



# Ahmad Dahlan's Contribution of Thought to the Dynamics of the Muhammadiyah Movement.

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## Abstract

The thoughts of K.H. Ahmad Dahlan were a major milestone in shaping the character and direction of the Muhammadiyah movement as an Islamic reform organization in Indonesia. The organization was born from Ahmad Dahlan's concern about the condition of the Muslim community, which at that time was in decline socially, educationally, and spiritually. Ahmad Dahlan came up with contextual and progressive ideas of *tajdid*. Through a literature study approach, this article discusses Ahmad Dahlan's intellectual contribution in reviving rational, functional, and down-to-earth Islamic teachings in depth. He viewed Islam as a comprehensive system of life that must touch all aspects of human life, not just the mere rituals of worship. However, his thoughts did not stop at the level of discourse, but served as a foundation for building educational institutions, empowering women, and social institutions that became the seeds of real change in society. Ahmad Dahlan's ideas rejected the dichotomy between religious knowledge and general knowledge, and prioritized education as the main gateway to change. In the context of the dynamics of the Muhammadiyah movement, his thoughts remain relevant and serve as the spirit of Muhammadiyah's various *da'wah* and social activities to this day. This article aims to highlight the transformative values of his thoughts and how these ideas became the lifeblood of the modern Islamic movement that is deeply rooted in Indonesia.

## INTRODUCTION

Indonesia, as a great nation, certainly cannot be separated from the role of Islamic reformist figures who have laid the foundations for reform in various areas of life, one of which is K.H. Ahmad Dahlan. In the midst of the decline of Muslims during the colonial period which was marked by poverty, educational backwardness, and religious practices mixed with elements of superstition and heresy, Ahmad Dahlan emerged, bringing the spirit of change. Mukhtarom, A. (2019). He was not only a scholar well-versed in classical Islamic studies but also an intellectual open to modern thought. His extensive educational background, both in Islamic boarding schools in his homeland and during his studies in Mecca, made him a visionary figure in understanding the times. He was inspired by the reformist ideas of figures such as Jamaluddin al-Afghani, Muhammad Abduh, and Rasyid Ridha, which he then adapted to the Indonesian context. Akhiruddin, K. M. (2015).

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Ahmad Dahlan's understanding of the conditions of the Muslim community led him to understand that change cannot be achieved individually or sporadically, but must be achieved through an organized and structured movement. Thus, Muhammadiyah was born on November 18, 1912, as a manifestation of the ideals of pure, rational, and contextual Islamic renewal. Anis, A. (2019). Through Muhammadiyah, Ahmad Dahlan championed integrated Islamic education, integrating religious and general knowledge, opening access to education for women through 'Aisyiyah, and establishing social institutions that addressed the real needs of the community. His ideas were not merely concepts, but became the basis for concrete actions in building an intelligent, moral, and competitive community. Muthrofin, K., & Muchtar, N. E. P. (2023).

## METHODS

This data analysis focuses more on library research, namely by reading, reviewing, and examining books and written sources closely related to the problem being discussed (Muaz, M., & Ruswandi, U., 2022). This study uses a descriptive research method that emphasizes the strength of the analysis of sources and data, relying on existing theories and concepts to be interpreted based on writings that lead to the discussion of the problem. (Sari, R. K. 2021).

This research uses library research. Data were obtained by collecting, analyzing, and organizing sources from articles, journals, books, and previous research on the contribution of Ahmad Dahlan's thought to the dynamics of the Muhammadiyah movement. This research will then conclude and present data regarding the contribution of Ahmad Dahlan's thought to the dynamics of the Muhammadiyah movement. In this paper, readers will be invited to understand more deeply how the thoughts of K.H. Ahmad Dahlan became the main source of the Muhammadiyah movement and how his intellectual contributions and social practices remain relevant and inspiring to this day. This research uses a library study method by exploring various references, books, articles, and historical documents closely related to the figure and the movement he pioneered. It is hoped that this study can enrich insight into the importance of transformative Islamic thought in responding to the challenges of the times.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Short Biography of K. H. Ahmad Dahlan

