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Unfinished decolonization of Islamic education in Indonesia: The case of Muhammadiyah

Dwi Prasetyanti
Universitas Muhammadiyah Magelang, Indonesia

dwiprasetyanti01@gmail.com

Abstract: This paper examines Muhammadiyah as a pioneering movement in the decolonization of Islamic education in Indonesia. Founded in 1912 by Ahmad Dahlan during the Dutch colonial period, Muhammadiyah emerged as a modern Islamic organization that sought to reform traditional Islamic education while strategically engaging with Western modernity. Rather than adopting a confrontational political resistance against colonial rule, Muhammadiyah pursued cultural and educational reform as a means of empowering Muslim society. This study argues that Muhammadiyah's educational reforms represent a form of epistemic decolonization—selectively appropriating Western educational structures while re-centering Islamic values and rational inquiry. Using historical and qualitative analysis, this paper explores the ideological foundations, institutional strategies, and long-term impacts of Muhammadiyah's educational project, highlighting both its achievements and its persistent challenges in quality and relevance in the contemporary era.

Keywords: Muhammadiyah; Islamic Education; Decolonization; Modernism; Indonesia

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INTRODUCTION

During Ahmad Dahlan's era, the discourse on Islamic identity was mainly designed to purify Islam from the non-Islamic elements such as TBC (*tahayul*, *bid'ah*, *churafat*—irrational beliefs). Ahmad Dahlan was educated under the western education system, i.e. the Dutch colonial formal school, and Islamic traditional schools. His hybrid educational backgrounds were quite unique at his time, and this had inspired to establish the most successful modern Islamic educational institution in present day Indonesia. By establishing an educational institution, he had successfully promoted a rational approach to addressing discourses of identity in Islam by eradicating the superstitious debris of the TBC. The present global-political context has found the Indonesian Muslim community as being unable to accept the inevitability of multicultural values in the

global era. As the Dutch colonial government in Indonesia was entering the twentieth century, it had to create groups of local people who could help the state manage itself and its population. Thus the ethical policy was launched to educate some of these people. That brought an influx of modernity into the lives and minds of several Indonesians, and created news aspirations. These aspirations spawned the initiatives to create civil associations—social, educational, and religious—that was to build schools and published newspapers to fulfil the desire to bring education and progress to the people. This development in turn nurtured national consciousness that would later give birth to the Indonesian independence movement (Abdullah 1999, p. 8).

The mushrooming of civil organizations followed the influx of ideas from both the West and the East. From the West, the fledging Indonesian intellectual communities learned about new political ideas and modern sciences; from the East, especially the Middle East, they learned about Islamic reformist movements and ideas about how to free Islam from the shackles of both ancient traditions and the colonial rules (Maarif, 1985:52-79). A central issue was whether to fight colonialism through confrontational political struggles or through cultural struggles. In Indonesia, the intellectuals were divided into different ideological groups: those who liked to apply Western ideas on Indonesian soil; those who liked to combine Western and native traditions; those who liked to combine Western and Islamic ideas; and those who preferred to maintain the existing combination of Islam and native traditions (Scherer, 1975). Intellectuals also debated the appropriate strategies for dealing with colonialism. These contending ideas constituted the ideological context in which Ahmad Dahlan founded Muhammadiyah in 1912. Muhammadiyah is an Indonesian Islamic social organization well known for providing education and health services. Structurally, Muhammadiyah's organization consists of *Pengurus Pusat* (national office, or PP), *Pengurus Wilayah* (provincial offices, or PW), *Pengurus Daerah* (district offices on the kabupaten level, or PD), *Pengurus Cabang* (branch offices on the kecamatan level, or PC), and *Pengurus Ranting* (sub-branch offices on the desa level, or PR). The administrative units below the state in Indonesia are *Propinsi* (province), *Kabupaten* (district), *Kecamatan* (sub-district), and *Desa* (village). Delegates from offices around the country from all levels, representing millions of Muhammadiyah's supporters, attend its centennial national conference (*Muktamar*). The conference elects a new chair of the national office and ratifies national policies and programmes. Muhammadiyah also functions as an umbrella for its "autonomous organizations", such as Aisyiyah (Muhammadiyah Women Movement), Nasyiatul Aisyiyah (Muhammadiyah Young Women Movement), as well as Pemuda Muhammadiyah (Muhammadiyah Young Men Movement).

