

PURIFYING THE FAITH, ACTING FOR PROGRESS Reinterpreting Muhammadiyah

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Abstract

This paper investigates Muhammadiyah, specifically exploring the intricate relationship between purification and social activism and addressing the interpretive challenges inherent in their connection. It posits that ijtihad and progress, fundamental to Muhammadiyah's theological underpinnings, broaden the understanding of purification beyond mere adherence to the Scriptures, aligning purification with the necessity of adapting to contemporary developments. The initial sections of the paper analyze Suara Muhammadiyah to shed light on the organization's early theological framework that seamlessly integrates purification, social activism, ijtihad, and progress. Subsequent sections, drawing on diverse research findings, explore the evolution of these concepts and their implementations throughout Muhammadiyah's history. The paper concludes that the fusion of ijtihad and progress has fostered diverse approaches to purification, reflecting various cultural and social contexts. This synthesis has prevented stagnation in the realm of social activism and infused it with vitality and dynamism.

[Tulisan ini mengkaji ormas Muhammadiyah, kebususnnya tentang hubungan rumit antara pemurnian dan aktivisme sosial serta penafsiran-penafsiran dalam hubungan keduanya. Studi ini mengemukakan bahwa ijtihad dan



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kemajuan, yang merupakan landasan teologis Muhammadiyah, memperluas pemahaman tentang pemurnian lebih dari sekedar ketaatan pada kitab suci, tetapi menyelaraskan pemurnian dengan kebutuhan untuk beradaptasi dengan perkembangan kontemporer. Bagian awal makalah ini menganalisis Suara Muhammadiyah, menyoroti kerangka teologis awal organisasi yang mengintegrasikan pemurnian, aktivisme sosial, ijtihad, dan kemajuan. Bagian selanjutnya mengeksplorasi evolusi konsep-konsep tersebut dan implementasinya sepanjang sejarah Muhammadiyah, dengan memanfaatkan beragam temuan penelitian. Makalah ini menyimpulkan bahwa perpaduan ijtihad dan kemajuan telah mendorong beragam pendekatan terhadap pemurnian, yang mencerminkan berbagai konteks budaya dan sosial. Sintesis ini telah mencegah stagnasi di bidang aktivisme sosial serta menanamkan vitalitas dan dinamisme di dalamnya.]

Keywords: Muhammadiyah, purification, social activism, Islamic reformism, progressive Islam

A. Introduction

The concept of ‘progress’ has recently emerged as a focal point in Muhammadiyah’s discourse, highlighted especially during its 2022 congress where the organization was characterized as a progressive Islamic movement (*gerakan Islam yang berkembang*). Progressive Muhammadiyah is delineated as an organization that “commits to progress, adapts to modernity, advocates a moderate understanding, and promotes tolerance in both thought and action”.¹ Contrary to its recent prominence, the term progress was used less frequently in the latter part of the 20th century. However, this sporadic usage should not be interpreted as an indication of its limited influence within the organization. In fact, the concept of progress has been a key force in shaping Muhammadiyah’s organizational ideologies and activities. Arifin notes that a strong desire to elevate

¹ *Laporan Pimpinan Pusat Muhammadiyah Period 2015-2022* (Yogyakarta: Pimpinan Pusat Muhammadiyah, 2022), p. 8. For recent discussions on progress within Muhammadiyah, refer to Syamsul Arifin, Syafiq Mughni, and Moh. Nurhakim, “The Idea of Progress: Meaning and Implications of Islam Berkemajuan in Muhammadiyah”, *Al-Jāmi’ah: Journal of Islamic Studies*, vol. 60, no. 2, (2022), pp. 554-6. For a vision of progressive Islam proposed by Muhammadiyah activists, refer to Alpha Amirrachman, Andar Nubowo and Azaki Khoirudin (ed), *Islam Berkemajuan untuk Indonesia Berkemajuan: Agenda Muhammadiyah ke Depan* (Jakarta: Centre for Dialogue and Cooperation among Civilisations, 2015).

Indonesian society from historical backwardness was a fundamental impetus for the establishment of Muhammadiyah.² Likewise, Najib Burhani and Achmad Jainuri emphasize the significance of progress, aligning it with Muhammadiyah's essential goal of religious reform.³

The resurgence of the concept of progress, coupled with its foundational role, calls for a reevaluation of Muhammadiyah's conventional portrayal. Historically, the organization has been characterized through the dual lenses of purification and social activism.⁴ Hildred Geertz, for instance, describes Muhammadiyah as "a modernist Islamic social service and educational society which is dedicated to ... the purification of Indonesian Islam".⁵ In this context, purification signifies the efforts to remove non-Islamic beliefs and practices, often identified as *bid'ah*, while social activism emphasizes a proactive approach in integrating Western developments. However, this dual characterization presents interpretative challenges, as the link between purification and social activism is not immediately evident. Such ambiguity necessitates a more in-depth exploration of how the removal of syncretic elements can coexist with the foundation of modern educational and social institutions. Here, the notion of progress becomes crucial, serving as a bridge over this conceptual gap. It allows for an expanded interpretation of purification that extends beyond mere strict adherence to scripture, making it more flexible and attuned to contemporary changes. This broader understanding, in turn, validates the establishment of schools and orphanages as integral parts of Muhammadiyah's reform agenda.

This paper aims to scrutinize the ideological framework of Muhammadiyah during its formative years, focusing on the amalgamation of purification, social activism, and progress into its ethos. It also explores the concept of '*ijtihad*', the rational interpretation of the Islamic

² MT. Arifin, *Mubammadiyah: Potret yang Berubah* (Yogyakarta: Suara Muhammadiyah, 2016), p. 32, 45.

³ Ahmad Najib Burhani, *Mubammadiyah Jawa* (Yogyakarta: Suara Muhammadiyah, 2016), pp. 105-9; Achmad Jainuri, *Ideologi Kaum Reformis: Melacak Pandangan Keagamaan Mubammadiyah Periode Awal* (Surabaya: Lembaga Pengkajian Agama dan Masyarakat, 2002), p. 91.

⁴ Howard M. Federspiel, "The Muhammadiyah: A Study of an Orthodox Islamic Movement in Indonesia", *Indonesia*, vol. 10 (1970); James Peacock, *Purifying the Faith: The Muhammadiyah Movement in Indonesian Islam* (California: The Benjamin/Cummings Publishing Company, 1978), pp. 110-1.

⁵ Hildred Geertz, "Indonesian Cultures and Communities", in *Indonesia*, ed. by Ruth McVey (New Haven: Yale University, 1967), pp. 66-7.

Scriptures, which served as a key instrument in Muhammadiyah's goal of returning to the original state of Islam. Through *ijtihad*,⁶ Muhammadiyah effectively merged the core ideas of purification, social activism, and progress.

