

## ISLAMIC EDUCATION WITHIN THE RELIGIOUS SOCIAL ORGANIZATION NAHDLATUL ULAMA

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### **Abstract**

*This study aims to describe the concept of Islamic education as envisioned by Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), its contribution to the national education system, and the challenges and prospects it faces in the modern era. The research adopts a qualitative-descriptive method based on library research, using content analysis of relevant literature. The findings reveal that NU plays a vital role in advancing Islamic education through its network of pesantren (Islamic boarding schools), madrasahs, and universities that integrate the values of Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah, such as moderation, tolerance, and balance. Despite facing challenges related to digital transformation and infrastructure disparities, NU holds significant potential in strengthening an inclusive and contextualized model of Islamic education in Indonesia.*

**Keywords:** Islamic education, Nahdlatul Ulama, madrasah, pesantren, religious social organization, religious moderation.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

The character, identity, and civilization of Muslim communities across the globe, including in Indonesia, are profoundly shaped by Islamic education. Within this context, Islamic education is not merely regarded as a medium for knowledge transmission, but rather as a fundamental institution for cultivating moral integrity, religious piety, and socio-cultural values in accordance with Islamic teachings. It functions as a vital means for the internalization of ethical behavior, the formation of Islamic worldviews, and the construction of an ummah (Islamic community) that is not only spiritually grounded but also intellectually progressive and socially engaged.

In Indonesia, Islamic education has grown in a diverse and dynamic manner, reflecting the multicultural and pluralistic fabric of the nation. It has evolved not only within the framework of formal state educational institutions but also through the significant involvement of religious social organizations. Among the most influential of these is Nahdlatul Ulama (NU)—a religious and socio-cultural movement founded in 1926 with the aim of safeguarding traditional Islamic scholarship while engaging constructively with the challenges of modernity.

Nahdlatul Ulama is not merely a religious organization; it is a socio-religious force that carries with it deep cultural roots and a long-standing commitment to the preservation and development of traditional Islamic knowledge (*turats*) through institutions such as pesantren, madrasah, and Islamic universities. NU's educational ideology is grounded in the values of Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah, promoting religious moderation (*wasathiyyah*), tolerance, balance, and inclusivity. These values are continuously cultivated through its network of educational institutions that emphasize both religious sciences and general

knowledge. This dual integration has allowed NU to produce generations of scholars, educators, and community leaders who are equipped to engage with the modern world without losing their Islamic identity.

Moreover, NU's educational agenda aspires to transcend the dichotomy between religious and secular education. By doing so, it fosters the development of individuals who not only understand the depth of Islamic theology and jurisprudence but also possess the critical and creative capacities to contribute to broader societal transformation. This integrative model of education—rooted in local traditions yet open to global discourse—has made NU an essential player in the broader landscape of Islamic education in Southeast Asia (Hefner, 2009; Azra, 2012).

This paper seeks to address three major research questions: First, how does Nahdlatul Ulama conceptualize Islamic education in both its historical and contemporary forms? Second, to what extent has NU contributed to the development of Indonesia's national Islamic education system, including its institutions, curricula, and pedagogical models? Third, what are the current challenges and future prospects for NU's Islamic education programs in an era marked by rapid digitalization, globalization, and educational reform? To answer these questions, this study employs a comprehensive literature-based approach by analyzing scholarly publications, NU's official educational documents, and recent studies on Islamic educational reform. The objective is to offer a systematic and in-depth understanding of NU's role in shaping Islamic education in Indonesia—particularly in terms of ideological vision, institutional capacity, and societal impact. The findings of this study are expected to contribute not only to the academic discourse on Islamic education but also to inform policy-making and educational innovation in both religious and national contexts.

## **2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **A. Islamic Education**

Islamic education (*ta'lim al-islāmī*) is an inherently holistic enterprise that intertwines intellectual cultivation with the formation of moral character and social responsibility. At its core, it is “a conscious and systematic effort to shape a complete Muslim personality—spiritually, intellectually, and socially” (Azra, 2012, p. 47). Classical Muslim scholars such as al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) and Ibn Khaldūn (d. 1406) argued that knowledge (*'ilm*) must lead to action (*'amal*) that benefits both the individual and society. Contemporary theorists reinforce this view, emphasising three inseparable dimensions of Islamic education: *tarbiyah* (nurturing and growth), *ta'lim* (instruction), and *ta'dīb* (ethical habituation) (Al-Attas, 1999).

Accordingly, learners are guided to balance scientific inquiry with ethical comportment in everyday life. A physics lesson on renewable energy, for instance, is coupled with Qur'ānic discussions on stewardship of the Earth (*khilāfah*) and practical community projects such as building low-waste composting systems (Iman & Rahman, 2020). The ultimate *telos* is

the production of *insān kāmil*—a “complete” human being whose cognitive, affective and psychomotor domains harmonise in service of God and humanity (Hefner, 2009).

Islamic education therefore operates simultaneously as an epistemic system and a moral economy. Classroom pedagogy is complemented by co-curricular activities—charity drives, disaster-relief training, and interfaith service projects—that cultivate honesty, responsibility and social empathy. Such integrative praxis ensures that education is never an end in itself but a vehicle for individual flourishing and communal uplift.

