

THE ROLE OF NAHDLATUL ULAMA IN SOCIAL REALITY AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF ISLAMIC EDUCATION IN INDONESIA

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Abstract

Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) is the largest Islamic religious organization in Indonesia, playing a strategic role in social life and Islamic education. Since its establishment in 1926, NU has grown and developed from a base of Islamic boarding schools and rural communities, based on the teachings of Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah. This article aims to examine the role of Nahdlatul Ulama in the social reality of Indonesian society and its contribution to the development of Islamic education. The discussion focuses on the historical background of NU's establishment, NU's socio-religious role in maintaining social harmony and religious moderation, and NU's contribution to the development of Islamic education through Islamic boarding schools, madrasas, and universities. In addition, this article also highlights the challenges and dynamics faced by NU in the contemporary era, such as globalization, religious radicalism, and the demands of adapting to technological developments and social change. Through a moderate, cultural, and contextual approach, NU not only acts as the guardian of Islamic traditions, but also as an agent of social transformation and sustainable education. Thus, NU has an important position in developing Islamic education that is rooted in tradition, has a national perspective, and is relevant to the challenges of the times in Indonesia.

Keywords: *Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah*, Nahdlatul Ulama, Social Reality, Islamic Education, Religious Moderation.

INTRODUCTION

Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) is one of the largest Islamic organizations in Indonesia, playing a significant role in the social, religious, and educational life of the community. Since its establishment in 1926, NU has functioned not only as a religious organization but also as a social force deeply rooted in the traditions of Islamic boarding schools and the life of the Indonesian Muslim community. Based on the teachings of Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah, NU has grown and developed amid the social realities of a diverse society, and has been able to adapt to the dynamics of changing times without losing its Islamic identity.

In the context of social reality, NU is present as an organization that is responsive to the needs of the community, especially in rural areas and Islamic boarding school communities. NU plays an important role in maintaining social harmony, preserving local religious traditions, and developing an attitude of religious moderation that emphasizes balance, tolerance, and justice.

An accommodative and contextual religious approach has enabled NU to bridge the gap between normative Islamic teachings and the socio-cultural practices that exist within Indonesian society.

In addition to its role in the social sphere, NU also contributes greatly to the development of Islamic education in Indonesia. Through its network of Islamic boarding schools, madrasas, schools, and universities, NU plays a role in transmitting Islamic knowledge, shaping the character of students, and instilling religious and national values. Education in the NU tradition is not only oriented towards the mastery of knowledge, but also towards the formation of character, social sensitivity, and responsibility as citizens.

Amidst the challenges of globalization, technological developments, and the strengthening of transnational religious ideologies, NU's role has become increasingly relevant as the guardian of a moderate Islam that is friendly, inclusive, and rooted in local culture. NU is required to maintain a balance between preserving tradition and renewing ideas in order to continue to respond to the contemporary issues faced by Indonesian society. Based on this background, this article aims to examine the role of Nahdlatul Ulama in the social reality of Indonesian society and its contribution to the development of Islamic education, by exploring historical, social, and educational aspects, as well as the challenges faced by NU in the contemporary era. This discussion is expected to provide a comprehensive picture of NU's strategic position in religious and national life in Indonesia.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative approach with library research. This approach was chosen because the study focuses on a conceptual review of the role of Nahdlatul Ulama in social reality and the development of Islamic education in Indonesia. Data were obtained from various written sources such as books, scientific journals, articles, and official documents relevant to the research topic. Data collection was conducted through literature study, namely by reading, recording, and examining sources related to Nahdlatul Ulama and Islamic education. The collected data were then analyzed using descriptive-analytical methods, by systematically presenting the data and analyzing them to obtain a comprehensive understanding in accordance with the focus of the research discussion.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. History of the Birth of Nahdlatul Ulama

Nahdlatul Ulama was founded on January 31, 1926, as a representative of traditional scholars who followed the Ahlussunnah Wal Jamaah ideology. This organization was pioneered by Islamic boarding school scholars, including K.H. Hasyim Asy'ari, K.H. Wahab

Hasbullah, and other scholars who were deeply concerned about the continuity of Islamic traditions in the archipelago.¹

The birth of NU cannot be separated from the socio-religious context of the early 20th century, when the Islamic reform movement began to spread widely. At that time, Islamic boarding school scholars were not yet formally organized, but they already had a strong network of relationships through scientific ties, kinship, and boarding school traditions. This relationship is maintained through various religious activities, such as anniversary celebrations and scientific forums, which periodically bring together clerics, students, and alumni of Islamic boarding schools scattered throughout the archipelago.²