Despite extensive scholarly discussions on Muhammadiyah's early theological construction, including seminal works by Achmad Jainuri and Fauzan Saleh,⁷ this study explores the topic for two primary reasons. First, existing literature often overlooks the significant role played by Muhammadiyah's official bulletin, '*Suara Muhammadiyah*' (SM), in shaping its theological narratives. By examining this crucial source, this research attempts to provide a more vivid and comprehensive account of the theological evolution and formation of key concepts. Second, contemporary scholarship tends to analyze the fundamental principles of purification, social activism, progress, and *ijtihad* in isolation, limiting a nuanced understanding of their interconnectivity. This study proposes an integrative approach, demonstrating how these ideas not only coexist but also mutually reinforce each other. Adopting this integrative perspective, the paper seeks to deepen our understanding of the evolution of purification and social activism throughout Muhammadiyah's history, a theme that will be explored in later sections. Rather than presuming that purification efforts inherently lead to the eradication of non-Islamic elements, this study examines the concrete implementations and outcomes of these endeavors by Muhammadiyah activists. Beyond merely tracing the numeric expansion of educational and social institutions, this study analyzes the dynamic processes underpinning the establishment and transformation of these entities.

The paper starts by exploring how Muhammadiyah activists, in the organization's early years, recognized the perceived backwardness in Muslim society. It critically analyzes the role of *ijtihad* as a potential remedy, concentrating on the strategies developed to confront Islamic malaise through purification and social activism. The latter part of the paper traces the historical development of these initiatives, charting their evolution to the present day. This analysis posits that the integration of *ijtihad* and progress has precluded a simplistic, binary interpretation of

⁶ This italic word is an Indonesian word, loaned from the Arabic one, *ijtihād*. Throughout this article, things like this occur several times.

⁷ Achmad Jainuri, *Ideologi Kaum Reformis*; Fauzan Saleh, *Modern Trends in Islamic Theological Discourse in 20th Century Indonesia: A Critical Survey* (Leiden, Boston & Koln: Brill, 2001).

purification, thereby rendering it more adaptable and sensitive to context. This approach has fostered diverse approaches to purification, reflecting various cultural and social contexts, and has prevented stagnation in the realm of social activism, infusing it with vitality and dynamism.

The first two sections of this paper are based on archival research, primarily drawing from *Suara Muhammadiyah* editions published between 1922 and 1926. This timeframe was chosen due to the unavailability of editions from 1920 to 1921 and a notable editorial shift after 1927 when the publication began focusing primarily on reporting Muhammadiyah's activities.⁸ The author conducts a contextual interpretation of materials from *Suara Muhammadiyah*, supplemented by secondary data on the early years of Muhammadiyah. The subsequent sections present a comprehensive analysis of various research findings, incorporating contributions from both external scholars and Muhammadiyah activists. While not directly integrated into the analysis, the author's research experience —intensively carried out over eight months in 2010 and intermittently thereafter— provides valuable contextual insights that inform the examination of both primary and secondary sources.

B. Diagnosis of Backwardness in Muslim Society

In the early 1920s, Muhammadiyah's discourse drew a stark contrast between the concepts of progress (*kemajuan*) and regression (*kemunduran*).⁹ The prevailing notion asserted that Muslims, unable to keep pace with Western advancements, were entrenched in backwardness. The quality of living, political standing, and intellectual pursuits within Muslim communities were perceived to lag behind those of non-Muslim societies significantly.¹⁰ This dismal view extended to Indonesia itself, then under non-Muslim colonial rule, grappling with economic challenges and lacking modern institutions necessary for progress.

⁸ The citation format for *Suara Muhammadiyah* varies based on the publication year. The 1922 edition consists of monthly issues, and when citing, the publication month is enclosed in square brackets, for example, '1922[3]'. Conversely, the editions from 1923 to 1926 are compiled with consecutive page numbers; in citations from these years, only the year is provided without specific monthly references. SM includes articles with identified contributors as well as those without clear authorship, which are attributed as 'anonymous'.

⁹ A. M. Wijoto, "Keroesakan Kita", SM (1922[3]), p. 12.

¹⁰ "Samboengan S. M. No.7 Tjatatetan (Notulen) Rapat Moehammadijah Tahoen 1342 H. 1924 M", SM (1924), p. 113.

Muhammadiyah activists¹¹ viewed Muslims as besieged on multiple fronts, with Islam perceived as teetering “on the brink of extinction”.¹² They attributed this backwardness not to external factors but primarily to the Muslims themselves, contending that “due to a lack of comprehension of social changes... our lives were entrenched in malaise”.¹³ While Muhammadiyah’s interpretation of backwardness bore a resemblance to the perspectives of contemporary nationalists, its approach markedly differed. In contrast to nationalists who proposed distancing from religion to tackle these challenges,¹⁴ Muhammadiyah activists pursued solutions within the Islamic framework. They contended that the issue was not Islam itself, but its misinterpretation and flawed practice.¹⁵ To support this view, they highlighted historical instances where Muslim societies were at the forefront of global advancements and civilization.¹⁶

Muhammadiyah activists pinpointed the corruption of ‘*tauhid*’ (Ar: *taḥīd*) (the belief in the oneness of God) as a key factor in the decline of Muslim society. Despite its fundamental importance in Islam, *tauhid* was often incorrectly practiced, leading to the widespread prevalence of ‘*syirik*’ (Ar: *shirk*)—the adherence to non-Islamic traditions. This misinterpretation was widespread among ordinary Muslims, especially apparent in the veneration of natural objects like large stones, trees, and statues, often involving offerings and acts of worship.¹⁷ Notably, the term ‘*abangan*’ was used to describe Muslims who blended Islamic and non-Islamic traditions.¹⁸ Practices that were common among *abangan*

¹¹ As the ideas and opinions expressed in SM reflect those of a wider circle within Muhammadiyah, this paper uses the term ‘Muhammadiyah activists’ in this and subsequent sections. This term is intended to denote individuals who advocate for and express these ideas and opinions.

¹² Fanan, “Perintah Tochan Jang ke 9”, SM (1923), p. 165.

¹³ Nazir, “Gandjil alias Aneh”, SM (1925), p. 108.

¹⁴ Agama Rachmat, “T’lam !!!”, SM (1924), p. 43; H.A. Namidrameos, “Anggapan Anak Boemi (Pendoedoek) Tanah Djawa kepada Agama Islam dalam Zaman Ini”, SM (1923), p. 183.

¹⁵ Nasreddin, “Mentjahari Ilmoe”, SM (1923), p. 212.

¹⁶ Bin Hasjim, “Agama Islam Njawa Kemajuan: Samboengan S. M. No. 3”, SM (1922[4]), p. 10.; Djojosoegito, “Rapat pada Hari Selasa 1 April 1924 Terboeka”, SM (1924), p. 134.

¹⁷ H.A. Namidrameos, “Sesoeatoe Hal jang Kerap Kali Meroesakkan Kepertjajaan Menoeroet Boenjinja Ajat Qoeran”, SM (1923), pp. 64-5.