Muhammadiyah views these activities as the best way for propagating Is-

lam, empowering the *ummah* and improving the social conditions of Muslims. Muhammadiyah was established in Jogjakarta in 1912, in the decade that saw the emergence of civil associations and political organizations in Indonesian at a national scale. Some observers have seen the decade, therefore, as the first flowering of the civil society in Indonesia and the beginning of the nationalist movement in Indonesia (Abdullah, 1999:4-6). Ideologically, Dahlan was one of those who opted for a combination of Western and Islamic reformist ideas as the basis for his activities. His concerns with poverty and backwardness of the people of the Netherlands East Indies, the majority of whom belonged to the Islamic *ummah*, led him to the fields of education and health. Within the politically restrictive colonial environment, Dahlan adopted a by-and-large co-operative, though not wholly uncritical, attitude towards the colonial government (Suminto, 1985:36-37 & 193-98). This co-operative attitude became the basic policy for Muhammadiyah throughout its history. The Dutch introduction of the ethical politics had created a new class of educated indigenous, including Muslim educated elites which then established Muhammadiyah. Muhammadiyah was established to encounter the traditionalists' perspectives towards the propagation of Islam. Muhammadiyah rejected blind surrender to the *madzab* followers as well as uncritical embrace to particular interpretations produced by the *ulema*. Besides rejecting their authorities, Muhammadiyah reformed the prevalent stagnant Islamic educational institutions that were famously spread throughout Indonesian which were known as *madrasa*. Muhammadiyah saw that *madrasa* merely became the subtext of the religious and political authorities possessed by the ulema and jurists. Muhammadiyah believed that this was the source of Muslim backwardness in the face of the powerful Western civilization. To access the western scientific tradition, Muhammadiyah have been willing to support the process of teaching and learning of several European languages. First it was the Dutch before World War II, and second it was the English language during the reign of Soeharto which was then embraced openly and consciously by Muhammadiyah in the rapid changing global era.

Literature Review

Scholarly discussions on Muhammadiyah have generally focused on its role as a modernist Islamic organization, its political behavior under colonial rule, and its contribution to Indonesian civil society. Abdullah (1999) situates Muhammadiyah within the early flowering of Indonesian civil society, emphasizing its role in nurturing nationalist consciousness through education and social services. Alfian's seminal work highlights Muhammadiyah's pragmatic and cooperative stance toward the colonial government, which allowed it to expand its institutional base despite political constraints. Maarif (1985) frames Muham-

madiyah as part of a broader Islamic reformist movement influenced by Middle Eastern modernism, particularly the ideas of Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida. This reformist orientation emphasized ijtihad (independent reasoning), rational interpretation of scripture, and resistance to blind adherence (taqlid) to traditional jurisprudential schools.

Noer (1963) provides a comprehensive account of Islamic modernism in Indonesia, noting that Muhammadiyah's educational reforms were driven by a growing awareness of Muslim backwardness in the face of Western scientific and technological advancement. Similarly, Scherer (1975) situates Muhammadiyah within competing intellectual currents among Indonesian elites, ranging from Western-oriented modernism to conservative traditionalism. However, relatively fewer studies explicitly frame Muhammadiyah's educational reforms within a decolonial theoretical lens. While Muhammadiyah adopted Western educational forms—such as graded schooling systems, secular subjects, and foreign languages—it simultaneously sought to Islamize modern knowledge rather than Westernize Muslim identity. This selective appropriation challenges binary understandings of colonial domination versus resistance and suggests a more nuanced process of epistemic negotiation. This paper contributes to existing scholarship by interpreting Muhammadiyah's educational project as a form of decolonizing Islamic education—one that resists both colonial epistemic dominance and stagnant traditionalism.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative historical research method, relying on textual analysis of primary and secondary sources related to Muhammadiyah's educational development. Primary sources include Muhammadiyah statutes, organizational reports, and historical records of Muhammadiyah schools. Secondary sources consist of scholarly works on Islamic modernism, Indonesian colonial history, and Muhammadiyah's institutional development. The analysis adopts a critical-historical approach, examining how Muhammadiyah's educational strategies were shaped by colonial power relations and internal Islamic debates. A decolonial perspective is applied to understand how Muhammadiyah negotiated Western knowledge systems while maintaining Islamic epistemological autonomy.