K.H. Ahmad Dahlan, whose real name was Muhammad Darwis, was born in Kauman, Yogyakarta, in 1868. He was the fourth of seven children from a respected and religious family. His father was K.H. Abu Bakar, a preacher at the Grand Mosque of the Yogyakarta Sultanate, while his mother was Siti Aminah, daughter of K.H. Ibrahim. Since childhood, Darwis has shown extraordinary intelligence and a strong passion for learning. Syarif, U. (2017). At the age of 8, he had completed the 30 chapters of the Quran and demonstrated a persistent, inquisitive nature and a talent for leadership from an early age. Darwis received his first religious education from his father, then continued by studying with a group of great scholars, such as K.H. Muhammad Shaleh (fiqh), K.H. Muhsin (nahwu), and K.H. Raden Dahlan (falak). Not only that, he also studied many hadiths from Kyai Mahfudz and Sheikh Hasan, as well as qira'at from Sheikh Amien and Sayyid Bakri Syatha. Muttaqin, A. (2017).

His scholarly journey led him to make the pilgrimage to Mecca at the age of 22 (1890), where he remained to study for five years. In Mecca, he studied the reformist ideas of great thinkers such as Jamaluddin Al-Afghani, Muhammad Abduh, and Rasyid Ridha, which greatly influenced his thinking. There, he even abandoned

his old name and changed it to Ahmad Dahlan after receiving permission from his teacher, Sayyid Bakri Syatha. Ahmad Dahlan was known as an activist and lover of knowledge, as evidenced by his preference for buying a book worth 500 gold coins rather than using it as capital for business. He was also active in preaching, teaching, and trading, including serving as a religious teacher at Kweekschool Jetis and OSVIA Magelang, as well as a teacher in the Kauman community.

In 1912, Ahmad Dahlan founded the Muhammadiyah organization in the Kauman area of Yogyakarta as an Islamic renewal movement. He was inspired by the thoughts of figures such as Ibn Taymiyyah, Muhammad Abduh, Rasyid Ridha, and Al-Afghani. Muhammadiyah aimed to purify the faith, advance Islamic education, and integrate religious and general knowledge. He was also active in preaching to the lower and upper classes, even joining the modern organization Budi Utomo to expand the reach of his preaching. Muttaqin, A. (2017). K.H. Ahmad Dahlan died on February 23, 1923, in Yogyakarta and was buried in Karangajen. The Indonesian government designated him a National Hero of Independence through Decree No. 657 of 1961.

### Thoughts of K. H. Ahmad Dahlan

Ahmad Dahlan's thinking was considered progressive and relevant to the problems of the people during the colonial period. He presented Islam not merely as a ritualistic religion, but as a comprehensive guide to life (*way of life*). His ideas spanned social, educational, and cultural spheres. His rational and functional way of thinking explored the primary sources of Islamic teachings (the Quran and Sunnah) rationally and purely. He rejected syncretism and various forms of teaching that deviated from the essence of Islam. K.H. Ahmad Dahlan was not a thinker simply busy expounding theories in a vacuum. He was a figure who fused thought and action. Every idea he had was born from his sensitivity to social reality, and he did not hesitate to directly intervene to change it. For him, Islamic teachings should not remain merely concepts, discourse, or memorization, but must become a transformative force capable of touching the real lives of the people. Religious teachings must be down-to-earth and provide a solution to the suffering, backwardness, and ignorance that afflicted society at that time. That is why his thoughts were always enlightening and led to concrete social movements that raised the awareness of the people. Furthermore, he was also known as a figure who strongly opposed the separation between religious knowledge and general knowledge. According to him, the dichotomy between the two would only produce a lopsided generation: one side too textual, the other lacking spiritual direction.

Therefore, he championed an integrated educational model that maintained religious values as the primary foundation, while simultaneously incorporating mastery of science and technology. This was an extraordinarily progressive and even radical step by colonial standards, when many were still trapped in sectoral fanaticism and secular Western-style education. This idea reflected not only his intellectual courage but also his astuteness in understanding the times and addressing the needs of the community holistically. In his view, education was the primary gateway to social change, and therefore, it must be shaped by a system that liberates the mind, purifies the heart, and equips the community with knowledge that is relevant and functional in real life.