¹⁸ H.A. Namidrameos, “Anggapan Anak Boemi (Pendoedoek) Tanah Djawa Kepada Agama Islam dalam Zaman Ini”, SM (1923), p. 182. The term *abangan* gained prominence following its use by Clifford Geertz to categorize Javanese Muslims. Both SM and Geertz employ *abangan* in a similar manner, using it to characterize syncretic

Muslims, such as *selamatan* (life-cycle ceremonies) and *ziarah* (pilgrimages to graves of the deceased), were categorized as *syirik*. Muhammadiyah activists argued that *syirik* was not only in direct opposition to Islamic teachings, but it also contributed to the social backwardness of Muslims. They believed that adherence to *syirik* impeded independent and rational thinking, thereby keeping individuals mired in ignorance.¹⁹

Furthermore, Muhammadiyah activists pointed to a narrow understanding of *amal* (religious deeds) as another contributing factor in Muslim underdevelopment, emphasizing that Islam values actions for both worldly affairs and the hereafter. In their view, simply performing daily prayers, reciting scriptures, and engaging in religious studies were insufficient for one to be deemed a true adherent of Islam, unless these acts were translated into practical implementations in daily life.²⁰ According to this perspective, those who limited their *amal* exclusively to religious rituals might harbor false beliefs or lack genuine faith in Islam.²¹ Muhammadiyah activists attributed the deterioration of *tauhid* and *amal* primarily to misconceptions about religious teachings, identifying specific sources of these misunderstandings: Islamic leaders and scholars, known as *‘kiai’* or *‘ulama’*, and the practice of *‘taklid’* (Ar: *taqlid*) which involves strict adherence to the interpretations and rulings of the four Islamic law schools. In their critique of *taqlid*, the activists did not outright dismiss these schools’ teachings. Instead, they questioned the tendency to accept these rulings as unchallengeable and definitive. Advocating for a more dynamic approach, they argued that interpretations from these law schools should undergo critical analysis, comprehensive comparison, and contextual evaluation to ensure their relevance and applicability in contemporary settings.²²

When Muhammadiyah activists extended their critique to the general Muslim populace, *taqlid* was seen as representing blind obedience and submission to the authority of *kiai*. The unquestioned adherence to *kiai’s* doctrinal interpretations, along with their further sacralization, was perceived as a contributing factor to the decline of Islam. The activists argued that *kiai* did not inherently possess Islam, nor did they have a Muslims who blend Islamic practices with pre-Islamic religious traditions.

¹⁹ H.A. Namidramees, “Sesoeatoe Hal jang Kerap Kali Meroesakkan Kepertajaan Menoeroet Boenjinja Ajat Qoeran”, SM (1923), p. 64.

²⁰ “Bentangan dan Soal Djawab”, SM (1923), p. 127.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² H.A. Namidrameos, “Anggapan Anak Boemi (Pendoedock) Tanah Djawa Kepada Agama Islam dalam Zaman Ini”, SM (1923), pp. 71-2.

monopoly on its interpretation.²³ The widespread belief among ordinary Muslims that they needed a *kiai* to act as an intermediary for their prayers to reach God was viewed as a significant misinterpretation, reducing the divine to a human level and misunderstanding the nature of God.²⁴

Critiques towards *kiai* also centered on their perceived detachment from practical issues. Muhammadiyah activists asserted that *kiai* were preoccupied with merely “rotating a *tasbeih* (Ar: *tasbīh*) (Islamic rosary) while chanting in the mosque”,²⁵ and showed little concern for the real-world needs of their followers. This criticism was vividly exemplified in a report titled “The Strange Look I’ve Seen”, which underscored a *kiai*’s neglect of *amal*:

During a Friday prayer session, an Islamic leader in charge of the mosque emphasized the importance of donating for mosque repairs, placing a collection box at the entrance. While he successfully gathered donations from worshippers as they arrived and departed, he completely overlooked the needy individuals begging right outside the mosque. The following Friday, he once again stressed the need for donations but failed to offer a single penny to the numerous beggars at the mosque’s entrance. Despite his awareness of the doctrinal guidelines on the appropriate use of donations, he behaved as if he had forgotten the rules about who rightfully deserved such aid.²⁶

The author of the report used this incident to narrate how Islam had been subjected to criticism as an erroneous religion, primarily due to a misinterpretation that confined *amal* to mere religious rituals. The *kiai*’s failure to fulfill their duty to aid the impoverished was portrayed as indicative of their selective adherence to Islamic doctrine, distorting it to suit personal preferences.²⁷

In summary, the discourse of SM attributed the backwardness of Muslims to a flawed practice of Islam, identifying the corruption of *tauhid* and the misapplication of *amal* as key factors leading to the widespread practice of *syirik* and a disregard for worldly changes. The critiques were particularly focused on *taklid*, which involves blind adherence to religious authority at the expense of independent thinking. In response,

²³ H. Fachroedin, “Balesan Soerat!: Dari H. M. Tajib, Batoe Malang”, SM (1923), p. 153.

²⁴ H.A. Namidramees, “Sesoeatoe Hal jang Kerap Kali Meroesakkan Kepertjajaan Menoeroet Boenjinja Ajat Qoeran”, SM (1923), p. 150.

²⁵ H. Fachroedin, “Democratie di dalam Islam”, SM (1924), p. 140.

²⁶ S. Boerik, “Di Madioen: Saja Pandang Aneh”, SM (1924), pp. 43-4.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

Muhammadiyah activists turned to the Scriptures and advocated for *ijtihad* as a means to steer Muslims toward progress. The following section will delve into the meaning, implementation, and impacts of *ijtihad*, highlighting its significance in fostering purification and social activism in the Muslim community.

C. Exploring Paths to Progress in Islamic Society

1. *Ijtihad and Reason*

The term *ijtihad* denotes the intellectual endeavor to formulate religious principles.²⁸ Muhammadiyah activists underscored that the gate of *ijtihad* is open,²⁹ echoing the sentiments of Islamic reformism prevalent in the Middle East.³⁰ However, it is essential to note that *ijtihad* was not a novel concept introduced by Islamic reformism. Instead, it represented a method of doctrinal interpretation since the early days of Islam. Therefore, it is more accurate to state that Islamic reformism reinvigorated *ijtihad*, which had been overshadowed by the dominance of *taklid*. When *ijtihad* is applied to religious interpretation, several significant issues arise. Key among these are debates over whether *ijtihad* should be a collective or an individual pursuit, the suitability of ordinary Muslims for engaging in *ijtihad*, the scope of its application, and the appropriate methodologies for its execution.³¹ While acknowledging the complexities inherent in *ijtihad*, Muhammadiyah activists did not thoroughly explore these issues. Instead, they often equated *ijtihad* with the use of reason, consistently highlighting its role as a vital tool in doctrinal interpretation.³²

For Muhammadiyah activists, reason was esteemed as a divine endowment that epitomizes a fundamental aspect of human uniqueness.³³

²⁸ Howard M. Federspiel, *A Dictionary of Indonesian Islam* (Athens: Ohio University Center for International Studies, 1995), p. 91.

²⁹ Hoofdredacteur, "Noot", SM (1925), pp. 37-8.

³⁰ Fazlur Rahman, *Islam* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 215.

³¹ Asjmundi Abdurrahman, *Manhaj Tarjih Muhammadiyah: Metodologi dan Aplikasi* (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2003), pp. 12-4; Arifin, *Muhammadiyah*, pp. 43-4; Ahmad Jainuri, *Ideologi Kaum Reformis*, pp. 105-9.