DISCUSSION

Analysis: Negotiating Colonial Modernity

Muhammadiyah was established to promote modern Islamic education during the Dutch reign in Indonesia. Muhammadiyah became one of the influential and significant Indonesian Islamic modernist organizations which reformed the tra-

ditional Islamic education, *madrasa* traditional system. Although Muhammadiyah was not the first organization, its influences and its stronghold throughout Indonesia was lasted until now. The birth and development of Islamic modernism in Indonesia was influenced by the awareness of the Muslim society of their backwardness which was triggered by the western imperialism and its progress in the science. Through this, it was expected that Islam would be able to avoid the danger of *taqlid* which had become the major characteristics of the traditionalist *madrasa* and the *madzab* followers, and thus liberate the Muslims from accepting anything without reservation and further investigation. This was directed to open the door of *ijtihad* in Islam, meaning the right for individual interpretation of anything connected to the Faith through a process of intellectual exercise at its utmost degree. Individual opinion (*fatwa*) on certain cases or issues, or any particular rule of law (*hukum*) could be exercised by any man, called *mujtahidin* (singular, *mujtahid*). Previously, *fatwa* became the mere privilege of the traditionalist ulema. The new *mujtahidin*, reformer, could be any man who exercise his rationality at its utmost, were fighting against the disease of anti-intellectualism who would champion Islam as compatible with the modern world which aimed at the challenges posed by the surge of Western intellectual, cultural, political invasion. Several *mujtahidin* in Indonesia had promoted their *ijtihad* through mission (*dakwah*) and education by establishing modern Islamic education which combined secular subjects and religious teachings in its curriculum in which a more reformed and western modern style of schools was introduced and applied into the traditional system of *pesantren* Islamic schools (*madaris* traditional system). European languages, Dutch, German, French and English were also introduced in the modern Islamic senior high school during the Dutch reign. The first Islamic modern school was established in Padang Sumatera by Haji Ahmad in 1909 (Djaja, 1951:296; Noer, 1963:51&59). The name of the school was *Adabijah School* which offered both religious and secular subjects in the curriculum for both boys and girls and which then finally subsidized by the Dutch colonial government in 1915. Adabijah School adapted completely the Dutch colonial elementary school, HIS. By 1916 the school had seven teachers, of which two were European, four Indonesian with teaching certificates from Western schools. It shows clearly how western-oriented was Adabijah School, while consequently, still maintained its Islamic teachings. The second Islamic modern school in Sumatera was Dinijah School at Padang Pandjang Sumatera which was established in 1915 by Zainuddin Labai El-Junusi (1890-1924), in which he was to introduce a radical departure from the prevalent "*pesantren* system". By 1922 he was able to spread his school system to about 15 schools in Minangkabau Sumatera (Djaja, 1951:323-330).

In Java, the first Islamic modern school was established in Batavia (now Jakarta) in 1906. The Dutch prototype elementary school was called *Djamijat*

Chair School which offered secular subjects such as arithmetic, history (Islamic History), and geography. The Arabic which was used in the traditional pesantren school was substituted with Malay (Bahasa Indonesia). Djamijat Chair Islamic Organization was criticized by the dominancy of the Arab-descendant members. Two of its prominent members were Sheikh Surkati which later founded *al-Irsjad* and Ahmad Dahlan which later founded *Muhammadijah*. In 1913 Sheikh Surkati (Sudanese) established his own organization, *Djamijat al-Islam wal Ersjat al-Arabia* which was commonly known as *al-Irsjad*. Besides establishing organization, his followers later also established al-Irsjad modern Islamic schools. The vast spread of modern Islamic schools throughout Indonesia was mainly led by *Muhammadijah* Islamic modern organization which was founded in Jogjakarta by Kijai Hadji Amad Dahlan (indigenous Indonesian, Javanese) in 1912 which will become the focus of this research. One of the famous teachings of Ahmad Dahlan was: "Be progressive Ulama" (*"Jadilah Ulama yang berkemadjuan"*), meaning Ulama who followed the progress of the modern world, and who had to be knowledgeable and familiar with worldly matters (secular subjects) as well as the sciences of religion (Wirjosukarto, 1962:58). Dahlan's first inner logic of Islamic modernism was to return to the purely orthodox teachings of the Faith; and the second side of the inner logic which proved that Islam was compatible with the modern world. He never wrote his *ijtihad* in any serious and seminal books. Any available record of him was offered by organizations and activities that he established. As a true pragmatist he was to liberalize Islam as he had liberalized *Muhammadijah* to accept everything which he thought was beneficial, provided that it was not in contradiction with the true Faith, or deviating from it.

In Article II of the Statute of the Establishment of Muhammadijah it was aimed to (a) The spreading of Muslim religious teaching among the native people in the Residency of Jogjakarta and; (b) The promotion of religious life among its members. And in Article III of the Statute stated that to achieve the previous goal, several steps were taken as follows:

a. To establish and maintain good support of educational institutions, where besides common ***(secular) subjects*** the principles of Muslim religious teachings would also be given.
b. To hold meetings among its members and interested persons, where topics from Muslim religious teachings would be discussed.
c. To establish and maintain good support of the prayer-houses (wakafs and mosques), where publics religious services would be held.
d. To publish and render support in publishing books, treatises, brochures, and newspapers, wherein the subjects from religious usages and holy teachings would be treated, shall, in each aforementioned case, as well as other means, never be in conflict with law of the land and with public order or good custom.

