

Madrasah As a Transformation of Islamic Education in North Sumatera

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ABSTRACT

Madrasahs initially evolved from traditional Islamic educational institutions centered on mosques and Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*). This study aims to analyze the formation and development of madrasahs within the Indonesian national education system. The method used is a historical analysis, reviewing the pre-independence to post-independence periods, including the implementation of the Joint Decree (SKB) of the Three Ministers and the accompanying curriculum changes. The results show that madrasahs represent a blend of the *pesantren* model and the modern education system. Government policy strengthens the position of madrasahs by equalizing their status with public schools and developing a school-based curriculum. These findings confirm the strategic role of madrasahs in the national education system and contribute to the development of Islamic education policies that integrate religious values with national education.

Keyword: Madrasah; Transformation; Islamic Education

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1. INTRODUCTION

The term *madrasah* comes from Arabic, from the root words *darasa–yadrusu–darsan*, meaning to study. Grammatically, *madrasah* is a noun meaning a place of learning. In Indonesian, this term is equivalent to the word "school." Based on its original meaning, *madrasah* refers to a place where learning activities take place in general, not limited to a specific location. Madrasahs can be held in homes, prayer rooms, mosques, or other places according to the needs of the community. In the early days, these places served as centers for the dissemination and development of knowledge in the Islamic educational tradition (Muwafiqoh & Ulum, 2023).

The existence of *madrasahs* in Indonesia is a continuation of the traditional Islamic education system that developed in *surau* (Islamic prayer rooms), Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*), *langgar* (prayer rooms), and mosques. According to Maksum, the emergence of madrasahs was influenced by two main factors. First, it was a response from Muslims to the discriminatory policies of the Dutch East Indies colonial government in the field of education. Second, it was the impact of the influx of Islamic renewal movements inspired by reforms in the Middle East. The shift in the teaching system from the *halaqah* model to the class (classical) system in Indonesian madrasahs was closely related to the influence of the Dutch colonial school system. This transformation was carried out as a form of adaptation to the demands of the times and as a reaction to the secular nature of colonial education that did not accommodate religious instruction (Liriwati, 2024).

Over time, Islamic education in Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*), mosques, and madrasahs initially emphasized aspects of Sufism, which later evolved into a strengthening of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*). This was influenced by the nature of Sufism in Indonesia, which is rooted in the Sunni school of thought and places *fiqh* as a central pillar in the structure of Islamic scholarship. The *madrasah* curriculum at that time included courses in Sufism, *fiqh*, *kalam* (theology), instrumental sciences such as grammar and rhetoric, as well as *tafsir* and *hadith*. However, historical sources do not record in detail how Islamic education was implemented during the early period of Islamization. Many aspects of the evolution of Islamic educational systems, methods, and institutions can only be explained through evidence-based historical studies (Hidayah, 2023).

The growth of madrasas accelerated with the emergence of Islamic renewal movements spearheaded by Muslim intellectuals and continued by Islamic organizations in various regions such as Java, Sumatra, and Kalimantan. These organizations established madrasas as a form of modern Islamic education. According to the Islamic Education History Compilation Team of the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs, the oldest madrasa in Indonesia is Madrasah Adabiyah, founded in Padang, West Sumatra, by Sheikh Abdullah Ahmad in 1909 (Sari et al., 2024).

Over time, the term "madrasah" has narrowed its meaning and is understood as a formal educational institution that combines religious and general lessons. In classical Islamic literature (*turath*), the term "madrasah" is also used to refer to schools of thought such as the Hanafi, Maliki, Syafi'i, and Hanbali madrasas (Fauzan, 2024). In this context, *madrasah* describes a community of *ulama* with a particular methodology in the field of Islamic law. The formation of these schools occurred during the golden age of Islamic civilization, especially in the Abbasid era when freedom of thought encouraged *ulama* to develop legal *istinbat* methods independently (Jaber, 2025).

