



Muhammadiyah's Contributions to Education, Social, Cultural, and Political Development: The Perspective of the Nusantara-Middle Eastern Ulama Network

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Abstract

This study analyzes Muhammadiyah's contributions to educational, social, cultural, and political development in Indonesia through the lens of the Nusantara–Middle Eastern ulama network. Using a qualitative historical-analytical approach, the research examines the intellectual trajectories and transregional scholarly connections of three influential Indonesian Muslim figures: Haji Abdul Malik Karim Amrullah (Buya Hamka), Wahid Hasyim, and Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur). The findings reveal that sustained engagement with Middle Eastern centers of Islamic learning such as Mecca, Medina, Cairo, and Baghdad played a significant role in shaping diverse Islamic orientations in Indonesia, ranging from reformist Muhammadiyah thought to traditionalist and neo-modernist perspectives within Nahdlatul Ulama. Buya Hamka's modernist outlook contributed to educational reform and socio-cultural transformation through Muhammadiyah. Wahid Hasyim advanced the modernization of *pesantren* education and strengthened Islamic educational institutions at the state level. Abdurrahman Wahid developed a progressive and pluralistic Islamic vision that reinforced the role of ulama in Indonesia's socio-political landscape. This study demonstrates that the Nusantara–Middle Eastern ulama network served as a vital conduit for intellectual transmission, enabling Muhammadiyah and related Islamic movements to contribute dynamically to Indonesia's religious, social, and political development.

INTRODUCTION

The early history of Islam in Indonesia laid the foundation for the formation of enduring scholarly networks between Nusantara ulama and Middle Eastern centers of Islamic learning. Mecca and Medina often referred to as the Two Holy Cities (Asari, 2007; Azra & Azyumardi, 2018) emerged as the primary hubs of Islamic scholarship and pilgrimage, attracting Muslim scholars from across the world, including Southeast Asia (Azra & Azyumardi, 2018). Beyond their religious significance, these cities functioned as global intellectual centers where Islamic knowledge was transmitted through mosques, madrasas, and *ribāṭ* institutions, shaping transregional scholarly traditions (Asari, 2007).

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The relationship between Nusantara ulama and the Middle East has persisted for centuries, particularly through educational pursuits, religious instruction, and the annual pilgrimage. From the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, Mecca and Medina served as central destinations for Southeast Asian students seeking advanced Islamic learning. This intellectual engagement intensified in the twentieth century, a period marked by profound transformation and contestation within the Muslim world. During this era, many Indonesian scholars pursued religious education in Middle Eastern institutions such as Mecca, Medina, and Cairo, thereby strengthening intellectual exchanges and ideological transmission between the two regions (Naldi, 2022).

These historical connections gradually crystallized into what may be described as the Nusantara–Middle Eastern ulama network, which continues to evolve into the twenty-first century. This network not only facilitated the circulation of religious knowledge but also influenced the development of Islamic movements, educational reforms, and socio-political thought in Indonesia. Notably, figures such as Haji Abdul Malik Karim Amrullah (Buya Hamka), Wahid Hasyim, and Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur) exemplify how transregional scholarly experiences shaped diverse Islamic orientations, ranging from reformist to traditionalist and neo-modernist perspectives. Despite the significance of these transnational scholarly connections, studies that systematically analyze their impact on educational, social, cultural, and political development particularly in relation to Muhammadiyah and broader Islamic movements remain limited.

Therefore, this study seeks to examine the educational backgrounds of prominent Indonesian ulama from the twentieth to the early twenty-first century, map the structure of the Middle Eastern scholarly networks in which they participated, and analyze how these networks influenced Islamic thought and religious diversity in Indonesia. By adopting a historical-analytical approach, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how global Islamic intellectual currents intersected with local contexts, shaping the trajectory of Indonesian Islam in the modern era. From an analytical perspective, the study of ulama networks provides an important framework for understanding the transmission of religious authority and intellectual influence across regions. Scholarly networks linking Nusantara and the Middle East were not merely educational pathways but also mechanisms through which theological orientations, pedagogical models, and socio-political ideas were negotiated and localized. As (Azra & Azyumardi, 2018) emphasizes, these networks enabled Southeast Asian ulama to adapt Middle Eastern Islamic thought to local socio-cultural realities, resulting in distinctive forms of Islamic expression in Indonesia.