Paragraph (a) of the Article III clearly indicates the desire to become an agent of social change within the Muslim community by specifically mentioned its effort to introduce and offer secular or modern subjects besides religious teachings in the curriculum of its educational system. This overt non political position taken by Muhammadijah before the Dutch colonial government had eased Ahmad Dahlan to make friends with the nationalist indigenous and even Christians organizations. From his friendship with the Christians, most notably Reverend Baker, he got valuable inputs in establishing the school system that they employed in Muhammadijah schools. He copied *HIS met de Bibel* (HIS with the Bible) into *HIS met de Koran* (HIS with the Quran). He was even called as *Kijai Kristen* (Christian Kyai/Ulema) and *Kijai Modern* (Modern Kyai/Ulema). This incited rejection among the traditional ulemas who saw that Dahlan had polluted Islamic teachings with the western knowledge. He was then accused of being a fake ulema (*Kijai Palsu*). Most notable opposition was then held by many traditional ulemas in East Java who formed the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) in 1942. Dahlan was not afraid of the attack from the rural-based Ulema and he continued his progressive movements in the Muslim community, mainly in the urban areas, by establishing the core infrastructure of Muhammadijah, namely:

a. Tabligh/Dakwah (religious propagation)
b. Education (Muhammadiyah schools and universities throughout Indonesia)
c. Aisyijah (the women's section of Muhammadijah)
d. Penolong Kesengsaraan Umum, PKU (Improving the People's Misery which then established many hospitals in Indonesia)
e. Hizbul Wathan (Boyscout)
f. Taman Pustaka (Publication and Library)
g. Bahagian Penolong Hadji (Department to assist pilgrimage to Mecca)

The seeds of Muhammadijah modern school in which both secular and religious subjects were to be included in the curriculum, were planted the year before Muhammadijah formally established a religious school at Kauman on the first of December 1911 with 29 youngsters, and it increased to 62 pupils in 1912. The colonial government, consequently, responded generously to Muslim aspirations. It revised its earlier position that Muslims were indifferent to Western secular liberal education because they were anti-Dutch and wrapped up in the glory of the bygone days of Islam. On 12 June 1912, Muhammadijah received its first subsidy from the Dutch colonial government although the amount was far less compared to those which were received by the Christian schools conducted by Christian missionaries in Indonesia. A Dutch language course was introduced afterwards in *HIS mit de Koran*. Muhammadijah schools since then

were developed like mushrooms throughout Java and Madura. Table 1 shows the rapid expansion of the Muhammadijah school system. Around 316 schools were already operated in the whole Java and Madura, of which 207 were categorized under the Western Schools System. Of particular importance was the introduction of the European foreign language, that is Dutch as obligatory, and English, German and French as regular subjects in Senior High Schools, those are the MULO/Normal HIK and Kweekschools. Before the break of world war II, the amount of Muhammadijah schools were far less behind those run by the colonial government and other private schools, notably those run by the Christian missionaries.

Table 1. Muhammadiyah schools in Java and Madura in 1932

Type of school	West Java	Central Java	East Java	Madura	Total
Western School System					
Volksschool	8	88	2	0	98
Standard School	1	23	2	2	28
Schakel	0	17	5	1	23
H.I.S. (Elementary School)	7	32	10	1	50
MULO/Noormal H.I.K (Senior High School)	1	2	1	0	4
Kweekschool	1	3	0	0	4
	18	165	20	4	207
Religious Schools					
Dinijah	2	59	12	4	77
Wustha	1	9	1	0	11
	3	68	13	4	88
Other Schools					
Aisyijah/Meisje school	2	6	0	0	8
Jatimschool (School for Orphans)	0	7	0	0	7
Bustanuf Athfal (Kindergarten)	1	1	0	0	2
Others	0	4	0	0	4
Grand Total	24	251	33	8	316

Sources: *Pemandangan Alam Islam dan Muhammadijah* 1932-1933, Jogjakarta, Hoofdbestuur Muhammadijah, n.d., pp. 118-128.