³² Jainuri highlights that during its formative years, Muhammadiyah activists used the concept of reason more frequently than *ijtihad*, often employing these terms interchangeably. He suggests that, as a result, reason became an integral component of the *ijtihad* process. Ahmad Jainuri, *Ideologi Kaum Reformis*, p. 100.

³³ "Penghidoepan Setjara Islam", SM (1923), p. 38.

This divine gift was perceived as encompassing the capacity for critical thought, empowering individuals to distinguish between right and wrong, and to discern the difference between good and evil.³⁴ Although universally granted, it was noted that not everyone could fully harness their capacity for reason. As a result, the application of reason was seen to vary, leading to its classification into ‘weak’ and ‘strong’ forms.³⁵ This emphasis on reason led to the belief that religious doctrines, including core tenets such as the existence of God and the veracity of Islam, must align with reason to be considered valid.³⁶ Muhammadiyah activists advocated that Muslims have the freedom to critically evaluate scriptural texts, asserting that it is unnecessary to adhere to religious teachings that contradict sound reasoning.³⁷ An illuminating example of applying reason to religious doctrine is evident in the treatment of alcohol prohibition. In periodically published question-and-answer sections, SM classified alcohol as forbidden. The underlying rationale was that banning alcohol mitigates the significant risk of drunkenness, which impairs reason and leads to deviant behavior.³⁸ This case exemplifies a rational approach to interpreting doctrines, aimed at uncovering the intrinsic truths in the Qur’an and Hadith, as well as comprehending their intended purpose. The employment of reason was also pivotal in evaluating the concept of *yirike*, as demonstrated by the discourse on *ziarah*. Muhammadiyah’s stance on this practice was initially articulated by its prominent activist, Fachrodin, who, drawing on the Hadith, contended that visiting tombs to seek divine favors was incongruent with the practices of Prophet Muhammad.³⁹ This view spurred further discussions, which introduced a variety of rational arguments, showcasing a reasoned approach to Islamic teachings.

SM urged readers to consider the perspectives of revered scholars and saints buried in tombs. These figures, venerated for their past deeds and achievements, were thought to possess spirits capable of discerning

³⁴ A. Duzanah, “Manoesia”, SM (1926), p. 22; S. Tegoeh, “Kemadjoean Adjaran Perempoean Agama Islam”, SM (1925), p. 75.

³⁵ Fatat Adab, “Tarbijatoel-Marah”, SM (1925), p. 90; A. Aziz, “Menoentoet Ilmoe Sempoerna”, SM (1926), p. 18.

³⁶ “Agama”, SM (1924), pp. 37-9; S. Tegoeh, “Bentangan dan Soal Jawab: Tiap-Tiap Manoesia Wadjib Beragama”, SM (1923), p. 161-2.

³⁷ “Pemandangan”, SM (1924), p. 101; Z. S., “Anak Indonesia, Awas”, SM (1925), p. 23.

³⁸ H. Fachrodin, “Djawab Pertanjaan”, SM (1923), p. 186.

³⁹ H. Fachrodin, “Ziarah Qoeboer”, SM (1922[11]), p. 30.

the intentions of those visiting their tombs. SM maintained that if visitors harbored malevolent intentions, such as wishing harm on others or seeking personal gain, it was apparent that these entombed scholars and saints would not intercede for them with God. SM critically assessed the belief that God understands human intentions only through the mediation of holy spirits and that blessings are dispensed solely at their discretion. This idea, SM argued, belittles and degrades God, by equating Him with His creations and suggesting His favoritism. SM concluded that the practice of *ziarah* is incongruent with the attributes of God as *rahmān* and *rahīm*. Moreover, SM described those participating in *ziarah* as lacking in rational thought, labeling them as individuals “whose brains did not work properly”.⁴⁰

SM’s rational approach extended to questioning the role of *kiai*, drawing on the Islamic tenet of equality before God. It was proposed that since Islam does not differentiate among people, each person is accountable for their deeds and will face God’s judgment independently.⁴¹ This led to the assertion that “it is not *kiai* but God who can punish and reward us. It is not *kiai* but God who owns Paradise and Hell”.⁴² SM encouraged ordinary Muslims to critically examine the teachings of *kiai*, irrespective of their own limitations in grasping Islamic knowledge.⁴³

The deep-rooted commitment of Muhammadiyah activists to *ijtihad* and reason was grounded not only in scriptural justifications but also reinforced by the imperatives of progress. They contended that the era of progress, initiated by Western societies, was intrinsically linked to an age of reason.⁴⁴ This perspective held particular significance against the backdrop of Western colonization and the widespread anti-Western and anti-Christian sentiments prevalent among Muslims at the time. Hence, the Muhammadiyah activists’ positive view of Western advancements was a notably distinct position. Their justifications for this viewpoint were anchored in two main historical arguments.

Firstly, they highlighted the perceived state of progress during the era of Prophet Muhammad, portraying Islam as inherently embodying the

⁴⁰ H.A. Namidramees, “Sesoeatoe Hal jang Kerap Kali Meroesakkan Kepertjajaan Menoeroet Boenjinja Ajat Qoeran”, SM (1923), p. 150.

⁴¹ Bin Hasjim, “Agama Islam Njawa Kemadjoean”, SM (1922[3]), p. 10.

⁴² H. Fachroedin, “Balesan Soerat!: Dari H.M. Tajib, Batoe Malang”, SM (1923), p. 153.

⁴³ Fanan, “Perintah Toehan jang ke 9”, SM (1923), p. 164; Hoofdredacteur, “Noot”, SM (1925), p. 37.

⁴⁴ “Pemandangan”, SM (1924), p. 101.

spirit of progress.⁴⁵ Secondly, they emphasized the historical transmission of knowledge from the Middle East to Europe, which had been crucial in lifting Europe out of the Dark Ages and subsequently contributing to its modern advancement.⁴⁶ By framing European progress as a continuation of Islamic influence, Muhammadiyah activists not only reinforced the image of Islam as a forerunner of progress but also rationalized the emulation of Western development.

2. *Purification and Social Activism*

The recognition of the Muslim community's stagnation, attributed to a neglect of *ijtihad*, inspired Muhammadiyah activists to advocate for progress through a renewed emphasis on reason. They proposed two main approaches to engage with modern development: purification and social activism. Purification aimed to combat the widespread practice of *syirik*, while social activism sought to remedy the insufficient practice of *amal* and to encourage active engagement in contemporary social advancements.

In their efforts towards purification, Muhammadiyah activists focused on two key areas. The first was related to fundamental religious obligations, such as prayer and fasting. The second was addressing practices and beliefs considered to be *syirik*. Their emphasis on purifying basic religious observances highlighted the essence of Muhammadiyah's reformist agenda, as exemplified by its founder, Ahmad Dahlan, whose notable initiatives included correcting the direction of prayer and reforming the method of determining the start of the fasting month.⁴⁷

In SM, considerable emphasis was placed on several key Islamic obligations, particularly fasting and *zakat*. SM went beyond merely outlining the correct procedures for these practices; they underscored the importance of the intentions behind these actions. For instance, SM presented a scenario where children, roused by their teacher for the morning prayer, would likely say they complied due to fear of reprimand rather than devotion to God. Referencing a Quranic verse,⁴⁸ SM argued

⁴⁵ Bin Hasjim, "Agama Islam Njawa Kemadjoean", SM (1922[3]), p. 10.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 10-1.