The establishment of Nahdlatul Ulama was also an effort to uphold the teachings of Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah (Aswaja) as an ideological foundation. The teachings of Aswaja are derived from the Qur'an, As-Sunnah, Ijma', and Qiyas. As quoted by Marijan from K.H. Mustofa Bisri, the substance of Aswaja teachings covers three main aspects, namely:

- 1) in the field of fiqh, it adheres to one of the four madhhabs (Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i, and Hanbali), with the Shafi'i madhhab dominating among NU scholars;
- 2) In the field of tawhid, it follows the teachings of Imam Abu Hasan al-Ash'ari and Imam Abu Mansur al-Maturidi.
- 3) In the field of Sufism, it refers to the teachings of Imam Abu Qasim al-Junaid.³

The consolidation of Sunni beliefs in the Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah tradition took place gradually. In theology, Sunni thought is moderate and selective. Hasan al-Bashri's thinking, for example, on the issues of qada and qadar tends to be close to the Qadariyah view, Meanwhile, regarding the issue of major sinners, it is in line with the Murji'ah view which states that major sinners do not become infidels, but rather wicked. This idea later became one of the foundations for the development of Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah theology.⁴

The establishment of NU was also influenced by the internal dynamics of Indonesian Muslims in the early 20th century. On the one hand, NU was a response to the growth of reformist and modernist movements such as Muhammadiyah, as well as the involvement of modern Islamic organizations in political movements such as Sarekat Islam. On the other

¹ Choirul Anam, *Pertumbuhan dan Perkembangan Nahdlatul Ulama* (Surabaya: PT Duta Aksara Mulia, 2010), hlm. 23–26.

² Masykur Hasyim, *Merakit Negeri Berserakan* (Surabaya: Yayasan 95, 2002), hlm. 66.

³ Laode Ida, *NU Muda* (Jakarta: Erlangga, 2004), hlm. 7.

⁴ Ridwan, *Paradigma Politik NU* (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2004), hlm. 95.

hand, NU emerged as a reaction to the influence of international religious thought and movements that were considered to have the potential to shift traditional Islamic practices in the archipelago.⁵

The goal of Nahdlatul Ulama is to realize 'izzatul Islam wal muslimin, which is to maintain the glory of Islam and Muslims by forming a society that adheres to the teachings of Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah. In this context, Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah is understood as the path to Islam that emulates the Prophet Muhammad SAW and his companions by adhering to the Qur'an, As-Sunnah, and authoritative Islamic scholarly traditions.⁶

2. The Role of Nahdlatul Ulama in the Social Reality of Indonesian Society

Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) did not emerge and develop in a vacuum, but grew out of the social reality of Indonesia's diverse, multi-layered society, rich in local traditions. Since its inception, NU has positioned itself as a religious organization that is responsive to the social conditions of its followers, particularly rural communities and Islamic boarding schools. This position has given NU a strong social character that is rooted in the daily lives of Indonesian Muslims.⁷

In the social sphere, NU strives to improve the welfare of the community and preserve local culture in line with Islamic values and humanity. These efforts are carried out as part of strengthening ukhuwah (brotherhood) and social solidarity.⁸ Since its inception, NU has established various social and religious activities and organizations as a means of community empowerment. One of the social and religious activities that has developed within NU is Lailatul Ijtima', which began in the 1930s. This activity includes a series of worship activities such as salat ghaib, salat hajat, tahlil, and recitation of Surah Yasin, as well as a forum for deliberation to discuss organizational and social issues. In addition, NU also developed youth organizations, such as the Persatoean Pemoeda Nahdlatul Ulama (PPNO), which was founded by K.H. Abdullah Ubaid, as a forum for nurturing the younger generation of Nahdlatul Ulama.

In the socio-religious reality, NU acts as the guardian of balance between normative Islamic teachings and socio-cultural practices that exist within society. NU's religious

⁵ Deliar Noer, *Gerakan Modern Islam di Indonesia 1900–1942* (Jakarta: LP3ES, 1996), hlm. 247–250.

⁶ KH. Hasyim Asy'ari, *Risalah Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah* (Jombang: Maktabah at-Turats al-Islami, t.t.), hlm. 7–9.