Besides quantity problem, Muhammadijah schools exposed to the quality matters as well. In spite of lack of financial support, Muhammadijah also lacks

of qualified teachers who will support the infrastructure of all Muhammadijah schools throughout Java and Madura. Before the World War II, Muhammadijah mainly concentrated in establishing secondary schools. In 1934, Muhammadijah established a Senior High School (AMS-Algemeene Middelbare School) in Djakarta, while the plan to establish Muhammadijah University was also expressed in 1936 (Alfian, nd:310). This plan, however, was never realized before the Independence of Indonesia. The positive attitude taken by Muhammadijah towards modernism had probably had a far greater impact on the Muslim community as a whole than its very small tangible achievements.

Table 2. Muhammadiyah Educational Institutions in Indonesia (2005)

Level of Educational Institutions	**Total**
Pre-School & Elementary Schools	
Busthanul Athfal (TK ABA—Taman Kanak-kanak Aisyiyah Busthanul Athfal)	3.370
Koran Education (Taman Pendidikan Al Quran)	3.015
Elementary School (Sekolah Dasar Muhammadiyah)	1.128
Madrasah Diniyah/Ibtidaiyyah	1.768
Total	**9.281**
Secondary Schools	
Junior High School (SLTP Muhammadiyah)	1.179
Madrasah Tsanawiyah	534
Senior High School (SMU Muhammadiyah	509
Special Schools (Sekolah Menengah Kejuruan Muhammadiyah)	249
Madrasah Aliyah	171
Total	**2.642**
High Educations	
Universities	36
High Education	74
Academy	52
Polytechnic	4
Total	**166**
Grand Total	**12.089**

Sources: Report from Majelis Diktilitbang PP Muhammadiyah on Muktamar Muhammadiyah 45, Malang, East Java.

Until 2005, the number of Muhammadiyah schools has rapidly increased as follows (see Tabel 2 for detail): 3.370 TK *Busthanul Athfal*/ Kindergarten, 3.015 Koran education (TPA-Taman Pendidikan Al Qur'an), 1.128 elementary schools, 1.768 *Madrasah Diniyah/Ibtidaiyyah*, 1.179 Junior High School (SLTP Muhammadiyah), 534 *Madrasah Tsanawiyah*/junior high schools, 509 senior high schools (SMU Muhammadiyah), 249 specialised schools (Sekolah Kejuruan Muhammadiyah), 171 Madrasah Aliyah. Besides schools, Muhammadiyah began establishing higher education institutions since 1958. By 2005, Muhammadiyah has established 36 universities, 74 high schools institutions, 52 academies, 4 polytechnics. Muhammadiyah expanded its educational institutions especially throughout the Muslim social enclaves in the outer islands outside Java, such as Aceh, West Sumatera, West and South Kalimantan, Central and South Sulawesi, West Nusa Tenggara as well. Approaching the 21st century, the number of Muhammadiyah educational institutions is far beyond other private ones. The quantity of Muhammadiyah educational institutions, however, is not accompanied by a proper standard of education. Of 166 PTM (Perguruan Tinggi Muhammadiyah/Muhammadiyah High Schools) with 666 study programs, solely 410 got the accreditation from the Education Department (*Badan Akreditasi Nasional* [BAN], 2000). The rest—the 256 of them—have not achieved the standard set by the government. This fact illustrates the lack of proper quality Muhammadiyah educational institutions have compared with the private ones.

The positive attitude taken by Muhammadiyah towards Western education system was proved by its commitment in elaborating western type of schools and higher education. Tables 1 & 2 show that Muhammadiyah is still combining the traditional type of *madrasa* and western schools. The most historical moment Muhammadiyah made was when it conducted its Muktamar in 1959 in Pekalongan, Central Java. There was a dispute within the Muhammdiyah policy committees whether to establish higher education in a "university" form such in the West or "madrasa" form such as in Central Arabia. A faction represented by Kyai Haji Mas Mansyur preferred the "madrasa" form for the higher institutions, such as *Zawiyah* (traditional *madrasa*) in North Africa which he visited formerly. Another faction represented by Mulyadi Joyonegoro (the Minister of Social Affair at Soekarno's era) proposed that Muhammadiyah established a "university" form similar to the one in the western countries. After a serious debate between the two factions, "university" was applied to all Muhammadiyah higher institution. The prototype of the university Muhammadiyah embraced was totally similar to what is now employed in the western countries. Though the template Muhammadiyah employed is similar with the western educational system, the content of the curriculum is different. Muhammadiyah adds "Islamic and Muhammadiyah" teachings to all its educational institutions.

