

**MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF  
ISLAM NUSANTARA: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF  
ABDURRAHMAN WAHID'S THOUGHT**

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**Abstract**

*This study examines Abdurrahman Wahid's (Gus Dur) ideas on multicultural education and their relevance to Islamic education in Indonesia. Through a literature review of his writings and speeches, the research finds that Gus Dur promoted an inclusive, tolerant, and culturally grounded Islam known as Islam Nusantara. He emphasized that education should foster mutual respect, empathy, and peaceful coexistence across religious and cultural differences. His rejection of exclusivist interpretations and advocacy for local cultural integration position his thought as a strong foundation against intolerance and radicalism. Gus Dur's ideas remain highly relevant for building a tolerant and humanistic Islamic education today.*

**Keywords:** Multicultural education, Islam Nusantara, Tolerance

**Abstrak**

Penelitian ini mengkaji pemikiran Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur) tentang pendidikan multikultural dan relevansinya bagi pendidikan Islam di Indonesia. Melalui studi pustaka atas tulisan dan pidatonya, ditemukan bahwa Gus Dur mengusung Islam inklusif dan toleran yang dikenal sebagai *Islam Nusantara*. Ia menekankan pentingnya pendidikan yang menumbuhkan sikap saling menghargai, empati, dan hidup damai dalam keberagaman. Penolakannya terhadap tafsir tunggal dan dukungannya terhadap budaya lokal menjadikan gagasannya relevan untuk melawan intoleransi dan radikalisme. Pemikiran Gus Dur menjadi landasan penting dalam membangun pendidikan Islam yang manusiawi dan toleran.

**Kata Kunci:** Pendidikan multikultural, Islam Nusantara, Toleransi

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## **Introduction**

Indonesia is an archipelagic country known for its extraordinary cultural, linguistic, ethnic, and religious diversity. According to the Central Statistics Agency (BPS, 2023), Indonesia is home to more than 1,300 ethnic groups and over 700 regional languages spread across its vast islands. In addition, the religious life of Indonesians is also diverse, encompassing Islam, Christianity, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and local belief systems. This multicultural reality not only represents a cultural richness but also presents the potential for horizontal conflict if not managed wisely. Hence, the urgency for multicultural education as a strategic effort to strengthen social cohesion and promote mutual respect becomes increasingly significant (Banks, 2006; Gay, 2010).

Multicultural education aims to shape citizens who are aware of diversity, socially empathetic, and tolerant of differences (Nieto & Bode, 2018). In the Indonesian context, multicultural education must not be limited to textual knowledge; it must be integrated into daily experiences, learning practices, and local values. Islamic education, which plays a vital role in Indonesia's educational landscape, is expected not only to teach ritualistic and doctrinal aspects of the faith but also to instill universal Islamic values such as *rahmatan lil 'alamin* (mercy for all creation), social justice (*al-'adl*), human brotherhood (*ukhuwwah insaniyyah*), and tolerance (*tasamuh*), which are all foundational elements of Islam (QS. Al-Hujurat: 13; QS. Al-Anbiya: 107). Therefore, multicultural Islamic education is an actualization of Islam's inclusive and humanistic ethos.

In practice, however, there are still many rigid, textualist, and exclusivist religious interpretations that hinder the integration of multicultural values within the education system. This is where a contextual and tolerant approach to Islam (rooted in local culture) is needed, as advocated by K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur) through the concept of Islam Nusantara. Gus Dur proposed that Islam should not be presented as a rigid "Arab" religion, but rather as a spiritual and social force that harmonizes with local culture while maintaining its universal principles (Ahmad, 2018). His approach, known as the *indigenization of Islam*, was an effort to re-root Islamic teachings in Indonesian culture, enabling its values to be broadly accepted across various ethnic, religious, and cultural groups.