This process highlights the dynamic interaction between global Islamic scholarship and indigenous contexts, rather than a unidirectional transfer of ideas. Furthermore, examining the contributions of Muhammadiyah within this transregional network offers critical insights into how reformist Islamic movements emerged and evolved in Indonesia. Muhammadiyah's emphasis on educational modernization, social welfare, and civic engagement cannot be separated from the intellectual encounters of its leading figures with Middle Eastern reformist thought. By situating Muhammadiyah within the broader Nusantara–Middle Eastern ulama network, this study not only enriches existing scholarship on Islamic intellectual history but also contributes to contemporary discussions on religious pluralism, educational reform, and the role of Islamic organizations in socio-political development. Consequently, this research advances the understanding of how transnational Islamic networks continue to shape religious discourse and institutional practices in Indonesia in the twenty-first century.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach using a historical-analytical method to examine the contributions of Muhammadiyah in the fields of education, social, cultural, and political development through the Nusantara–Middle Eastern ulama network. This approach is chosen to trace intellectual trajectories, teacher and student relationships, and institutional connections between Indonesian ulama and centers of Islamic learning in the Middle East from the twentieth to the early twenty-first century. The study emphasizes intellectual history and scholarly network analysis without relying on field interviews, focusing instead on the transmission of ideas, orientations of Islamic thought, and their influence on religious and socio-political dynamics in Indonesia.

The data sources consist of both primary and secondary materials. Primary sources include scholarly works by ulama, autobiographies, speeches, documents from Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama organizations, as well as state policy documents related to education and religious life. Secondary sources comprise academic books and articles from reputable journals addressing ulama networks, Islamic intellectual history, and Islamic movements in Indonesia, particularly publications from 2018 to 2025. Data analysis is conducted thematically and interpretatively by categorizing findings according to the educational backgrounds of ulama, the structure of Middle Eastern scholarly networks, and their influence on Islamic thought and practice in Indonesia (Engkizar et al., 2024; Oktarinda et al., 2021). Data validity is ensured through source triangulation and critical review of relevant literature (Aryasutha et al., 2025; Eltoukhi et al., 2025; Engkizar et al., 2022, 2023, 2025; Ikhlas et al., 2025).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Educational Background of Prominent Indonesian Ulama and Their Connections with the Middle East

The findings of this study indicate that the development of Islamic thought and movements in Indonesia from the twentieth to the early twenty-first century cannot be separated from the educational backgrounds of prominent ulama who maintained close connections with centers of Islamic scholarship in the Middle East, particularly Mecca, Medina, and Cairo. Figures such as Haji Abdul Malik Karim Amrullah (Buya Hamka), Wahid Hasyim, and KH. Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur) represent a typology of Nusantara ulama whose intellectual formation was shaped through a combination of local education such as pesantren and Islamic organizations and transnational interactions within Middle Eastern scholarly networks (Ali Trigiyatno et al., 2022; Burhanudin, 2019; Rusydi, 2018).

Buya Hamka grew up in a reformist Minangkabau ulama family that had been connected to Mecca since the early twentieth century through his father, Haji Abdul Karim Amrullah (Haji Rasul), a student of Shaykh Ahmad Khatib al-Minangkabawi (Burhanudin, 2019). Hamka's early informal and autodidactic education, combined with his intellectual engagement in Yogyakarta through Muhammadiyah and Sarekat Islam, shaped a modernist Islamic orientation that was rational and contextual (Ali Trigiyatno et al., 2022). His residence in Mecca in 1927, along with access to Egyptian reformist literature, further strengthened his intellectual affiliation with Islamic reform ideas developed by Jamaluddin al-Afghani, Muhammad Abduh, and Rashid Rida (Hamka, 1979; Naldi, 2022).

In contrast to Hamka, Wahid Hasyim represents a traditionalist-reformist ulama rooted in the intellectual tradition of the Tebuireng pesantren. His early education under the direct guidance of KH. Hasyim Asy'ari reinforced a strong foundation in hadith studies, Islamic jurisprudence, and Sunni Sufism, which were firmly connected through scholarly lineages to the ulama of the Haramayn,

particularly via Muhammad Nawawi al-Bantani and Mahfudz Termas (Azizah et al., 2021; Yunus, 2008). His experience of studying in Mecca from 1932 to 1933, combined with openness to modern Arabic and Western literature, encouraged him to modernize pesantren education without severing its classical NU scholarly roots.