⁷ Zamakhsyari Dhofier, *Tradisi Pesantren: Studi tentang Pandangan Hidup Kiai* (Jakarta: LP3ES, 2011), hlm. 54–56.

⁸ Saeful Bahri, *Sejarah Peradaban Islam: Perkembangan islam di Nusantara* (Banten: Pustaka Aufa Media, 2015), hlm. 93.

approach, which is based on Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah, allows for a dialectic between religious texts and social contexts. Religious traditions such as tahlilan, maulidan, grave pilgrimage, and slametan are understood by NU not as deviations from Islamic teachings, but as expressions of religious diversity that contain spiritual, social, and cultural values.⁹

Nahdlatul Ulama's social role is also evident in its efforts to maintain harmony in a pluralistic society. NU consistently promotes the principles of religious moderation, such as tawassuth (moderation), tasamuh (tolerance), tawazun (balance), and i'tidal (fairness) in responding to differences, both between Muslims and between people of different faiths. These principles make NU a social force that serves to reduce conflict, prevent radicalism, and strengthen social cohesion in community life.¹⁰

In the context of nationality, NU believes that religion and state are not two mutually exclusive entities. NU accepts Pancasila as the foundation of the state and considers it a national agreement (mu'ahadah wathaniyyah) that is in line with Islamic values. This stance has implications for NU's social role in strengthening religious nationalism and maintaining the integrity of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia (NKRI).¹¹

In addition, NU is also active in community empowerment through various concrete programs in the fields of economy, health, and social welfare. Institutions within NU, Such as the NU Zakat, Infaq, and Alms Institution (LAZISNU), the NU Health Institution (LKNU), and various pesantren-based social movements, which serve as concrete means of addressing issues of poverty, social inequality, and limited access to basic services for the community.¹²

In the contemporary era, amid the challenges of globalization, technological disruption, and the strengthening of transnational religious ideologies, NU continues to play a strategic role as the guardian of a friendly and down-to-earth Islam. The concept of Islam Nusantara developed by NU is a socio-religious response to the Indonesian people's

⁹ Martin van Bruinessen, *NU: Tradisi, Relasi-relasi Kuasa, dan Pencarian Wacana Baru* (Yogyakarta: LKiS, 1994), hlm. 25–27.

¹⁰ Ahmad Suaedy, *Islam NU: Islam Tradisionalisme dan Moderatisme* (Jakarta: PBNU, 2007), hlm. 112–115.

¹¹ KH. Achmad Siddiq, *Khittah Nahdliyah* (Surabaya: Khalista, 2005), hlm. 33–35.

¹² Choirul Anam, *Pertumbuhan dan Perkembangan Nahdlatul Ulama* (Surabaya: Bisma Satu Press, 1999), hlm. 173–176.

need for Islam that is contextual, peaceful, and in harmony with local culture without losing the substance of its teachings.¹³

Thus, Nahdlatul Ulama's role in Indonesian society is not only symbolic, but also substantive and functional. NU acts as a moral, cultural, and social force that bridges religious teachings with real life, while maintaining social stability and national unity within the framework of diversity.

3. The Role of Nahdlatul Ulama in Islamic Education in Indonesia

Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) plays a role in education primarily through the development of Islamic boarding schools as centers of Islamic education. These boarding schools, which have grown and become institutionalized within communities, especially in rural areas, are among the oldest Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia. In its early days, Islamic boarding schools were traditional in nature and focused on deepening religious knowledge (*tafaqquh fi al-dīn*), with a strong emphasis on moral and social ethics in community life.¹⁴

Since its establishment in 1926, NU has been inseparable from the *pesantren* educational tradition, which has been the main basis for the formation of Islamic knowledge, morals, and spirituality. For NU, education is not merely understood as a process of knowledge transfer, but rather as a means of character building and strengthening Islamic values rooted in the teachings of *Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah*. Therefore, education is seen as a strategic instrument in maintaining the continuity of Islamic scholarly traditions while shaping Muslims who are moral and socially responsible.¹⁵

Pesantren, as a fundamental educational institution in the NU tradition, plays an important role in the transmission of classical Islamic sciences (*turās*), such as *fiqh*, *tafsir*, *hadith*, and *tasawuf*. The learning process is carried out through methods specific to *pesantren*, such as *sorogan*, *bandongan*, and *halaqah*, which emphasize depth of understanding, discipline, and a close relationship between *kiai* and *santri*. This

¹³ Afifuddin Muhajir, *Islam Nusantara: Jalan Tengah Islam Indonesia* (Situbondo: Tanwirul Afkar, 2018), hlm. 41–44.