Historically, madrasas played an important role in the spread of Islamic knowledge alongside mosques and Islamic boarding schools. A seminar on the arrival of Islam in Indonesia held in Medan in 1963 concluded that Islam entered the archipelago in the 7th century AD through Arab traders. However, there are differing opinions regarding the origins of Islam in Indonesia. Pijnapel and Snouck Hurgronje mention India, Moquette argues for Gujarat, while Fatimi points to Bengal. Al-Attas rejects all three views and asserts that Islam came directly from Arabia for two reasons: Islamic literature in Indonesia before the 17th century does not show the influence of Indian authors, and the names of the carriers of Islam are of Arab or Persian origin (Suriyani, 2024).

Based on this description, important questions arise about how the madrasah was established and how it evolved to become an integral part of Indonesia's national education system. The purpose of this study is to analyze the birth of madrasahs, their structural and curricular development from the pre-independence to post-independence era, and the role of government policies in strengthening their position as formal educational institutions.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This research employed a library research method focused on discussing issues related to the transformation of Islamic education in North Sumatra. Data were collected through a review of various written sources, such as scientific articles, academic journals, research reports, and books relevant to the development of Islamic education. Sources were selected based on several criteria: literature published within the last ten years to ensure contextual relevance, direct thematic relevance to the issue of Islamic education transformation, and originating from credible academic sources, including reputable journals and publications from higher education institutions.

Data analysis was conducted using two approaches: descriptive analysis and content analysis. Descriptive analysis was used to systematically collect, categorize, and present data before in-depth interpretation. Content analysis, meanwhile, focused on examining the meaning, messages, and trends contained within the literature sources (Sujarweni, 2015). The analysis process involved reading, interpreting, and summarizing various literature on the development of Islamic educational institutions, which was then focused on the context of Islamic education transformation in North Sumatra and reinforced with other relevant supporting sources.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The early 20th century witnessed a major shift in the history of Islamic education in Indonesia. This transformation began when the Dutch colonial government introduced a modern school system through its ethical policy (*Ethische Politiek*) as a form of concern for the welfare of the indigenous population. One example was the establishment of *volkscholen*, or people's schools, to provide basic education for indigenous children. These schools began in the 1860s in Batavia and Semarang, although initially they met with little interest in both cities. Support instead came from the people of West Sumatra, which later became the center of the development of modern colonial education. From this emerged a group of indigenous intellectuals who became the pioneers of modern Indonesian intellectual (Islamiyah, 2022).

During the same period, the intellectual network between Indonesian *ulama* and the Islamic renewal movement in Cairo began to strengthen. Cairo became an important center for Indonesian students seeking to deepen their religious knowledge while broadening their modern perspectives. While Mecca was known as the center of the Nusantara *ulama* tradition, Cairo offered a synthesis of Islamic education and progressive modern rationality. The city also opened up space for the intellectual and social activities of foreign students, including

those from Indonesia. The development of print media and modern educational institutions in the Islamic world accelerated the spread of reformist ideas to the Malay world (Puspitasari Rhindra et al., 2022). In the context of social change theory, this global interaction demonstrates the phase of value diffusion and adaptation of educational culture, which laid the initial foundation for the transformation of Indonesian Islamic education toward a more modern and rational model.

In line with the growth of this Islamic intellectual network, Indonesia entered a phase of educational modernization marked by the emergence of various modern Islamic institutions. Examples include SMA Plus Adzkie in Medan, which developed an integrated education system with a boarding school concept, and the Insan Cendekia Islamic Foundation in Helvetia, which implemented a *full day school* system focused on integrating general and religious knowledge (Pangeresa et al., 2024). This educational model illustrates a form of adaptive transformation in which Islamic values are not abandoned but rather integrated into the modern education system. Within the framework of educational modernization theory, this indicates a paradigm shift from a traditional teacher-based system to an institutional system oriented toward management, curriculum, and measurable evaluation.

Similar changes have occurred in formal institutions such as Madrasah Ibtidaiyah Negeri (MIN) 1 Medan, which is now recognized as one of the best elementary schools in the city. This madrasa excels not only academically but also in religious development through activities such as congregational prayer, *Duha* prayer, and daily Qur'an recitation (Badriyah & Suwandi, 2024). These religious traditions were originally typical of Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) but have now been adapted by modern madrasas. In the context of value integration theory, these practices demonstrate an integrative transformation process, namely the merging of elements of *pesantren* spirituality with a competency-based formal education system.