Decolonization and Its Limits

Prior to the emergence of Muhammadiyah in the early twentieth century, Islamic education in Indonesia was predominantly organized around pesantren and madrasah systems that were structured by the authority of the ulama and characterized by rote learning, textual repetition, and jurisprudential conservatism (Steenbrink 1986; van Bruinessen 1994). While these institutions played a crucial role in preserving Islamic knowledge under colonial domination, reformist thinkers increasingly viewed them as ill-equipped to respond to the epistemic and socio-political challenges of modernity. Muhammadiyah emerged from this context as a reformist movement that identified intellectual stagnation—rather than Islam itself—as a principal cause of Muslim marginalization (Noer 1963; Alfian n.d.). Rejecting blind adherence (taqlid) to established madhhab, Muhammadiyah promoted ijtihad as a means of revitalizing Islamic thought and restoring reason (‘aql) as a legitimate epistemic instrument. Ahmad Dahlan’s call for the eradication of tahayul, bid‘ah, and khurafat was not simply theological purification but a broader epistemological intervention aimed at reorienting Muslim subjectivity toward critical inquiry and ethical responsibility (Maarif 1985; Rahman 1982). In educational practice, Muhammadiyah integrated secular subjects—such as mathematics, history, geography, and natural sciences—alongside religious instruction, thereby breaking with the rigid dualism between “religious” and “worldly” knowledge that had characterized traditional Islamic pedagogy (Azra 2004).

The introduction of European languages, particularly Dutch and later English, further reflected Muhammadiyah’s conviction that access to modern scientific knowledge was essential for Muslim empowerment. This curricular integration represented a radical departure from prevailing Islamic educational norms and positioned Muhammadiyah schools closer to the modern school system introduced by the colonial state. Ahmad Dahlan’s adaptation of the Dutch Hollandsch-Inlandsche School (HIS) into HIS met de Koran exemplifies this strategy of selective appropriation, whereby Western institutional forms were reconfigured within an Islamic moral framework (Wirjosukarto 1962; Steenbrink 1986). Muhammadiyah’s cooperative stance toward the colonial government must be understood as a strategic rather than ideological alignment. By avoiding overt political confrontation, Muhammadiyah secured subsidies, legal recognition, and administrative space that enabled the rapid expansion of its educational and social institutions (Suminto 1985; Ricklefs 2008). This approach attracted criticism from traditional ulama, who accused Ahmad Dahlan of contaminating Islam with Western influences and undermining inherited religious authority (Djaja 1951). Nevertheless, Muhammadiyah continued to grow,

particularly in urban centers, establishing not only schools but also hospitals and women's organizations such as 'Aisyiyah, which played a pioneering role in promoting women's education and public participation (Scherer 1985; Hefner 2000).

By the early 1930s, Muhammadiyah operated hundreds of educational institutions across Java and Madura, combining Western-style schools with religious instruction (Noer 1963). After Indonesian independence, this expansion accelerated dramatically. Muhammadiyah developed thousands of educational institutions at all levels, including a large network of universities. Yet this quantitative growth was not always accompanied by qualitative consolidation. By the early 2000s, a significant number of Muhammadiyah higher education institutions lacked national accreditation, revealing persistent challenges related to standardization, academic rigor, and institutional governance (Nilan 2009). From a decolonial theoretical perspective, Muhammadiyah's trajectory exemplifies what Quijano (2000) conceptualizes as resistance to the coloniality of knowledge. Colonial domination operated not only through political control but also through epistemic hierarchies that positioned Western knowledge as universal while relegating non-Western epistemologies to the realm of the inferior or pre-modern. Muhammadiyah did not reject Western knowledge outright; instead, it selectively appropriated modern sciences and pedagogical methods, embedding them within an Islamic ethical worldview. This strategy resonates with Mignolo's (2011) notion of epistemic disobedience, albeit in a pragmatic and reformist rather than radical form.

However, this selective appropriation also produced inherent tensions. While Muhammadiyah sought to Islamize modern knowledge, it relied heavily on Western institutional models, particularly in its adoption of the modern school and university system. The decision to model Muhammadiyah universities after Western institutions—rather than traditional Islamic learning centers—illustrates both the pragmatism and the limits of its decolonial vision. On the one hand, this choice enabled Muhammadiyah to participate in global knowledge production and equip Muslim students with skills relevant to modern society. On the other hand, it risked reproducing Western epistemic hierarchies within Islamic institutions (Connell 2007; Alatas 2006). These tensions surfaced explicitly during internal debates at the 1959 Muhammadiyah Congress (Muktamar) in Pekalongan, where advocates of the madrasa model clashed with proponents of the Western-style university. The debate reflected a deeper epistemological struggle: whether decolonization should prioritize continuity with Islamic intellectual traditions or embrace global modernity as an unavoidable horizon (Maarif 1985). The eventual triumph of the university model signaled Muhammadiyah's prioritization of functional modernity over

epistemic rupture. While this decision ensured institutional survival and expansion, it also left unresolved questions regarding epistemic autonomy and the possibility of genuinely alternative knowledge systems.