Gus Dur was not only a national leader and former president of Indonesia but also a Muslim intellectual and cultural thinker who consistently advocated for pluralism, democracy, and humanity. His thoughts on Islam Nusantara reflect his efforts to integrate Islamic teachings with Indonesia's socio-cultural reality. For Gus Dur, Islam should be a moral force that embraces all groups, not one that excludes others (Wahid, 2001). He believed that respecting diversity is an inseparable part of faith and that education is the most strategic instrument for instilling these values in future generations. Therefore, Gus Dur developed a concept of multicultural Islamic education, an education that prioritizes respect for differences, social justice, and intercultural dialogue.

Several studies have highlighted the relevance of Gus Dur's thoughts in the context of multicultural education. Prachya (2013), in her research, found that Gus Dur viewed education as a medium for liberation and empowerment, not merely the transmission of knowledge. He emphasized four strategic approaches to multicultural education: political, socio-cultural, pedagogical, and cultural. All of these aim to shape humanist individuals capable of living harmoniously in a pluralistic society. Meanwhile, the study by Rosalina et al. (2021) shows that Gus Dur's ideas align with the principles of multiculturalism proposed by James A. Banks, including recognition of minority identities, equitable curriculum development, and participatory equality

in multicultural society. These values are also aligned with Islamic objectives (*maqāṣid al-syarī'ah*), particularly the protection of religion, intellect, and humanity.

Nevertheless, Gus Dur's ideas on multicultural Islamic education have not been systematically examined within the framework of *Islam Nusantara* as a distinct epistemological approach to Islam rooted in Indonesian culture. In fact, his thinking offers not only practical relevance but also theoretical depth as a paradigm for education capable of countering intolerance and exclusivism in today's global era. This research seeks to address that gap by critically analyzing Gus Dur's concept of multicultural education and its relevance in designing an inclusive, contextual, and culturally grounded model of Islamic education in Indonesia.

## **Method**

This study employs a qualitative approach using the library research method. This method is deemed appropriate because the research focuses on examining the thoughts of a prominent figure within a conceptual and philosophical framework, particularly regarding multicultural education from the perspective of *Islam Nusantara*. Library research allows the researcher to conduct an in-depth exploration of Abdurrahman Wahid's (Gus Dur's) written works and relevant academic discussions.

Primary data sources consist of Gus Dur's original works, including books, articles, essays, and public speeches that directly reflect his views on education, pluralism, diversity, and Islam Nusantara. Among these are his influential book "*Islamku, Islam Anda, Islam Kita*" and a collection of his essays published in various media or anthologies. The researcher also utilized documented speeches and interviews by Gus Dur that are thematically relevant.

Secondary sources include academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, theses, and dissertations that analytically discuss Gus Dur's thought, multicultural education, and the concept of Islam Nusantara. Only sources with strong academic credibility and clear relevance to the research focus were selected.

The data were analyzed using content analysis techniques. The analysis process involved three key stages: (1) identifying major themes in Gus Dur's thought, (2) categorizing the values of multicultural education within the framework of Islam Nusantara, and (3) critically interpreting the relevance of Gus Dur's ideas in shaping an inclusive and context-based model of Islamic education. To ensure data validity, source triangulation was also applied by cross-referencing multiple literatures that corroborate each other.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Biography of Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur)**

Abdurrahman Wahid was a highly respected national figure in Indonesia, admired by people across different communities. His full name was Abdurrahman ad-Dakhil Wahid, though he is more widely known as Gus Dur. The title "Gus" in Javanese tradition, particularly in pesantren (Islamic boarding school) circles, refers to the son of a prominent Islamic cleric (*kyai*). This honorific signifies that Gus Dur came from a highly esteemed and influential Islamic family. He was born on August 4, 1940, in Jombang, East Java, a town famously known as the "city of santri" due to its many renowned pesantren and scholars.