### **B. Nahdlatul Ulama as a Religious Social Organisation**

Religious social organisations (*jam‘iyyah dīniyyah*) mediate between faith-based ideals and concrete social needs. Founded in 1926, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) has evolved into the world’s largest mass-membership Muslim movement, maintaining more than 30,000 pesantren, 24,000 madrasah, 200 Islamic universities, and a rapidly expanding network of community health centres and micro-finance cooperatives (NU Educational Council, 2023).

NU’s schools pursue a blended curriculum: national standards in mathematics, science and languages are taught alongside advanced Islamic sciences—*fikih*, *tafsīr*, *ḥadīth*, and classical Arabic rhetoric. Pedagogically, NU embraces *manhaj al-wasāṭiyyah* (the middle-path approach), cultivating religious moderation, tolerance and socio-cultural inclusivity (Zuhdi, 2015). Rural satellite pesantren provide boarding, scholarships and agricultural training for marginalised youth, while urban NU universities experiment with AI-enhanced Arabic instruction, virtual laboratories and MOOCs on Islamic ethics in digital finance.

By embedding learning within a living community of practice, NU produces graduates who are both cognitively literate—able to compete in the global knowledge economy—and morally anchored, committed to social justice (*maṣlaḥah ‘āmmah*). These outcomes illustrate NU’s dual identity as guardian of tradition and catalyst for progressive educational reform.

#### **. Theoretical Lenses: Social Role and Social Transformation**

To analyse NU’s educational praxis, this paper draws on Parsons’s (1951) Social Role Theory, which posits that social institutions reproduce order by internalising normative values through socialisation. In this view, NU’s schools function as value-transmission hubs: they inculcate Islamic moral codes that stabilise community life while equipping students with roles—teacher, entrepreneur, activist—required by the modern socio-economic order.

Complementing Parsons, Cultural–Social Transformation Theory explains how institutions negotiate continuity and change. Haryatmoko (2003) argues that cultural actors can rearticulate inherited symbols to fit new contexts without losing identity. NU exemplifies this adaptive dynamism: it preserves *Ahlussunnah wal-Jamā‘ah* orthodoxy yet deploys e-learning platforms, podcast tafsīrs, and TikTok da‘wah to reach Gen-Z audiences. Such “glocal” hybridity (global tools, local values) demonstrates that tradition and innovation are not mutually exclusive but mutually reinforcing.

Taken together, these theories illuminate how Islamic education and religious social organisations co-evolve. Education supplies the ethical and cognitive capital for social role performance, while organisations such as NU institutionalise and scale those roles, engineering incremental—yet profound—social transformation.

### **3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This study adopts a qualitative-descriptive library research design to explore the role of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) in Islamic education. Data were systematically collected from peer-reviewed journal articles, official NU publications, government white papers, and classical and contemporary texts on Islamic education published between 2000 and 2025. The inclusion criteria required that sources explicitly discuss NU's educational philosophy, institutional structures, or reform initiatives; provide empirical or historical evidence; and be available in full text. Data analysis was conducted through a three-stage content analysis protocol. First, in the open coding phase, key concepts—such as *manhaj al-wasāṭiyyah* and pesantren digitisation—were identified and labeled across 87 documents. Second, axial coding was employed to categorize these codes into thematic domains: educational philosophy, institutional contributions, key challenges, and future prospects. Lastly, selective coding and triangulation were used to refine emerging narratives by cross-referencing NU's policy documents with independent scholarly literature, ensuring credibility, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Throughout the process, reflexivity logs were maintained to track analytic decisions, and external validation was ensured through peer debriefing with two scholars in Islamic education. This methodology provided a comprehensive and context-rich understanding of NU's educational paradigm, grounded in rigorous qualitative inquiry.

### **4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

#### **A. The Concept of Islamic Education from the Perspective of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU)**

Founded in 1926 in response to the rise of modernism and colonialism, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) emerged as a guardian of traditional Islamic values and institutions in Indonesia. At that time, the Muslim community faced intense ideological challenges, with new interpretations of Islam often clashing with deeply rooted religious traditions. In this complex historical moment, NU assumed a significant role not only in religious propagation but also in constructing a robust Islamic education system grounded in classical knowledge.

The development of pesantren (Islamic boarding schools) represents NU's most defining contribution to education. Pesantren are not merely institutions for academic instruction; they are spiritual and moral training grounds where the classical Islamic curriculum is centered around the study of *kitab kuning*—traditional Islamic texts covering theology, jurisprudence, ethics, and Sufism. These texts serve as the intellectual bedrock for students (*santri*), providing a comprehensive framework to understand Islamic teachings holistically.

Within NU's pesantren, education is a holistic experience that emphasizes not only academic proficiency but also moral conduct, discipline, and communal harmony. Students are trained to respect their teachers (*kyai*), cooperate with peers, and live according to Islamic ethics. Daily practices such as reading the Qur'an, participating in communal prayers, and applying Islamic teachings in everyday life form the core of this moral education. As a result, pesantren serve as breeding grounds for morally upright and socially responsible future leaders.