#### 1. Islam as a Rational and Social System of Life

For K.H. Ahmad Dahlan, Islam is not merely a collection of worship rituals limited to the mosque or during prayer, but rather a comprehensive way of life that should influence all aspects of human life. Religion must be

present in the educational sector, social relations, economics, and even the cultural realm. True religiosity, according to him, is not one that is trapped in symbols or mere memorization, but one that is capable of driving real social change. The Islamic views and experiences he developed are based on a rational and applicable approach—religion is believed in, understood deeply, and used as a foundation for solving societal problems. Islam, in his view, is not merely a subject of debate or a rigid dogma, but a concrete and down-to-earth liberating energy. Mawardi, A. (2017).

2. Modern Islamic Education as an Instrument of Social Change

One of K.H. Ahmad Dahlan's greatest contributions lies in the field of education. He was highly critical of the Dutch colonial education system that overly glorified Western culture without giving space to Islamic values. Responding to this concern, he offered an education system based on religious values, but not anti-modern science. Akhyar, M., & Kosim, M. (2024). In Muhammadiyah schools, he included general subjects, foreign languages, and sciences into the curriculum, while making religious education a core subject. Schools such as Mu'allimin, Mu'allimat, and Mubalighin and Mubalighat are tangible evidence of his struggle to build a generation of intelligent, competitive, and qualified Muslims. For him, education is the locomotive of the progress of the people: not just a place to seek knowledge, but an arena for forming complete human beings who are rational, ethical, and progressive.

3. Rational-Functional Approach to Islamic Teachings

K.H. Ahmad Dahlan was known as a figure who did not blindly follow the opinions of scholars without careful consideration. He preferred to interpret the Qur'an using the verse-versus-verse method (*munasabah ayat*), using common sense and clear logic. Jayadi, H.M. He believed that understanding religion should give birth to positive social change. Therefore, his approach was both rational and functional not only understanding the text, but also instilling meaning for real action. Although emphasizing the purification of Islamic teachings, he still considered the conditions of the times. He did not reinterpret the Qur'an and Sunnah rigidly, but rather in a contextual and adaptive way to the challenges of modernity. His interpretation was not merely textual, but reflective and transformative.

4. Hijrah as a Transformation of the Mindset of the Ummah

Hijrah, in the understanding of K.H. Ahmad Dahlan, does not only mean physical movement from one place to another. More than that, hijrah is a symbol of a change in mindset: from a passive to an active mindset, from dependence to independence, from stagnation to dynamism. He sees hijrah as a spiritual and intellectual journey starting from input (knowledge and values), continuing through the process (internalization of values), until producing an output in the form of social change. This is the basis of the spirit of reform within Muhammadiyah, encouraging Muslims to continue moving, thinking progressively, and not getting trapped in the stasis of tradition. Abror, R.H. (2012).

5. Commitment to the Purity of Islam

Ahmad Dahlan had a strong commitment to the purification of Islamic teachings. He rejected religious practices mixed with local customs or traditions that contradicted the values of monotheism. He was also very strict

against the practice of blind imitation that distanced the community from critical understanding. According to him, religion must be based on knowledge, reason, and awareness, not simply following hereditary customs without basis. Muhammad, F. A. (2020). However, the purity he fought for was not rigid exclusivity, but rather an effort to return to the core teachings of Islam as taught by the Prophet Muhammad SAW, which are pure, dynamic, and touching on life.

6. Empowering Women as Pillars of the Community

Amidst the strong patriarchal culture of that time, K.H. Ahmad Dahlan's thoughts on women were considered very progressive. Mu'thi, A., Mulkhan, A. M., & Marihandono, D. (2024). He believed that women have a strategic role in building civilization and should not be neglected. For this reason, he founded a women's organization called 'Aisyiyah as a space for mothers and young women to learn, preach, and organize. Burhanuddin, J. (Ed.). (2002). He even held religious classes and courses specifically for women. For him, when women are intelligent and educated, they are not merely complements in the household, but equal partners in the struggle of the people and nation.