Gus Dur was born into a family of prominent ulama (Islamic scholars). His father, Wahid Hasyim, was a key historical figure who served as Indonesia's first Minister of Religious Affairs under President Soekarno. His grandfather, Hadratus Syaikh K.H. Hasyim Asy'ari, was the founder of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), the largest

Islamic organization in Indonesia. Raised in such an environment, Gus Dur was immersed in Islamic values, wisdom, and a deep love for learning from an early age (Aizid, 2023).

He began his formal education in an elementary school in Jakarta, then continued to the Sekolah Menengah Ekonomi Pertama (SMEP) in Tanah Abang, Central Jakarta. As a teenager, he was known for his intelligence, critical thinking, and love for reading. His interests spanned beyond religion to include history, literature, and general sciences. Later, he moved to Yogyakarta and lived with K.H. Junaid, a Muhammadiyah figure and a member of Majelis Tarjih Muhammadiyah. This experience broadened his perspective on Islamic diversity and nurtured his inclusive attitude (Rifai, 2020).

Gus Dur furthered his Islamic studies at several pesantren, notably in NU circles. From 1959 to 1963, he studied at Pesantren Muallimin Bahrul Ulum in Tambak Beras, Jombang, one of NU's most prominent Islamic institutions. He later studied at Pesantren Krapyak in Yogyakarta under K.H. Ali Maksum, a highly respected scholar. At these pesantren, he mastered classical Islamic texts written in Arabic.

Driven by his passion for knowledge, Gus Dur pursued higher education abroad. In 1964, he traveled to Egypt to study at Al-Azhar University in Cairo—one of the oldest and most prestigious Islamic institutions in the world. However, he found the learning system there too rigid and incompatible with his dynamic and critical way of thinking. In 1966, he transferred to the University of Baghdad, Faculty of Arts, where he explored a broad range of disciplines, including Arabic literature, history, culture, and Islamic philosophy. His experiences in these two culturally rich countries significantly shaped his worldview and deepened his openness to pluralism.

While living abroad, Gus Dur was not only a student but also an active participant in intercultural dialogue. He engaged with people from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds, frequently discussing, writing, and reading international literature. These experiences reinforced his belief that Islam is a religion of mercy for all creation, not exclusive to a single group. This understanding became the bedrock of his commitment to tolerance and diversity upon returning to Indonesia. He viewed differences not as a threat, but as a treasure to be preserved and cherished collectively.

Upon his return to Indonesia, Gus Dur became actively involved in social, educational, and religious spheres. He wrote extensively, taught, and participated in public discussions on national issues. His critical, compassionate, and inclusive outlook earned him widespread respect, not only from the Islamic community and pesantren circles, but also from people of different faiths and backgrounds. As the chairman of Nahdlatul Ulama (PBNU), he introduced many transformative reforms, including fostering interfaith dialogue and cross-group collaboration.

Gus Dur later entered politics and eventually became the fourth President of Indonesia. He led the nation during a turbulent period following the fall of the New Order regime, amidst an economic and social crisis. During his presidency, Gus Dur was renowned for advocating for the rights of marginalized groups, religious freedom, and freedom of speech. He abolished discriminatory laws and supported cultural recognition for minority communities, including allowing Chinese Indonesians to openly celebrate the Lunar New Year (Imlek) after decades of prohibition.

Known for his humor and relaxed demeanor, Gus Dur often conveyed profound messages through light and witty expressions, making them accessible to people from all walks of life. Behind his casual style was a steadfast commitment to justice, peace, and human dignity. He never hesitated to stand up for truth despite facing significant

pressure. He is widely remembered as the “Father of Indonesian Pluralism” for his relentless efforts to uphold national unity and diversity.

Gus Dur passed away on December 30, 2009, but his legacy lives on in the hearts of many. He is remembered as a courageous, honest, and compassionate leader for all people. His ideas continue to inspire and be referenced across educational and religious institutions. Numerous schools, roads, and places of worship have been named after him in honor of his contributions. More than just a cleric or president, Gus Dur was a true statesman and teacher of the nation who taught the importance of peaceful coexistence, mutual respect, and interfaith love (Misrawi, 2022).

