan's leadership, the organization embraced reformist thought from Muhammad Abduh and Jamal al-Din al-Afghani as its philosophical foundation (Afsah & Kaneko, 2025).

The movement's adoption and adaptation of reformist concepts created an Indonesian model that blended rationalist and textualist approaches with active social engagement, distinguishing it from traditionalist Islamic movements. Its extensive social services and educational institutions further set it apart from other rationalist Islamic organizations (Hamzah & Bakar, 2025).

Over time, Muhammadiyah evolved from a purifying religious movement into a dominant civic organization, now embracing democratic values, human rights, and pluralism alongside its theological principles. Today, it operates thousands of schools, hospitals, and social programs that align with Indonesia's national development agenda.

The organization's adaptive capacity is evident in its response to changing social and political contexts through structural reforms and the development of contemporary scholarly thought. Anthropological research also highlights how Muhammadiyah navigates tensions between its modernist doctrine and traditional Javanese religious customs, developing religious values that harmonize with Indonesian nationalism (Rijal, 2025).

This study positions Muhammadiyah as an exemplary case of Islamic modernism, uniting orthodox religious principles with the capacity to adapt to evolving political and social demands. By integrating traditional values with reformist innovation, Muhammadiyah demonstrates how faith-based movements can maintain theological integrity while expanding their public outreach (Rijal, 2025).

4.2. Framework of Muhammadiyah Organization

The framework in **Figure 1** illustrates the organizational structure and principles of Muhammadiyah, divided into four core dimensions: Ideological Foundation, Institutional Structure, Societal Functions, and Adaptive Strategies.

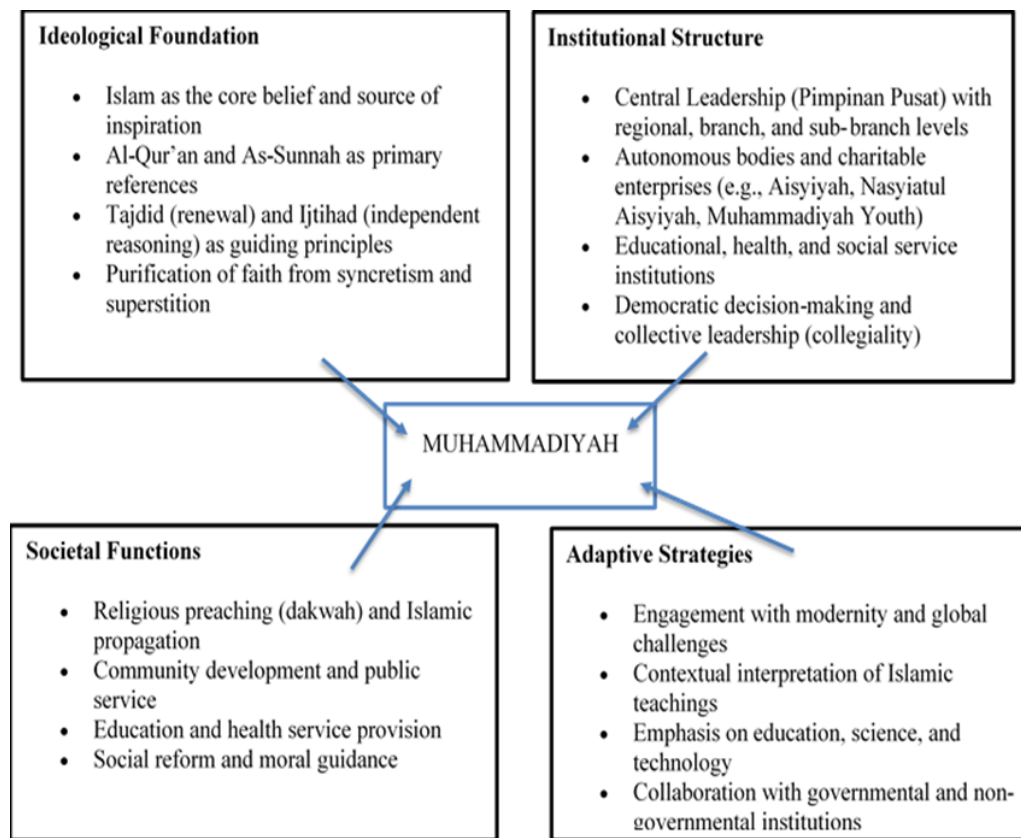


Figure 1. Framework.