⁴⁷ Hyung-Jun Kim, "Praxis and Religious Authority in Islam: The Case of Ahmad Dahlan, Founder of Muhammadiyah", *Studia Islamika*, vol. 17, no. 1 (2010), pp. 75-9.

⁴⁸ The Quranic passage referenced is from Surah Al-Kahf (18: 110), which includes the phrase, "whoever hopeth for the meeting with his Lord ... make none sharer of the worship due unto his Lord". M. Marmaduke Pickthall, *The Koran* (London: A 252

that such prayers could be considered *syirik* as the children's motivation was to please their teacher instead of seeking God's approval.⁴⁹ This analytical perspective was also applied in discussions about *zakat* and fasting. These practices were portrayed not merely as religious duties but as opportunities to foster empathy for the poor and develop a compassionate understanding of their plight, as well as a merciful attitude towards offering aid.⁵⁰ The consistent focus on intention as a fundamental aspect of the purification process reflects Muhammadiyah's rational approach to Islamic teachings. Compared to the purification of basic obligations, there was a more pronounced focus and enthusiasm in the efforts to address aspects related to *syirik*. This heightened attention can be linked to the external criticisms faced by Muhammadiyah, particularly regarding its initiatives to purify traditional practices.⁵¹

In SM, the scope of purification extended to various practices deeply rooted in the lives of Indonesian Muslims. These included venerating old artifacts like daggers, making offerings to objects deemed sacred, burning incense, consulting *dukun* (traditional healers and diviners) for problem-solving, and engaging in fortune-telling based on natural occurrences. The approach to purification within this context did not strictly adhere to its literal interpretation, which might suggest outright prohibition and eradication of such practices. Instead, Muhammadiyah activists took a more nuanced stance, scrutinizing the underlying intentions behind these practices to assess their congruence with *syirik*. Consequently, practices that might appear similar externally were subject to different evaluations based on their internal motivations and objectives. This approach to purification, grounded in a rational interpretation of Islamic teachings, can be exemplified in the case of *ziarah*.

SM differentiated between two types of tomb visits: those that were in accordance with *syariah* and those that were not.⁵² Visiting tombs to pray for the deceased, similar to the Islamic tradition of praying for the departed before burial, was considered acceptable. This stance was supported by Hadith narrations that depict Prophet Muhammad visiting

Star Book, 1989[1930]), p. 219.

⁴⁹ Fanan, "Bentangan dan Soal Jawab", SM (1923), p. 126.

⁵⁰ "Pelita-Fikiran bagi Rahasia jang Terkandoeng dalam Kemadjoean", SM (1923), p. 67; Mangkoromoerni, "Koeadjiban Orang Islam jang Kaja", SM (1926), pp. 11-2.

⁵¹ "Pemandangan jang terhadap pada Perkoempoelan Moehammadijah", SM (1923), pp. 40-2; Moeslim, "Dari Pembantoe Corespondentie", SM (1923), pp. 73-4.

⁵² H. Fachroedin, "Ziarah Qoeboer", SM (1922[11]), p. 30.

his mother's grave to pay respects. In contrast, *ziarah* became problematic when it involved seeking favors from God through the intercession of buried saints or directly from the deceased. Such practices, amounting to the worship of entities other than Allah, were identified as behaviors to be eradicated. The purification strategy employed by Muhammadiyah activists, characterized by their rational interpretation of Islamic teachings, does exhibit a certain degree of inconsistency. On the one hand, they focused on practical advantages, such as justifying the prohibition of *selamatan* based on economic considerations.⁵³ On the other hand, they relied on inference, analogy, and metaphor to explain prohibitions, like in the case of *ziarah* and incense burning.⁵⁴ Despite these varied methods, it is crucial to emphasize that Muhammadiyah activists endeavored to apply reason to uncover religious teachings' underlying intentions and purposes, thereby establishing rational justifications for their purification efforts.

To conclude, the early period of Muhammadiyah's development was characterized by a deep intertwining of purification efforts with the application of reason. This synthesis was considered indispensable for accurately discerning the true essence of religious teachings. By integrating reason, Muhammadiyah moved beyond a simplistic, binary, and deterministic interpretation of Islam. Instead, this approach allowed for more nuanced, flexible, and contextually relevant methods in addressing purification. In the realm of social activism, Muhammadiyah activists redefined the concept of *amal* to include all facets of life, guided by the principle that "knowledge that is not put into practice is like a fruitless tree".⁵⁵ This period saw a transformation in the application of *amal* beyond religious contexts, primarily in two directions.

Firstly, Muhammadiyah activists were at the forefront of assimilating Western developments, especially in the fields of science and technology. This stood in stark contrast to the predominant views of the era, particularly those held by *kiai*, who generally rejected Western culture and knowledge, primarily due to its association with Christian origins.⁵⁶ Muhammadiyah, however, advocated the obligation of Muslims

⁵³ Fanan, "Bentangan dan Soal Jawab: Samboengan Karangannya Fanan S.M. No 2-3", SM (1923), p. 127.

⁵⁴ H.A. Namidramees, "Samboengan S. M. No. 2 dan 3", SM (1923), p. 150; Redacteur, "Soerat Pertanjakan", SM (1923), p. 167.

⁵⁵ Siswojo Dwidjo, "Boeah Fikiran", SM (1922[8]), p. 13.

⁵⁶ Deliar Noer, *Gerakan Moderen Islam di Indonesia 1900-1942* (Jakarta: LP3ES, 1996), pp. 320-1.

to pursue knowledge, irrespective of its origins. This open-minded stance led to substantial educational reforms. Emblematic of these efforts was the establishment of schools featuring modern facilities like blackboards, desks, and chairs, marking a significant departure from the traditional modes of education. Additionally, the curriculum in these institutions was broadened to encompass secular subjects such as languages, mathematics, and science, which were taught alongside religious studies.⁵⁷ The goal of this educational strategy was not only academic proficiency, but also the cultivation of critical thinking, physical well-being, and proper social conduct, all considered indispensable for the advancement of society.⁵⁸

The second major application of *amal* by Muhammadiyah activists was in the domain of social welfare, which they saw as integral to the realization of Islamic principles.⁵⁹ Their dedication to supporting those in need led to the establishment of social welfare institutions like hospitals, orphanages, and shelters for the impoverished.⁶⁰ These initiatives extended beyond these facilities to encompass a wide array of humanitarian efforts, including providing aid during the influenza pandemic and volcanic eruptions, offering relief to victims of fires, providing jobs to the underprivileged, financing the installation of electric lighting in villages, and ensuring proper Islamic funeral rites for the deceased.⁶¹

Securing sufficient funding was vital to sustain and develop these educational and welfare institutions. Accordingly, *amal*, as highlighted by Muhammadiyah activists, encompassed the act of giving. Muslims were actively encouraged to use their resources for community betterment, adhering to the ethos of “utilizing wealth not for ostentation or immoral purposes but in the service of Allah”.⁶² Muhammadiyah even engaged in commercial ventures to aid in fundraising, such as renting out gasoline

⁵⁷ “Pengatoeran Oentoek Sekolah Rendah Mochammadijah di Hindia Timoer”, SM (1924), p. 50.