Another critical dimension of Muhammadiyah's decolonizing project lies in its engagement with social transformation. Education was never an isolated endeavor but was integrated with healthcare, social welfare, and women's empowerment. The establishment of 'Aisyiyah challenged patriarchal norms within both traditional Islamic society and colonial structures, expanding the scope of decolonization beyond epistemology to include gender relations and social justice (Scherer 1985; Hefner 2000). This holistic vision aligns with broader calls in decolonial scholarship to address the interconnections between knowledge, power, and social inequality (Santos 2014; Grosfoguel 2011). Nevertheless, Muhammadiyah's modernist orientation also generated exclusions. Critics argue that its emphasis on rationalism and purification sometimes marginalized local religious expressions and indigenous epistemologies. From a decolonial standpoint, this raises the question of whether Muhammadiyah inadvertently internalized certain colonial assumptions that equated progress with uniformity and rationalization (Nandy 1983; Smith 2012). While Muhammadiyah rejected superstition, it did not always critically engage with colonial dismissals of indigenous knowledge systems, thereby reproducing certain hierarchies even as it resisted others.

In the contemporary global context, Muhammadiyah faces renewed challenges related to neoliberalism, market-driven education, and global academic rankings. These pressures tend to reinforce Western epistemic standards and instrumental views of knowledge, constraining efforts to develop genuinely decolonial or Islamic curricula (Salvatore 2016; Connell 2007). This situation demands a renewed reflection on what decolonization means in the twenty-first century. Is it sufficient to append Islamic and Muhammadiyah studies to existing curricula, or does decolonization require a deeper rethinking of pedagogy, research priorities, and evaluation criteria? Ultimately, Muhammadiyah's experience underscores that decolonization is not a completed historical achievement but an ongoing struggle. Its successes demonstrate that Islamic education can be modern without being secularized and rational without abandoning faith. At the same time, its limitations reveal the difficulty of escaping colonial epistemic frameworks entirely within global systems of knowledge and power. Muhammadiyah thus occupies an ambivalent yet productive position: it exemplifies the possibilities of reformist Islam while reminding us that decolonization must remain reflexive, critical, and unfinished.

CONCLUSION

Muhammadiyah represents a distinctive model of decolonizing Islamic education in Indonesia. Through educational reform rather than political confrontation, Muhammadiyah empowered Muslim society by integrating rational inquiry, modern knowledge, and Islamic values. Its legacy demonstrates that decolonization is not merely the rejection of Western influence, but a critical process of selection, adaptation, and transformation. Despite its remarkable achievements, Muhammadiyah must continue to address issues of quality, relevance, and epistemic independence in its educational institutions. As Indonesia navigates the challenges of globalization, Muhammadiyah's foundational vision of progressive Islam remains a vital resource for rethinking Islamic education in a postcolonial world. This study has demonstrated that Muhammadiyah represents one of the most sustained and institutionally successful efforts to decolonize Islamic education in Indonesia. From its founding in 1912 under the leadership of Ahmad Dahlan to its contemporary status as a major provider of education and social services, Muhammadiyah has consistently pursued educational reform as a means of empowering Muslim society. Rather than engaging in overt political confrontation with colonial power, Muhammadiyah adopted a cultural and epistemological strategy that sought to reform Islamic thought from within while selectively engaging with Western modernity. This approach allowed Muhammadiyah to survive, expand, and exert long-term influence, but it also generated enduring tensions that continue to shape its educational project.

At the heart of Muhammadiyah's reformist vision was a critique of both colonial domination and internal stagnation within Islamic institutions. Ahmad Dahlan's emphasis on eradicating tahayul, bid'ah, and khurafat reflected a broader commitment to restoring rational inquiry (ijtihad) as a central principle of Islamic life. In this sense, Muhammadiyah's educational reform was not merely pedagogical but epistemological. It challenged the monopoly of traditional religious authorities over knowledge production while simultaneously rejecting colonial representations of Islam as inherently irrational or backward. By promoting reason, discipline, and scientific inquiry within an Islamic framework, Muhammadiyah sought to reposition Islam as compatible with modernity without surrendering its ethical and spiritual foundations. Viewed through a decolonial lens, Muhammadiyah's project exemplifies a form of epistemic resistance that does not conform neatly to binary oppositions between resistance and accommodation. Colonial power, as scholars of coloniality have argued, operates not only through political domination but also through the imposition of epistemic hierarchies that privilege Western knowledge as uni-

versal and authoritative. Muhammadiyah did not seek to overturn these hierarchies through outright rejection of Western knowledge. Instead, it pursued a strategy of selective appropriation, adopting Western educational forms—such as graded schooling, standardized curricula, and modern universities—while infusing them with Islamic values and moral objectives. This strategy enabled Muhammadiyah to participate in global modernity on its own terms, even as it remained embedded within colonial and postcolonial power structures.