¹⁴ Mastuhu, *Dinamika Sistem Pendidikan Pesantren* (Jakarta: INIS, 1994), hlm. 76.

¹⁵ Choirul Anam, *Pertumbuhan dan Perkembangan Nahdlatul Ulama* (Surabaya: Bisma Satu Press, 1999), hlm. 89–91.

educational model has proven capable of producing students who not only possess religious intellectual skills, but also strong social awareness and moral character.¹⁶

In addition to Islamic boarding schools, NU has a long history of developing formal education through the establishment of madrasas and schools in various regions. Educational institutions under NU's auspices implement an education system that combines Islamic teachings with general subjects, thereby creating a holistic learning environment. Improvements in education quality are made through curriculum updates, provision of facilities and infrastructure, and enhancement of teaching staff competencies. Education in the NU environment emphasizes not only academic aspects, but also character building, morals, and personality development of students.¹⁷

Through madrasahs and Islamic boarding schools, NU also acts as an agent of social change. NU education internalizes the values of inclusiveness, moderation, and tolerance in its curriculum. Programs such as scholarships, education for the underprivileged, and strengthening values-based education are the means by which NU empowers communities, reduces social inequality, and strengthens social cohesion. Thus, education not only serves to enlighten, but also becomes a tool for constructive social transformation.¹⁸

As times change, NU does not stop at traditional education alone. NU actively develops formal education through the NU Ma'arif Education Institution, which is the backbone of primary and secondary education. This institution combines the national curriculum with Islamic values specific to NU, enabling it to respond to the demands of modernity without abandoning its religious identity.¹⁹

NU has also contributed greatly to the development of Islamic higher education through the establishment of various institutions, such as universities, institutes, and Islamic colleges. NU universities are strategic spaces for the development of moderate, critical, and nationalistic Islamic thought, as well as for bridging the dialogue between religious studies and modern science.²⁰

¹⁶ Zamakhsyari Dhofier, *Tradisi Pesantren: Studi tentang Pandangan Hidup Kiai* (Jakarta: LP3ES, 2011), hlm. 44–47.

¹⁷ Ki Prasetyo, "Peran NU dalam Pengembangan Pendidikan Islam," *Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* Vol. 8, No. 2 (2023): hlm. 120–123.

¹⁸ Nasrullah, "Pendidikan Islam dan Pemberdayaan Sosial dalam Perspektif NU," *Jurnal Sosial Keagamaan* Vol. 5, No. 1 (2023): hlm. 55–58.

¹⁹ Abdul Mun'im DZ, *Pendidikan Ma'arif NU dan Tantangan Modernitas* (Jakarta: LP Ma'arif NU, 2015), hlm. 67–70.

²⁰ Ahmad Suaedy, *Islam NU dan Masa Depan Moderasi Beragama* (Jakarta: PBNU, 2018), hlm. 142–145.

In terms of values, NU education emphasizes the internalization of the principles of tawassuth (moderation), tasamuh (tolerance), tawazun (balance), and i'tidal (fairness). These values of religious moderation are instilled through the curriculum, the example set by educators, and the educational culture in NU boarding schools and schools. This approach makes NU educational institutions an important bulwark in preventing religious radicalism and extremism.²¹

In the Indonesian context, NU education also instills national values. Education in the NU environment teaches that love for the homeland is part of faith, and that commitment to Pancasila and the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia does not conflict with Islamic teachings. Integrasi nilai keislaman dan kebangsaan ini menjadikan pendidikan NU berperan strategis dalam membentuk generasi Muslim yang religius sekaligus nasionalis.²²

Thus, Nahdlatul Ulama's role in Islamic education in Indonesia is comprehensive and ongoing. NU not only preserves the legacy of classical Islamic education, but also continues to innovate and adapt so that Islamic education remains relevant to the challenges of the times. This contribution confirms NU's position as one of the main pillars of Islamic education in Indonesia, both in terms of science, morals, and nationality.