### **Abdurrahman Wahid’s Concept of Multicultural Education**

Gus Dur believed that every citizen holds a vital place in communal life. Thus, each individual deserves respectful and just treatment based on their circumstances. Every person has fundamental freedoms that must not be violated by anyone. These include personal safety, dignified treatment, the right to education, and equal opportunities to express opinions, uphold beliefs, and contribute positively to society.

For Gus Dur, multicultural education is an inclusive approach to teaching that considers diversity. This inclusiveness should apply to all subjects, not just those related to civics or religion. Differences such as regional origin, religion, language, socioeconomic status, skin color, cognitive abilities, and behavioral tendencies must be recognized and appreciated (Shohib, 2020).

He often referenced the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia, which outlines the state’s responsibility to ensure equitable prosperity. Gus Dur emphasized that Indonesia’s development should not only aim for progress and freedom but also justice and equitable success. In multicultural education, it is essential to instill the belief that every individual holds inherent value. The goal is not only to educate intellectually but also to cultivate just individuals who respect diversity.

The majority group in society must not suppress minority groups. Gus Dur maintained that diversity of opinion is a blessing. The Qur’an reminds us that humans were created in diverse groups and nations so they may know and respect one another. This verse teaches that differences should not be grounds for conflict but rather opportunities for learning and collective growth. Thus, both conservative and progressive Muslims must embrace the reality of a diverse majority with wisdom.

Gus Dur introduced the concept of “Islamic indigenization” (Pribumisasi Islam), which asserts that Islam in Indonesia should harmonize with local cultures. Religion and culture must not dominate one another. Islam can thrive within the context of Indonesian culture without compromising its core values. This is not about altering religious doctrines but about expressing them in culturally relevant ways. Islam should not simply mimic foreign customs but should engage meaningfully with local traditions (Setyazi et al., 2022).

He firmly rejected the notion that Islamic expression must mimic Arab culture. Instead, he advocated for a version of Islam that could be embraced by Indonesian society. Rather than enforcing uniformity, he envisioned a peaceful and culturally sensitive expression of Islam. This approach highlighted Islam as a religion of compassion, toward God, humanity, and the environment.

Gus Dur also emphasized the importance of community voice in shaping collective life. He believed that mutual listening fosters empathy and patience. All people (Muslim and non-Muslim alike) must be granted the opportunity to thrive and contribute. If embraced wholeheartedly, this principle would foster a culture of respect and inclusivity that transcends group boundaries.

The reality of living in a majority-minority society cannot be ignored. Education must prepare individuals to coexist within this reality. This is deeply connected to human dignity and rights. The multicultural perspective sees humans as beings who must be respected holistically. Their rights and responsibilities must be upheld fairly. Islamic education must not focus solely on knowledge acquisition, it must also instill ethical values in students.

Core values such as empathy, tolerance, and cooperation must be cultivated early on. Education that focuses only on cognitive achievement, without shaping character and moral integrity, loses its essence. In Islam, humans are inherently social beings, they cannot live in isolation. Everyone depends on one another and must therefore live in mutual respect and cooperation (Musthofa, 2024).

Gus Dur envisioned an Islamic education that nurtures well-rounded individuals, not only intellectually capable but also kind-hearted and ethically responsible. Such education will foster generations capable of caring for themselves and their communities. This is genuine education: one that integrates knowledge, attitudes, and actions into daily life.

### **Islam Nusantara as the Foundation of Gus Dur's Thought**

Islam Nusantara represents a distinctive form of religiosity that affirms the compatibility of Islamic teachings with the local values deeply rooted in Indonesian society. This concept goes beyond mere cultural syncretism; it emphasizes respect for diversity, tolerance, and a compassionate approach to Islamic preaching. Abdurrahman Wahid, or Gus Dur, was a key figure who championed Islam Nusantara as the intellectual and spiritual foundation for how Islam should be understood and practiced in the Indonesian context. He recognized that Islam's arrival in the archipelago was not through conquest, but rather through cultural adaptation, friendship, and the promotion of universal human values.