However, this strategy also reveals the limits of Muhammadiyah's decolonizing vision. The reliance on Western institutional models, particularly in higher education, raises critical questions about epistemic autonomy. While Muhammadiyah universities incorporate Islamic and Muhammadiyah studies into their curricula, the broader structures of knowledge production—disciplinary boundaries, research evaluation, accreditation standards, and academic hierarchies—largely reflect Western paradigms. This situation illustrates a central dilemma of postcolonial education: how to engage global systems of knowledge without reproducing the very epistemic dominance that decolonization seeks to dismantle. The tension between reform and reproduction is also evident in Muhammadiyah's relationship with local cultures and traditions. Muhammadiyah's commitment to purification and rationalization enabled it to challenge practices that it viewed as obstructive to intellectual and social progress. Yet from a critical perspective, this approach sometimes risked marginalizing indigenous forms of religiosity and local knowledge systems. Decolonization, as contemporary theorists emphasize, requires not only resistance to Western dominance but also a critical engagement with internal hierarchies and exclusions. Muhammadiyah's experience underscores the importance of reflexivity in reformist projects, particularly when rationalism is positioned as the primary criterion of legitimacy. Despite these limitations, Muhammadiyah's contributions to Indonesian society are undeniable. Its vast network of schools, universities, hospitals, and social organizations has played a crucial role in expanding access to education and healthcare, particularly among Muslim communities. The establishment of Aisyiyah as a women's organization represents a significant intervention in gender relations, challenging patriarchal norms within both traditional Islamic and colonial contexts. By integrating education with social welfare, Muhammadiyah articulated a holistic vision of Islam as a transformative force in public life. This integration remains one of Muhammadiyah's most enduring strengths and a key aspect of its decolonial significance.

In the post-independence and contemporary periods, Muhammadiyah faces new challenges that require renewed critical engagement with its founding principles. The rapid quantitative expansion of Muhammadiyah educational institutions has not always been matched by qualitative consolidation. Issues

of accreditation, academic quality, and institutional governance reflect broader structural pressures facing private education in Indonesia. Moreover, the increasing influence of neoliberal logics in higher education—such as market competition, performance metrics, and global rankings—poses additional risks to Muhammadiyah's educational mission. These pressures tend to reinforce Western epistemic standards and instrumental views of education, potentially undermining efforts to cultivate critical, ethical, and socially engaged Muslim intellectuals. In this context, Muhammadiyah's future relevance depends on its ability to rearticulate decolonization as an ongoing process rather than a completed historical achievement. Decolonizing Islamic education in the twenty-first century requires more than curricular additions or symbolic references to Islamic identity. It demands a deeper rethinking of pedagogy, research priorities, and institutional values. This includes fostering critical engagement with Islamic intellectual traditions, embracing epistemic plurality, and addressing contemporary issues such as environmental crisis, social inequality, and global injustice from Islamic ethical perspectives.

Furthermore, Muhammadiyah's experience offers valuable insights for other Muslim societies navigating postcolonial realities. It demonstrates that Islamic education can be both modern and faith-based, both globally engaged and locally rooted. At the same time, it cautions against complacency, reminding us that reformist success can generate new forms of domination if not accompanied by continuous self-critique. Decolonization, as this study suggests, is not a destination but a horizon—one that requires sustained intellectual effort, institutional courage, and ethical commitment. In conclusion, Muhammadiyah stands as a powerful example of how Islamic education can function as a site of decolonial struggle and creative negotiation. Its history reflects the possibilities and contradictions inherent in engaging modernity from within a religious tradition. By revisiting and critically renewing its foundational vision, Muhammadiyah has the potential to contribute not only to Indonesian education but also to global conversations on decolonizing knowledge, religion, and modernity. The unfinished nature of its project is not a failure, but rather an invitation—to continue imagining and enacting forms of Islamic education that are intellectually rigorous, socially just, and epistemically emancipatory.

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