7. Da'wah as a Concrete Social Movement

For Ahmad Dahlan, da'wah is not enough to be conveyed only verbally or in writing, but must also be realized in real actions. Wulandari, I. (2017). Islamic teachings, especially the spirit of Surah al-Ma'un, encouraged him to establish social institutions such as the Department of Assistance to the Poor, hospitals, orphanages, and Muhammadiyah medical centers. His students were taught not only to be proficient in reading the scriptures but also to be sensitive to the social suffering around them. Da'wah for him was a means to free the people from poverty, ignorance, and backwardness.

8. Cultural Preaching Strategy and Interfaith Tolerance

In a stressful colonial situation, K.H. Ahmad Dahlan chose a peaceful and cautious cultural da'wah strategy. Masruroh, S., Priatna, T., Nursobah, A., & Suherdiana, D. (2023). He consciously avoided practical politics in order to protect Muhammadiyah's existence from pressure from the Dutch East Indies government. Even so, he continued to show courage in defending the rights of the people, including through education and social activities. Abdullah, M. A. (2020). He also demonstrated a high level of tolerance towards followers of other religions, including the Christian community. Not because of compromise, but because he understood that social harmony and community trust are important assets for the sustainability of the da'wah movement. This strategy is evidence of his maturity and clarity of thought in determining the direction of the people's struggle.

### **Background to the Birth of Muhammadiyah**

The emergence of Muhammadiyah was inseparable from the deep anxiety felt by K.H. Ahmad Dahlan regarding the condition of Muslims during the colonial period. This anxiety arose from various dimensions: social, religious, and moral. From a social aspect, Muslims at that time were in a vortex of backwardness, poverty, and minimal access to education. Miswanto, A., & Arofi, M. Z. (2015). Religiously, the practice of Islam in society tended to be formalistic and ceremonial, filled with elements of superstition, bid'ah, and superstition, without having a significant impact on social life. In the moral realm, there was a blurring of values, so that the boundaries between what is appropriate and inappropriate, right and wrong, became unclear.

There are two main factors behind the founding of Muhammadiyah. Ula, N., Laila, K., & Qosim, N. (2022). The first is an internal or subjective factor, which originates from K.H. Ahmad Dahlan's deep thoughts and reflections on the verses of the Qur'an, especially Surah Ali Imran verse 104. This verse awakened his spiritual and intellectual drive to form a systematic and directed da'wah organization, tasked with inviting goodness and preventing evil. The second factor is external or objective, namely the condition of the community, which still practices religious rituals mixed with local traditions that do not align with authentic Islamic teachings. Practices such as offerings, thanksgiving, and funeral celebrations, which have been passed down through generations, were of particular concern to K.H. Ahmad Dahlan because they were considered to deviate from the principles of monotheism.

Furthermore, this movement was also inspired by the spirit of Islamic renewal that was developing in the Middle East, brought by great figures such as Jamaluddin al-Afghani, Muhammad Abduh, and Rasyid Ridha. Through the rational thinking and purification of Islamic teachings that they spread, K.H. Ahmad Dahlan felt the urgency to free the people from the shackles of imitation and syncretism. After studying in Mecca and returning to his homeland, he saw that Javanese society, in particular, was still trapped in a pattern of religiosity that was symbolic and mixed with local customs. Therefore, Muhammadiyah emerged as a solution to ground Islam that was pure, rational, and relevant to the context of the times.

### **Ahmad Dahlan's Contribution to Muhammadiyah**

K.H. Ahmad Dahlan was not only the founder of Muhammadiyah but also a central figure in shaping the direction of the movement's struggle and establishing its values. Since its founding on November 18, 1912, Muhammadiyah has been the primary vehicle for realizing his ideas of Islamic renewal. His contributions extend to various sectors:

1. Educational Transformation

K.H. Ahmad Dahlan founded an educational institution with a modern approach that integrates general knowledge and Islamic studies. Kholidin, A., & Kodriyah, I. (2025). This approach has proven to be able to produce a generation of Muslims who are intellectually intelligent, spiritually religious, and productive in social life.