⁵⁸ Isa Mamak, “Pendidikan”, SM (1922 [7]), p. 11.

⁵⁹ “P.K.O. (Penoloeng kesengsaraan Oemoem)”, SM (1924), p. 184.

⁶⁰ Drijowongso. “Kisah Pergerakan Mohammadijah Bagean P. K. O. di Djokjakarta”, SM (1924), pp. 8-10.

⁶¹ “Makloemat”, SM (1922[11]), p. 14; “Verslaggever, Openbare Algemeene Vergadering Mochammadijah Pekalongan”, SM (1923), p. 124; Doeroe Peneliti, “Persidangan Sekalian Pengoeroes Mochammadijah Tjabang Batavia”, SM (1923), p. 158; “Verslag Openbare Vergadering P.K.O.”, SM (1923), p. 193.

⁶² M. J. Anies, “Agama Islam dan Economi”, SM (1922[8]), p. 15.

lamps, chairs, glasses, and cups for large-scale events.⁶³ The active involvement of Muhammadiyah activists in establishing educational and welfare institutions profoundly shaped their interpretation of Islam. Firstly, their engagement emphasized the importance of striving for social transformation, nurturing a collective ethos geared towards progress and modernity. Secondly, their experience in navigating the practical challenges of managing these institutions exposed them to the complexities of the real world. Such direct involvement allowed Muhammadiyah to foster an organizational culture that embraced religious interpretations reflective of real-world dynamics, highlighting the necessity of responding to and adapting within this context.

D. Reassessing Purification and Social Activism

1. *Varied Approaches to Purification*

The commitment to purifying the faith, a fundamental objective ingrained during Muhammadiyah's formative years, emerged as a cornerstone of its organizational identity. This focus was pivotal in drawing new members and contributing to the movement's extensive growth throughout Indonesia. Recent historical accounts of Muhammadiyah's local branches reveal that their formation was primarily motivated by the pursuit of purification.⁶⁴ A notable example is the West Sumatra branch, where the initial struggle was marked by endeavors "to cleanse attitudes and behaviors in daily life that exhibited elements of *syirik*, *keburafat* (polytheism), and *takbayul* (superstition), and to restore adherence to unadulterated Islamic teachings".⁶⁵

The centrality of purification led to the creation of the acronym TBC, representing *takbayul*, *bidah*, and *churafat* (*keburafat*). This acronym succinctly encapsulates and symbolizes the essence and mission

⁶³ "Kabar Moehammadijah", SM (1922[4]), p. 15.

⁶⁴ Muhammad Haiban, *Matabari Bersinar di Tanjung Redeb: Geliat Muhammadiyah dari Cabang Tanjung Redeb sampai Daerah Berau Kalimantan Timur Sejak Tabun 1933 hingga 2013* (Jakarta: UHAMKA Press, 2015), pp. 34-6; Khatib Pahlawan Kayo and Harjohan, *Muhammadiyah Minangkabau (Sumatera Barat) dalam Perspektif Sejarah* (Yogyakarta: Suara Muhammadiyah, 2010), p. 135; Suwarno and Asep Daud Kosasih, *Dinamika Sosial Gerakan Muhammadiyah di Banyumas* (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2013), p. 40; Tafsir, *Dilema Purifikasi Muhammadiyah: Antara Progresifisme dan Konservatisme* (Yogyakarta: Suara Muhammadiyah, 2022), pp. 132-3.

⁶⁵ Khatib Pahlawan Kayo and Harjohan, *Muhammadiyah Minangkabau (Sumatera Barat) dalam Perspektif Sejarah*, p. 135.

of Muhammadiyah. The organization's dedication to purification was officially articulated in 1969 in its document 'Faith Pledge and Aspiration of Life in Muhammadiyah' (*Matan Keyakinan dan Cita-Cita Hidup Muhammadiyah*), proclaiming: "Muhammadiyah is committed to fostering a pure Islamic faith, free from the influences of *kemusyrikan*, *bidah*, and *keburafal*".⁶⁶

The significance of the purification initiative within Muhammadiyah's organizational framework likely profoundly impacted its followers. Empirical evidence points to the deep commitment of key activists to this ideal. A striking example is evident in Tanjung Redeb, where a pioneering activist, also serving as a religious official in the Sambaliung Sultanate, refrained from praising the Sultan during Friday prayers, viewing such acts as *yirik*.⁶⁷

While the dedication of these key activists is relatively well-documented, assessing the broader influence of the purification movement on Muhammadiyah's general supporters, especially up to the 1980s, is more challenging. A notable exception was in Kauman, Muhammadiyah's birthplace, where by 1950, practices like *selamatan*, *ziarah*, and reliance on amulets and offerings had disappeared.⁶⁸ However, outside of specific studies, such as Clifford Geertz's research in East Java, comprehensive information on the impact of these purification efforts on the wider Muhammadiyah community is limited.

Geertz's anthropological research in the early 1950s indicates that among Muhammadiyah activists, the practice of *selamatan* was either completely omitted or significantly simplified.⁶⁹ However, it is crucial to recognize that Geertz's observation was confined to a small group of approximately forty leaders, without an extensive exploration into how these leaders influenced the broader base of Muhammadiyah's supporters, referred to as 'friends of Muhammadiyah'.⁷⁰ Given Geertz's thorough documentation of Muhammadiyah's activities, the lack of detailed

⁶⁶ Umar Hasyim, "Matan Keyakinan dan Cita-Cita Hidup Muhammadiyah: Keputusan Sidang Tanwir di Ponorogo", in *Muhammadiyah Jalan Lurus Dalam Tadjid, Dakwah, Kaderisasi dan Pendidikan: Kritik dan Terapinya*, (Surabaya: Pt. Bina Ilmu, 1990[1969]), p. 216.

⁶⁷ Muhammad Haiban, *Matabari Bersinar di Tanjung Redeb*, p. 36.

⁶⁸ Adaby Darban, *Sejarah Kauman: Menguak Identitas Kampung Muhammadiyah* (Yogyakarta: Suara Muhammadiyah, 2010), p. 94.

⁶⁹ Clifford Geertz, *The Religion of Java* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1976), p. 153.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

comments on these friends' attitudes towards traditional practices and the leaders' efforts to disseminate their views, implies that the purification drive may not have permeated the broader circle of individuals who were sympathetic to Muhammadiyah.

In the early 1970s, Mitsuo Nakamura conducted a study in Kotagede, a district in Yogyakarta known as a Muhammadiyah stronghold. While this study does not offer an exhaustive overview of the status of traditional rituals, an anecdote from it provides a valuable perspective. Nakamura recounts an incident where he distributed food parcels to neighbors during his son's birthday celebration. Interestingly, one parcel was returned by a Muhammadiyah leader who expressed objection, perceiving the act as adherence to Javanese tradition that contravened the Islamic principle of *tauhid*. This leader further elaborated that Muslims in Kotagede could be divided into three categories: those strictly adhering to Islamic principles, those following solely Javanese customs, and those adopting a middle path.⁷¹ Considering Muhammadiyah's strong presence in the area, this observation suggests that not all its supporters or sympathizers fully embraced the organization's purification agenda.