Gus Dur's ideas did not emerge in a vacuum. He was inspired by the long history of Islam's development in the archipelago, particularly through the peaceful and cultural da'wah (propagation) methods of the Wali Songo (Nine Saints). According to Gus Dur, Islam in Indonesia flourished not through coercion, but through harmonious engagement with local traditions. Religious practices such as *tahlilan*, *yasinan*, *barzanji*, and the commemoration of the Prophet's birthday (*maulid*) exemplify an Islam that is deeply rooted in community life. Far from being deviations from orthodoxy, Gus Dur saw these as vital social and spiritual tools for strengthening Muslim solidarity in Indonesia.

This view is supported by numerous Indonesian Muslim scholars. Azyumardi Azra, for instance, stated that Islam Nusantara is an inclusive and tolerant form of Islam aligned with the nation's pluralistic ethos. He emphasized that Islam in Indonesia differs from that of the Middle East due to its strong connection with local cultural heritage while maintaining its core religious principles. Islam Nusantara presents a friendly and approachable face of Islam.

Ahmad Baso (as cited in Alfiah, 2023) echoed this idea, asserting that Islam Nusantara is not a new form of Islam. Rather, it reflects the result of a long historical and cultural adaptation process. Gus Dur's thought extends beyond cultural expression; it also entails a theological framework that honors tradition, respects diversity, and nurtures patriotism. He saw Islam Nusantara as an authentic way of being religious in Indonesia, characterized by serenity, coexistence, and a commitment to societal peace.

The purpose of Islam Nusantara, as Gus Dur envisioned, was not to dilute Islamic teachings but to communicate them in a way that resonates with the Indonesian people. By utilizing familiar cultural forms, Islamic teachings could be

more effectively understood and embraced. This approach is particularly beneficial in educational and da'wah contexts, especially for communities more attuned to cultural expressions than abstract religious terminology. In this way, Islam becomes an accessible and relevant guide for daily life. Gus Dur believed that Islamic education grounded in local culture would produce individuals who respect others, do not fear differences, and strive for peace.

Moreover, Islam Nusantara serves as a bulwark against radicalism and the imposition of monolithic interpretations of Islam. Gus Dur firmly opposed any effort to claim Islam for a single group or ideology. He rejected violent proselytization and the erasure of local traditions. His view aligns with Nurcholish Madjid, who asserted that Islam came not to erase culture, but to perfect it (Asripa et al., 2021). Culture, in this view, is a natural vessel for expressing divine values in society.

Gus Dur's promotion of Islam Nusantara offered a vision of religiosity that allows individuals to practice Islam while preserving their cultural identity. Local values such as *gotong royong* (communal cooperation), *musyawarah* (deliberation), and tolerance are seamlessly integrated into Islamic life. Gus Dur argued that such an approach to Islam would bring collective benefit because it emphasizes inclusion rather than coercion. Education rooted in the values of Islam Nusantara can nurture a generation capable of dialogue, empathy, and humanitarianism.

In sum, Gus Dur laid a foundational framework for a peaceful, tolerant, and culturally rooted expression of Islam in Indonesia. Islam Nusantara is not a fabricated innovation but a continuation of Indonesia's long-standing Islamic tradition enriched by local wisdom. By embracing Islam Nusantara as the basis of his thought, Gus Dur affirmed that religion should not dominate culture, but rather illuminate it and fortify the national identity (Yakin, 2022).

### **Tolerance as the Key to Multicultural Education**

Gus Dur is widely recognized as a prominent figure who consistently demonstrated a deep commitment to humanitarian values and the defense of minority rights. His support for marginalized communities was not limited to rhetoric, it was evident through his actions. He openly defended the rights of Chinese-Indonesians who had long faced discrimination, and he showed public support for groups such as the Ahmadiyya and adherents of local indigenous beliefs like Sunda Wiwitan. These actions were not only a testament to his moral courage but also reflected his unwavering belief that every human being deserves dignity and security.