The core of NU's educational philosophy is religious moderation, derived from the values of *Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah*. NU instills respect for cultural and religious diversity, teaching students to live in harmony within Indonesia's multicultural society. Activities such as interfaith celebrations and humanitarian programs are integrated into the curriculum to reinforce empathy, tolerance, and cooperation. These principles—*tawasuth* (moderation), *tasamuh* (tolerance), *tawazun* (balance), and *i'tidal* (justice)—form the ethical framework guiding NU's educational institutions. Each principle supports a comprehensive approach to education, aiming to produce balanced individuals capable of critical thought and compassionate action.

Consequently, NU's vision of education transcends mere academic achievement. It seeks to develop individuals who are intellectually capable and ethically grounded, able to use their knowledge to benefit society. By integrating scientific knowledge with moral education, NU ensures that its graduates are not only experts in their respective fields but also committed to social and spiritual well-being.

## **B. The Role of Nahdlatul Ulama in Islamic Education in Indonesia**

The role of NU in shaping Islamic education in Indonesia is both extensive and multifaceted. As the largest Islamic mass organization in the country, NU has a significant responsibility to provide quality and relevant education that reflects Indonesia's religious and cultural identity. NU's educational institutions act as engines for community development, combining Islamic values with national educational standards.

NU oversees thousands of educational institutions through the *Lembaga Pendidikan Ma'arif NU* (LP Ma'arif NU), which administers a wide range of institutions including madrasah diniyah (basic religious schools), MI (Madrasah Ibtidaiyah), MTs (Madrasah Tsanawiyah), MA (Madrasah Aliyah), and higher education under the *Lembaga Perguruan Tinggi Nahdlatul Ulama* (LPTNU), which includes universities, institutes, and colleges.

In addition to formal education, NU institutions focus heavily on character building and moral development. The curriculum integrates Islamic principles with general education subjects to prepare students for contemporary challenges. According to LP Ma'arif NU data, there are over 22,000 Islamic schools under NU's management: 8,450 MI, 6,250 MTs, 3,100 MA, and 4,300 pesantren and diniyah schools. Furthermore, the NU Higher Education Council (LPTNU) manages 258 institutions—30 are legally owned by NU, 2 are affiliated, and 253 are operated by NU-based foundations.

The pedagogical advantage of NU institutions lies in their dual curriculum, combining the national syllabus with Islamic teachings rooted in *Aswaja* ideology. For example, students

in MI are taught both basic religious knowledge and foundational skills in literacy and numeracy. The pesantren model also emphasizes the study of classical texts, where critical thinking and dialogue between students and *kyai* are essential, creating an interactive and immersive learning environment.

NU also embraces digital transformation, incorporating modern technologies into its educational practices. Many NU schools and universities now use digital learning platforms and content delivery systems, enabling students to access learning materials remotely. These initiatives are complemented by quality assurance mechanisms and capacity-building programs aimed at improving institutional effectiveness.

KH Yahya Cholil Staquf, the current Chairman of PBNU, has emphasized that education is at the heart of NU's mission. He asserts that without high-quality education, NU cannot fulfill its vision of nurturing a generation that upholds the peaceful and inclusive spirit of Islam (*rahmatan lil 'alamin*).

### **C. Challenges and Prospects of NU Education**

Despite its achievements, NU's education system faces numerous challenges. A major concern is the lack of adequate infrastructure, particularly in rural areas where many schools lack essential facilities such as libraries, laboratories, and internet access. This infrastructure gap hinders the delivery of quality education and limits opportunities for students to engage with modern learning resources.

Another significant challenge is the gap between traditional curricula and contemporary needs. While classical Islamic studies remain essential, they must be integrated with 21st-century skills such as critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration to prepare students for a globalized world. Curriculum reform is thus imperative to ensure relevance without compromising traditional values.

Digitalization also presents both a challenge and an opportunity. Many NU institutions are now investing in digital tools and platforms to enhance teaching and learning. For instance, LP Ma'arif NU has launched initiatives that provide online educational content and interactive learning applications. These tools make education more accessible, especially for students in remote regions.

Several NU-affiliated institutions have adopted innovations such as blended learning models and digital literacy training for teachers. Moreover, the implementation of quality management systems reflects a growing commitment to excellence in education. Strengthening institutional capacity is key to enabling NU institutions to adapt to societal and technological changes.

Given NU's broad network and strong community support, it is well-positioned to lead in promoting moderate and contextual Islamic education in Indonesia. Strategic partnerships with government agencies, the private sector, and international organizations can amplify NU's impact. Government collaboration can support funding and curriculum development, while corporate partnerships can provide vocational training and job opportunities for students.

## 5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Nahdlatul Ulama plays a pivotal role in shaping the future of Islamic education in Indonesia. To remain relevant and impactful, NU must continue refining its educational strategies to align with contemporary challenges. Through sustained collaboration with various stakeholders and ongoing innovation, NU can ensure the development of a high-quality, inclusive, and values-based education system that contributes meaningfully to the advancement of Indonesian society.

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