Nakamura's additional findings offer insight into the partial success of Muhammadiyah's purification efforts in eliminating traditional practices. He suggests that "if one realizes that one is still *gadbo-gadbo* (a mixture of Islamic and non-Islamic beliefs and practices), he himself is responsible for and capable of cleansing himself".⁷² This explanation implies that purification was seen more as a personal responsibility than as a collective organizational mandate. The findings of both Geertz and Nakamura indicate that while key Muhammadiyah activists were diligent in their own pursuit of purification, the broader community under their influence did not uniformly follow suit. This discrepancy might be explained by the perception of purification as an individual journey, a notion that aligns with Muhammadiyah's rational approach to religious interpretation.

The focus on *ijtihad* and reason in Muhammadiyah has fostered an environment where every Muslim is encouraged to critically engage with Islamic teachings, based on the Quran and Hadith. This individualistic approach eschews enforcement that might impinge upon human agency,

⁷¹ Mitsuo Nakamura, *The Crescent Arises over the Banyan Tree: A Study of the Muhammadiyah Movement in a Central Javanese Town, c. 1910-2010* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2012), p. 173.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 174.

resonating with the Quranic principle often cited by Muhammadiyah activists: “there is no compulsion in religion”. As a result, the process of purification, guided by reason, refrains from forcibly removing non-Islamic elements from the community’s life. Furthermore, the emphasis on intention complicates judging religiosity based solely on outward practices. For instance, participation in traditional rituals does not necessarily imply a departure from Islamic principles in terms of intention. In this context, Muhammadiyah activists are viewed primarily as role models, focused on consistently conveying appropriate messages.⁷³

Muhammadiyah’s guiding document, ‘Faith Pledge and Aspiration of Life in Muhammadiyah,’ reflects a reluctance to embrace direct and collective methods in pursuing purification. The call to free oneself from TBC is tempered by the caveat, “not ignoring the principle of tolerance”.⁷⁴ This principle encourages acknowledging and respecting diverse views and advises against harsh criticism or imposing specific interpretations on others.⁷⁵ While Muhammadiyah recognizes the importance of addressing errors in the Muslim community, it advocates for an open approach, highlighting that “one should have the desire to change deviations”.⁷⁶ This non-coercive method of influencing others’ lives is a key factor in the persistence of traditional practices in communal life.

Since the 1990s, academic research has highlighted the continued presence of traditional practices in areas influenced by Muhammadiyah. A study conducted by Hyung-Jun Kim in rural Yogyakarta, for instance, reveals the ongoing observance of rituals like *tablilan* and *selamatan*. Muhammadiyah activists justified their participation in these practices by emphasizing the need to integrate with the broader community. In addition, they reinterpreted these traditional activities within an Islamic context, aligning their participation with their commitment to *tauhid* and Muhammadiyah’s goals of purification.⁷⁷

In Jember, Munir Mulkhan identifies four distinct groups with

⁷³ Hyung-Jun Kim, “Egalitarian Leaders and Rational Followers: The Internal Dynamics of Muhammadiyah as an Islamic Organization”, *SOJOURN: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, vol. 39, no. 3 (2024), pp. 402.

⁷⁴ *Muhammadiyah Jalan Lurus Dalam Tajdid, Dakwah, Kaderisasi dan Pendidikan*, p. 216.

⁷⁵ “Penjelasan Kepribadian Muhammadiyah”, *Muhammadiyah Jalan Lurus Dalam Tajdid, Dakwah, Kaderisasi dan Pendidikan*, pp. 433-4.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 440.

⁷⁷ Hyung-Jun Kim, *Reformist Muslims in a Yogyakarta village: The Islamic Transformation of Contemporary Socio-Religious Life* (Canberra: ANU EPress, 2007), pp. 116-31.

different attitudes towards traditional practices. Some adhered to strict purification, while others were more accepting of traditional rituals.⁷⁸ Mulkhan partly attributes this diversity to a shift in the 1970s, when Muhammadiyah's leadership, increasingly comprised of school teachers, began to recognize the significance of traditional practices, particularly among its primary support base of peasants.⁷⁹ Similar changes were observed in Sulawesi and Kalimantan, where the rigid perspectives of the older generation were being gradually supplanted by the more flexible and pluralistic views of younger activists. This new generation perceived traditional practices as relatively harmless and sought culturally sensitive ways to disseminate Islamic teachings.⁸⁰

In various regions influenced by Muhammadiyah, diverse approaches to traditional practices are evident. In Bima, a selective strategy of accommodating and rejecting traditional elements was observed.⁸¹ In Klaten, successful outreach to the masses prompted Muhammadiyah activists to reinterpret local practices, transforming religious rituals into cultural festivals.⁸² In Kotagede, the continuation of traditional customs was rationalized based on social solidarity⁸³ and their

⁷⁸ Munir Mulkhan, *Islam Murni dalam Masyarakat Petani* (Yogyakarta: Yayasan Bentang Budaya, 2000), pp. 234-47. Similar observations are reported in a study that conducted research across 14 village branches of Muhammadiyah. This study identifies four distinct modes of interaction between purification and tradition: Islamization, localization, negotiation, and coexistence. See Suyoto, Moh. Shofan, and Sri Redjeki Endah, *Pola Gerakan Muhammadiyah Ranting: Ketegangan antara Purifikasi dan Dinamisasi* (Yogyakarta: IRCiSoD, 2005), p. 86.

⁷⁹ Munir Mulkhan, *Islam Murni dalam Masyarakat Petani*, pp. 194-5.

⁸⁰ Ian Chalmers, "The Islamization of Southern Kalimantan: Sufi Spiritualism, Ethnic Identity, Political Activism", *Studia Islamika*, vol. 14, no. 3 (2007), p. 395; Arfan Nusi, Nurul Ilmi Idrus, Hamka Naping and Lahaji, "Post-Traditionalist Nahdlatul Ulama and Neo-Modernist Muhammadiyah: A Study of Local Muslim Thought in Gorontalo", *International Journal of Social Science and Human Research*, vol. 5, no. 5 (2022), p. 1746.

⁸¹ Adlin Sila, "Revisiting NU-Muhammadiyah in Indonesia: The Accommodation of Islamic Reformism in Bima", *Indonesia and the Malay World*, vol. 48, no. 142 (2020), pp. 317-8.

⁸² J. M. Immanuel, G. Lee, K. Maizida and T. Pabbajah, "The Roles of Muhammadiyah in Shifting Apeman Ritual through State Power and Society", *DINIKA: Academic Journal of Islamic Studies*, vol. 3, no. 2 (2018), pp. 185-8.