The transformation of Islamic education is also evident at the tertiary level, with the establishment of a network of state Islamic universities, such as STAIN (State Islamic Institute), IAIN (State Islamic Institute), and UIN (State Islamic University), all under the Ministry of Religious Affairs. Since the 1960s, the government has strengthened Islamic higher education by improving the quality of lecturers and expanding study programs. Many IAINs have subsequently transformed into UINs, offering general disciplines such as science, economics, technology, and medicine (Handoyo et al., 2025). This process reflects a reformative transformation in which the Islamic scientific paradigm is expanded into a comprehensive educational system capable of competing globally without losing its religious orientation.

Entering 1924, the development of madrasas accelerated with the implementation of the classical system and the division of education levels similar to formal schools. The colonial government then issued the *Guru Ordonnantie* to control Islamic education outside of government supervision. However, this policy actually sparked a new awareness among Muslims to fight for educational independence. This was marked by the increasing number of madrasas and Islamic schools established in various regions as a form of resistance to colonial educational hegemony. Organizations such as Muhammadiyah, NU, Persis, and Al-Irsyad played a crucial role in the renewal of Islamic education and the development of modern madrasas without abandoning *sharia* principles.

During the Japanese occupation (1942–1945), madrasas were given greater room to grow as Japan sought to win the sympathy of Muslims. After independence, madrasas began to be recognized as part of the national education system. Since 1950, the Ministry of Religious Affairs has overseen the development of madrasas, although initially the government's attention was not equal to that of public schools. During the New Order era, madrasas experienced significant progress following the issuance of the Joint Decree of the Three Ministers (1975), which equalized the madrasa curriculum with public schools and granted formal recognition to their diplomas (Afista, 2021). This policy marked a significant milestone in the process of integrating madrasas into the national education system.

The reforms continued with the enactment of Law No. 2 of 1989 and Law No. 20 of 2003 concerning the National Education System, which affirmed the position of madrasas as an integral part of the national school system under the Ministry of Religious Affairs (Wahyudin, 2023). With this legal legitimacy, madrasas gained a strategic position as formal educational institutions equivalent to public schools. Within the framework of social transformation theory, this demonstrates a shift from a marginalized position to institutional recognition as a form of integrative transformation that combines religious values and educational nationalism.

In its development in the modern era, madrasas have demonstrated rapid progress in both institutional management and learning quality. Madrasas are no longer viewed as low-status alternative educational institutions but as superior institutions capable of competing at the national and international levels (Enhas et al., 2023). Thus, the journey of madrasas in Indonesia can be understood as an adaptive, integrative, and reformative transformation that adapts to the demands of the times, integrative in combining religious and scientific values, and reformative in expanding the role of Islamic scholarship amidst the globalization of education.

4. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicate that the development of Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia is dynamic, with diverse characteristics and patterns. *Pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools), *madrasahs* (Islamic schools), traditional Islamic schools, and modern Islamic schools all developed within their respective historical and social contexts, yet shared a common orientation to provide quality and relevant Islamic education. Madrasahs, which initially emerged from traditional institutions such as *surau* (prayer houses), mosques, and Islamic boarding schools, later transformed into a formal education system standing alongside public schools. This transformation was driven by social demands stemming from Dutch colonial policies and the influence of Islamic movements, and gained legal legitimacy through the Joint Decree of the Three Ministers (1975) and the National Education System Law (2003).

Theoretically, the results of this study strengthen the understanding of the modernization of Islamic education as an integrative process between religious values and a modern education system. Practically, this study recommends that education policy continue to focus on strengthening madrasahs through innovative curricula, digitalization of learning, and improving teacher competency. With these steps, madrasahs are expected to adapt to social and technological developments while maintaining their position as superior and competitive Islamic educational institutions within the national education system.

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