4. The Dynamics of NU's Role in Social Reality and Islamic Education in the Contemporary Era

Entering the contemporary era, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) faces various challenges stemming from rapid social, political, and cultural changes due to globalization and developments in information technology. The tide of globalization has had a significant impact on the way Indonesian Muslims, including NU members, think, practice their religion, and organize themselves.²³

One of the main challenges faced by NU is the strengthening of transnational religious ideas that tend to be exclusive, textual, and less accommodating of local traditions. These ideas often conflict with religious practices unique to Indonesian society, such as tahlilan, maulidan, and grave pilgrimages, which have been preserved and

²¹ Afifuddin Muhajir, *Moderasi Beragama dalam Tradisi NU* (Situbondo: Tanwirul Afkar, 2019), hlm. 31–34.

²² KH. Achmad Siddiq, *Khittah Nahdliyah* (Surabaya: Khalista, 2005), hlm. 41–43.

²³ Greg Barton, *Gagasan Islam Liberal di Indonesia: Pemikiran Neo-Modernisme Nurcholish Madjid, Djohan Effendi, Ahmad Wahib, dan Abdurrahman Wahid* (Jakarta: Paramadina, 1999), hlm. 324–330.

developed by NU.²⁴ This situation requires NU to continue strengthening the theological and cultural foundations of Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah so that it remains relevant and capable of serving as a religious reference for the community.

In response to these challenges, NU developed the concept of Islam Nusantara as a religious approach that emphasizes harmony between Islamic teachings and local culture without compromising the substance of Islam itself. This concept emphasizes that Islam can grow and develop peacefully within the context of Indonesia's pluralistic culture.²⁵ Islam Nusantara is NU's cultural strategy in facing cultural homogenization and global religious ideology.

In addition to external challenges, NU also faces internal dynamics, particularly related to leadership regeneration and organizational adaptation to changing times. The difference in perspective between the older and younger generations of NU in addressing contemporary issues, such as democracy, human rights, and digital technology, has become a dynamic that needs to be managed wisely.

Amidst rising radicalism and religious intolerance, NU plays a strategic role as a bastion of religious moderation. Through the principles of tawassuth, tasamuh, tawazun, and i'tidal, NU strives to prevent the spread of extremist ideologies that have the potential to threaten national unity.²⁶ NU's moderate stance positions it as an important socio-religious force in maintaining social stability and harmony in the nation.

In the context of nationality, NU continues to affirm its commitment to the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia (NKRI), Pancasila, and democracy. NU believes that national values do not conflict with Islamic teachings, but rather are in line with the objectives of Sharia law in protecting the welfare of the people.²⁷ This view reinforces NU's position as an Islamic organization that consistently maintains a balance between religiosity and nationalism.

²⁴ zyumardi Azra, *Islam Indonesia: Kontribusi NU dan Muhammadiyah dalam Peradaban Global* (Jakarta: Mizan, 2017), hlm. 45–60.

²⁵ Ahmad Najib Burhani, "Islam Nusantara sebagai Proyek Moderasi Beragama" *Jurnal Maarif*, Vol. II, No. 2 (2016): hlm. 15–30.

²⁶ Zuly Qodir, *Radikalisme Agama di Indonesia* (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2014), hlm. 98–112.

²⁷ KH. Said Aqil Siradj, *Islam Kebangsaan: Fiqih Demokratik Kaum Santri* (Jakarta: Pustaka Ciganjur, 1999), hlm. 75–90.

Thus, the challenges and dynamics of NU in the contemporary era are not only a test of the organization's sustainability, but also a space for the actualization of NU's role as the guardian of moderate Islam, rooted in tradition and responsive to the changes of the times.²⁸

CONCLUSION

Nahdlatul Ulama has played a strategic and comprehensive role in shaping Indonesia's social reality and advancing Islamic education. Rooted in the teachings of Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah, NU has consistently maintained religious moderation, social harmony, and national commitment while preserving local Islamic traditions. Through its vast network of pesantren, madrasas, schools, and higher education institutions, NU not only transmits Islamic knowledge but also forms moral character, social responsibility, and a strong sense of nationalism. Amid globalization, technological disruption, and the rise of transnational religious ideologies, NU continues to adapt through concepts such as Islam Nusantara, ensuring that Islamic teachings remain contextual, inclusive, and relevant to contemporary challenges. Therefore, NU stands as a vital pillar in sustaining moderate Islam, strengthening national unity, and developing transformative Islamic education in Indonesia.

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²⁸ Abdurrahman Wahid, *Islamku, Islam Anda, Islam Kita* (Jakarta: The Wahid Institute, 2006), hlm. 180–195.

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