2. Development of Social Institutions

He also initiated the establishment of various social institutions such as PKU Hospital, an orphanage, the women's organization Aisyiyah, and a waqf institution. All of these are concrete forms of da'wah bil hal—da'wah through concrete actions and direct service to the community.

3. Women's Emancipation

Through 'Aisyiyah, Ahmad Dahlan opened up space for women's participation in the realms of da'wah, education, and social activities. This initiative was considered highly progressive, having been initiated long before gender equality became a public discourse in Indonesia.

4. Organizational Ethics and Spirit

Within the Muhammadiyah organization, he instilled the values of sincerity, simplicity, and dedication. His famous saying, "Live Muhammadiyah, don't seek a living in Muhammadiyah," has become a moral motto that continues to inspire its members to this day.

### **K.H. Ahmad Dahlan's Thoughts on the Dynamics of the Muhammadiyah Movement.**

The thoughts of K.H. Ahmad Dahlan significantly influenced the direction of Muhammadiyah's movement. Nofa, Y. (2021). And they remain the mainstay of the organization's development to this day. His ideas represent a synthesis of Islamic values with the spirit of modernity, which later became Muhammadiyah's characteristic as an adaptive Islamic movement. Muhammadiyah not only functions as a religious organization but has also evolved into a modern social movement that upholds the values of spirituality, rationality, and humanity. Mu'ti, A., Ulhaq, F. R., Khoirudin, A., & Fanani, A. F. (Eds.). (2016). Within the framework of contemporary movement studies, Muhammadiyah is often classified as a new social movement namely, a movement that prioritizes immaterial values, anti-violence, and community empowerment.

Ahmad Dahlan's educational concept was also a direct manifestation of his vision. He opposed a rigid and dogmatic educational system. Instead, he offered an educational model based on *ijtihad*, contextual, and responsive to social change and the challenges of the times. This approach demonstrated Muhammadiyah's ability to be a pioneer in the realm of modern Islamic education. Furthermore, a systematic cadre development system, a spirit of collectivism, and autonomy in managing charitable endeavors are structural legacies of the organizational thinking designed by K.H. Ahmad Dahlan. These dynamics continue to transform, making Muhammadiyah one of the largest, most structured, and most influential Islamic organizations both nationally and in Southeast Asia.

### **CONCLUSION**

K.H. Ahmad Dahlan is a central figure in the history of the rise of modern Islam in Indonesia. He is known not only as the founder of Muhammadiyah, but also as a great thinker who was able to formulate Islamic ideas that were not only relevant in his time, but also remain alive in every pulse of the Muhammadiyah movement today. Through a rational and applicable approach to Islamic teachings, Ahmad Dahlan emphasized the importance of making Islam a solution to social, economic, educational, and cultural problems in society. His ideas on the importance of integrating religious knowledge with general knowledge, education as a tool for transformation, the empowerment of women as a pillar of the community, and *da'wah* as a concrete social movement have become the main pillars of Muhammadiyah. In the context of the movement's dynamics, Ahmad Dahlan's thinking succeeded in making Muhammadiyah not merely a religious organization, but a progressive, adaptive, and solution-oriented social movement addressing the challenges of the times. The values he instilled, such as sincerity, simplicity, and devotion, continue to be passed down from generation to generation. His legendary statement, "Live Muhammadiyah, don't seek a living in Muhammadiyah," is not merely a slogan, but an ethical principle that continues to be upheld and firmly upheld by its cadres to this day. In conclusion, Ahmad Dahlan's thinking has made a significant contribution to shaping the direction, strategy, and spirit of Muhammadiyah's struggle. With a comprehensive approach to education, social issues, and *da'wah*, he demonstrated that Islam is a living, liberating religion capable of being a force for social transformation. His intellectual legacy is a crucial milestone

in building an inclusive, progressive, and grounded Islamic civilization amidst the ever-evolving realities of Indonesian society.

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