The inclusive and tolerant stance exemplified by Gus Dur offers critical lessons for the field of education. Schools, as spaces for growth and learning, must reflect values of peace, openness, and respect for diversity. Quality education is not merely about delivering academic content; it must also cultivate students' character so that they are prepared to live harmoniously with others. Children must not be raised to fear those who are different. Instead, they must be encouraged to understand that diversity is a beautiful and unifying aspect of life.

Tolerance is not a passive stance but an active ability to accept the reality that others may differ in culture, beliefs, language, or lifestyle. Children must learn that not everyone prays the same way or lives according to the same traditions. These differences are not shortcomings but enrichments. When children are taught to appreciate this early on, they grow into individuals who are not easily provoked by differences and do not harbor feelings of superiority merely because they belong to the majority.

One of Gus Dur's most well-known statements, "It doesn't matter what your religion is; what matters is whether you can do good to others", carries a profound moral message. In a world often marked by prejudice and discrimination, this quote

urges us to judge people based on their actions, not their formal identities. True goodness transcends religious, ethnic, and racial boundaries. When education integrates this value into the daily learning process, it nurtures a generation that is wise, empathetic, and humane.

The role of teachers is especially crucial in embedding the value of tolerance. Teachers must not only deliver theories but also serve as role models through their behavior. When educators demonstrate respect for all students regardless of their background, students internalize those behaviors through observation. Stories, class discussions, and group activities can be powerful tools to instill an appreciation of difference. Thus, value-based education is not limited to lectures but is also formed through daily interactions and personal experience.

Early habituation in accepting differences shapes individuals who are socially and emotionally mature. These children will not react with hostility when confronted with opposing views. Nor will they feel threatened when peers have different religious practices. On a broader scale, they will be better prepared to thrive in a pluralistic society without prejudice. The capacity to coexist peacefully with others is an essential building block for a strong and prosperous nation (Ritonga, 2024).

Schools that promote tolerance will become safe and welcoming spaces for all children. Discrimination based on religion, skin color, or cultural traditions will no longer be tolerated. No child will feel alienated due to their background, and none will feel superior simply for belonging to a majority group. Every child will feel respected, heard, and accepted. This model of education mirrors Gus Dur's vision of an Indonesia that is just, peaceful, and humane, an Indonesia built upon the recognition and celebration of diversity.

## **Conclusion**

Abdurrahman Wahid, widely known as Gus Dur, was a prominent figure born into a respected pesantren environment and a distinguished family of Islamic scholars. From an early age, he was immersed in a deeply religious atmosphere that fostered a passion for learning and a profound appreciation for Islamic values. His extensive educational journey, both at home and abroad, shaped him into an open-minded, critical, and tolerant thinker. Gus Dur's vision of Islam was characterized by peace, compassion, and inclusivity, an understanding that emphasized the equal dignity of all human beings regardless of their religious, cultural, or ethnic backgrounds. He firmly believed that Islam in Indonesia should harmonize with local culture, making it more accessible and conducive to fostering a peaceful and pluralistic society.

According to Gus Dur, multicultural education is a pedagogical approach grounded in mutual respect, acceptance of differences, and the promotion of peaceful coexistence. He stressed that every individual, without exception, deserves to be treated with dignity and given equal opportunities in both education and life. His concept of *Islam Nusantara* teaches that Islam is not meant to eliminate local cultures, but rather to enrich and strengthen them. Furthermore, Gus Dur demonstrated that tolerance is not a sign of weakness but a profound strength that holds the key to unity. His intellectual legacy serves as a crucial foundation for the development of Islamic education that not only enlightens the mind but also nurtures just, compassionate, and empathetic individuals capable of building a harmonious and inclusive society.



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