The framework above illustrates Muhammadiyah's organizational structure, which operates through four fundamental dimensions: ideological foundation, institutional structure, social responsibilities, and adaptive strategies. At its core, Muhammadiyah upholds Islam as its central belief, with the Qur'an and the Sunnah serving as the primary sources guiding all activities. Its teachings are rooted in tajdid (renewal) and ijtihad (independent reasoning), reflecting a commitment to purifying the faith from un-Islamic elements and restoring authentic Islamic principles.

The organization maintains a leadership system known as *pimpinan pusat*, supported by a hierarchical network that includes regional offices and sub-branches. It also encompasses independent bodies such as Aisyiyah, Nasyiatul Aisyiyah, and Muhammadiyah Youth. In its operations, Muhammadiyah manages a wide range of educational institutions and healthcare facilities, as well as social service organizations, all governed by democratic decision-making processes and collegial leadership.

In the social domain, Muhammadiyah carries out three core functions: conducting Islamic preaching (dakwah), delivering healthcare and education services, and implementing community development initiatives coupled with moral reform to guide the Indonesian population.

The organization's adaptive strategies demonstrate its commitment to remaining relevant in contemporary contexts. Muhammadiyah addresses modern global challenges through contextual Islamic interpretation, while promoting educational advancement and technological innovation in collaboration with local and international partners.

Collectively, these dimensions enable Muhammadiyah to maintain a balanced identity as a modern Islamic organization that preserves religious adherence while actively engaging in civic and social transformation.

4.3. Discussion

The qualitative evidence from this investigation demonstrates that Muhammadiyah has evolved into a multidimensional socio-cultural organization that actively contributes to shaping Indonesia's contemporary cultural, political, and educational systems. Historical assessments, combined with prior scholarly analyses, show that Muhammadiyah defines its core identity through religious purification initiatives, rationalist reform projects, and civic engagement.

Founded in 1912, Muhammadiyah emerged as a critical response to religious syncretism and socio-economic stagnation during the colonial period. Ahmad Dahlan's vision, influenced by reformist scholars Muhammad Abduh and Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, emphasized Qur'an- and Sunnah-based teachings to promote scientific education (Hamzah & Bakar, 2025). The organization established modern schools, clinics, and community assistance programs, distinguishing itself from traditional Islamic peasant education systems.

Content-based analysis reveals that Muhammadiyah's organizational framework supports local autonomy and decentralization, allowing regional branches to develop diverse approaches while remaining within Islamic principles. This structural flexibility enabled the movement to flourish among middle-class Muslims in Java, as it merged the pursuit of a modern, rational faith with local leadership control.

Adaptation has been a defining feature of Muhammadiyah's resilience. The organization gradually shifted from strict puritanism toward embracing pluralistic democracy and human rights, aligning itself with Indonesia's democratic transitions while preserving its theological foundations (Hamzah & Bakar, 2025).

Anthropological studies highlight how Muhammadiyah successfully navigated tensions between mystical Islam and its rationalist doctrine. By emphasizing discipline, social ethics, and critical thinking, the movement appealed to urban professionals and solidified its role as a stabilizing force in a modernizing society (Https://Papers.Ssrn.Com/Sol3/JelJour_Results.Cfm?Form_name=journalBrowseandjournal_id=4735798, 20 March 2025, 18.).

As a civil society institution, Muhammadiyah engages in humanitarian work, disaster response, and interfaith dialogue, demonstrating the practical application of Islamic values in contemporary contexts. Its initiatives in gender equality, socio-economic development, and democratic empowerment further underscore its dual identity as both a faith-based and community-driven organization.

Overall, Muhammadiyah's sustained influence stems from its ability to integrate Islamic traditions with socially transformative practices. Through robust institutional frameworks, it has established systems that empower diverse communities to live out their faith while adapting to evolving social realities. This trajectory illustrates how Islamic modernism can flourish in traditional contexts by engaging constructively with modern challenges.

5. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study confirm that Muhammadiyah has played a pivotal role in Indonesia's religious, educational, and civic development since its establishment in 1912. Guided by reformist Islamic thought, the organization has successfully integrated Qur'an-Sunnah-based principles with modern sciences, thereby advancing progressive education alongside social reform. Through its extensive network of schools, universities, healthcare facilities, and community services, Muhammadiyah has demonstrated that religious purity and educational innovation can coexist to strengthen both individual and societal capacities.

Its adaptive approach (transitioning from puritanism to embracing pluralism, democracy, and human rights) has ensured continued relevance in a rapidly changing socio-political environment. As a model of Islamic modernism, Muhammadiyah illustrates how education, when combined with social responsibility, can preserve religious identity while contributing to national development and global discourse on faith-based civic engagement.

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7. AUTHORS' NOTE

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. Authors confirmed that the paper was free of plagiarism.

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