Meanwhile, KH. Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur) demonstrates a more complex and cosmopolitan educational trajectory. In addition to receiving traditional pesantren education at Tebuireng, Tegalrejo, and Krapyak, Gus Dur underwent intellectual formation abroad through studies at al-Azhar University in Cairo and in Baghdad, although these studies were not formally completed (Burhanudin, 2019; Fealy, 2003; Tohet, 2017). These cross-cultural and intellectual experiences shaped Gus Dur's reflective, critical, and open-minded character, later recognized as a form of Indonesian Islamic neo-modernism (Burhanudin, 2019).

Mapping the Nusantara–Middle Eastern Ulama Network

The findings reveal that the Nusantara–Middle Eastern ulama network was formed through genealogical and intellectual teacher and student relationships that have existed since the seventeenth century and continue into the twenty-first century (Naldi, 2022). This network is not merely personal in nature but has also been institutionalized through pesantren, Islamic organizations, and modern educational institutions.

Buya Hamka was embedded within a reformist Islamic network rooted in Minangkabau ulama of the Haramayn and connected to the reformist thought of al-Azhar Cairo. This intellectual pathway involved figures such as Shaykh Ahmad Khatib, Shaykh Muhammad Tahir Jalaluddin, as well as Muhammadiyah leaders including Ki Bagus Hadikusumo and Muhammad Natsir (Burhanudin, 2019; Yunus, 2008). This network helps explain why Hamka's thought strongly emphasized rationality, doctrinal purification, and modern Islamic social ethics.

Conversely, the networks of Wahid Hasyim and Gus Dur were more strongly connected to the Jawi ulama tradition in the Haramayn, particularly through Nawawi al-Bantani, Mahfudz Termas, and the Sunni Sufi tradition (Burhanudin, 2019). However, these networks were not static; rather, they were adaptive to changing contexts, as evidenced by pesantren educational reforms and active engagement within state institutions.

The Influence of Middle Eastern Networks on Islamic Thought and Diversity in Indonesia

The discussion demonstrates that Middle Eastern ulama networks exerted a significant influence on the formation of Islamic thought and religious diversity in Indonesia. The transmission of knowledge did not occur mechanically but through processes of selection, adaptation, and contextualization in accordance with Indonesia's socio-cultural realities (Azra & Azyumardi, 2018; Naldi, 2022).

Buya Hamka represents Muhammadiyah's modernist Islam, emphasizing the integration of Islamic values, nationalism, and universal humanism. His contributions to education, social ethics, and Quranic exegesis particularly through Tafsir al-Azhar have become important references in the development of moderate and contextual Islam in Indonesia (Mauliddina et al., 2022; Naldi, 2022).

Wahid Hasyim illustrates how NU's Sufi tradition and classical scholarship could be transformed into the foundation of modern public policy. His role as Minister of Religious Affairs in several cabinets reflects the influence of ulama networks in shaping state religious institutions, reforming Islamic education, and modernizing the organization of the hajj pilgrimage (Achmad Zaini, 2011; Yunus, 2008).

Gus Dur represents a further phase of this transformation. With a strong Sufi foundation enriched by global intellectual experiences, he developed an inclusive, pluralist, and progressive Islamic thought. His leadership of NU and his position as

President of the Republic of Indonesia demonstrate how the Nusantara–Middle Eastern ulama network influenced not only religious discourse but also played a strategic role in shaping democracy and civil society in contemporary Indonesia (Anshori et al., 2024; Burhanudin, 2019; Naldi, 2022; Ningrum et al., 2025).

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the twentieth to early twenty-first century represents a crucial phase of Islamic intellectual renewal in Indonesia, occurring alongside experiences of colonialism and the intensification of transnational scholarly networks between Nusantara ulama and the Middle East. The intellectual connections of Haji Abdul Malik Karim Amrullah (Buya Hamka), Wahid Hasyim, and KH. Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur) with Islamic learning centers in Mecca, Medina, and Cairo did not produce uniform patterns of thought; instead, they generated diverse, contextual, and adaptive Islamic orientations. Buya Hamka exemplifies Muhammadiyah's modernist Islam emphasizing intellectual renewal and social ethics; Wahid Hasyim represents a synthesis of NU's Sufi tradition with educational modernization and state institutional development; while Gus Dur advanced an inclusive, progressive, and neo-modernist Islamic vision oriented toward strengthening civil society and democracy. These findings affirm that the Nusantara–Middle Eastern ulama network functioned not merely as a channel for knowledge transmission but as a space of intellectual dialectics that shaped the diversity of thought, religious practice, and socio-political contributions of Indonesian Islam in the modern era.

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