⁸³ Sangkot Sirait, "Religious Attitudes of Theological Traditionalist in the Modern Muslim Community: Study on Tahlilan in Kotagede", *Journal of Indonesian Islam*, vol. 10, no. 2 (2016), pp. 254-7.

significance in tourism, art, and culture.⁸⁴ These adaptable attitudes and the resulting varied interactions with traditional practices led to an ironic situation in Yogyakarta, where a Salafi group spearheaded a campaign to abolish traditional rituals, in which Muhammadiyah supporters still participated.⁸⁵

The emergence of accommodative stances towards traditional practices has given rise to a new missionary approach known as ‘*dakwah kultural*’ (cultural missionary work). This strategy aims to integrate traditional practices with Islamic values and use them for missionary objectives. Despite its controversial nature and the lack of support among many activists who view it as a departure from the original purification goals,⁸⁶ this approach acknowledges the impracticality of directly intervening in Muslims’ lives to eradicate traditional practices. Theologically, it is in line with Muhammadiyah’s rational approach, giving room for *ijtihad* to those carrying out purification at the local level.⁸⁷

Hence, Muhammadiyah’s purification efforts have not resulted in a widespread movement aimed at eliminating traditional practices associated with TBC. While these initiatives have been inspirational among its activists, their actual implementation has deviated from a simplistic, rigid dichotomy of Islamic versus non-Islamic practices. Instead, a range of approaches has developed, each shaped by the distinct cultural and social dynamics of its local environment. This process of adaptation is deeply ingrained in *ijtihad*. It promotes personal responsibility in

⁸⁴ Judith Schlehe, “Contesting Javanese Traditions: The Popularisation of Rituals between Religion and Tourism”, *Indonesia and the Malay World*, vol. 45, no. 131 (2017), p. 11.

⁸⁵ A.Z. Arifin, “Defending Traditions, Countering Intolerant Ideologies: Re-energizing the Role of Modin in Modern Java”, *Al-Jami’ah: Journal of Islamic Studies*, vol. 55, no. 2 (2017), pp. 281-4. It is important to note that the maintenance of traditional practices is not a uniform phenomenon across all Muhammadiyah communities. A notable example of this variation is seen in a village branch in Brebes. Here, traditional rituals such as *selamatan* and the giving of offerings have been effectively eliminated. In their place, Islamic practices like *pengajian* and *aqiqah* have been embraced. Tafsir, *Dilema Purifikasi Muhammadiyah*, pp. 122-4.

⁸⁶ Jabrohim, “Kembali ke Majelis Kebudayaan: Memantapkan Instrumen Dakwah Kultural”, in *Muhammadiyahmu Muhammadiyahku Muhammadiyah Kita Bersama*, ed. by Jabrohim (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2021), p. 164.

⁸⁷ Tafsir, *Dilema Purifikasi Muhammadiyah*, p. 160. For a comprehensive examination of the diverse perspectives on *dakwah kultural*, including the ideological reformulation and the resulting pluralistic outlook toward local cultures, refer to Daniels. Timothy Daniels, *Islamic Spectrum in Java* (Farnham & Burlington: Ashgate, 2009), pp. 103-13.

religious observance and prioritizes intention over outward appearances while refraining from direct intervention in others' lives. This approach, however, does not diminish the importance of activists' roles as exemplars in shaping their followers' religious views and practices. While not necessarily leading to the complete abandonment of traditional practices, this approach encourages their thorough examination, negotiation, and reinterpretation. This, in turn, enables those involved to see the outcomes as aligned, albeit not perfectly, with Islamic teachings, thereby helping to reduce the stigma associated with TBC.

2. *Exploring Diverse Arenas of Activism*

Muhammadiyah's diverse range of educational, social, and economic institutions are collectively known as '*amal usaba*.' This concept originated with the establishment of schools and gradually expanded to include hospitals and orphanages. As previously discussed, *amal usaba* epitomizes Muhammadiyah's dedication to extending its practical engagement in various facets of life. *Amal usaba* emerged as a collaborative effort, fueled by the voluntary commitment of Muhammadiyah's supporters. It stands as a testament to the pride of the organization's activists and serves as a tangible indicator of Muhammadiyah's influence within Indonesian society. The meticulous documentation and reporting of the growing number of *amal usaba*, a key feature of the reports presented at each congress by the central board, highlight Muhammadiyah's successful journey towards modern development.

While *amal usaba* has been a source of pride, it has also presented formidable challenges. Beyond the initial enthusiasm of the establishment, Muhammadiyah activists have to face the practical task of sustaining and improving these institutions, requiring focused engagement. Since the late 1980s, the involvement of activists in *amal usaba* was scrutinized from a different angle. Observations suggested that in their efforts to manage and enhance *amal usaba*, activists became preoccupied with short-term interests, drifting away from the original motives.⁸⁸ Some critics even questioned the very act of establishing *amal usaba*, arguing that it was based on a naïve belief that social backwardness could be rectified solely

⁸⁸ Said Tuhulelei, "Masa Depan Intelektual Muhammadiyah: Mengayuh di antara Dua Pusaran Arus", in *Kembali ke al-Quran Menafsir Makna Zaman: Suara-Suara Kaum Muda Muhammadiyah*. ed. by Pradana Boy and Hilmi Faiq (Malang: UMM Press, 2004), p. 358.

through schools and hospitals.⁸⁹ While recognizing the noble intention of aiding the underprivileged,⁹⁰ these critics saw this focus as a deviation from the progressive ethos envisioned during Muhammadiyah's early years.

Activists deeply involved in *amal usaba* might view these critiques as unfair, considering the maintenance of these institutions as a demanding struggle that required significant sacrifices. They countered that the accusations of being mired in trivialities were one-sided, since, amidst managing existing institutions, they spearheaded innovative initiatives to embody the spirit of progress. For instance, the Kendal district branch undertook novel efforts in *zakat* collection and distribution, aligning with their commitment to helping the needy and reflecting the spirit of *ijtihad*.⁹¹ Some Muhammadiyah universities also extended their roles beyond education. A notable example was a university in Solo that introduced programs to empower pedicab drivers with a credit system and assist peasants through a goat sharecropping scheme.⁹² However, these initiatives remained relatively unknown, and criticisms focusing on the overemphasis on *amal usaba* continued to proliferate in Muhammadiyah discussions. This critique broadened to include various issues, such as lack of professionalism,⁹³ insufficient concern for the deprived,⁹⁴

⁸⁹ Mansour Fikih, "Muhammadiyah sebagai Gerakan Pembebasan: Mempertegas Pemihakannya pada Kaum Dhu'afa", in *Muhammadiyah Kini dan Esok*, ed. by Din Syamsuddin (Jakarta: Penerbit Pustaka Panjimas, 1990), p. 246; Said Ramadhan, "Muhammadiyah sebagai Gerakan Sosial Baru: Mencari Makna Baru bagi Gerakan Muhammadiyah", in *Kembali ke al-Quran Menafsir Makna Zaman*, p. 324.

⁹⁰ Mansour Fikih, in *Muhammadiyah Kini dan Esok*, p. 248.

⁹¹ Paryanto, "Membangun Keberimanan Baru: Sebuah Penjajagan Awal", in *Kembali ke al-Quran Menafsir Makna Zaman*, pp. 149-51; Pimpinan Daerah Muhammadiyah Kabupaten Kendal, "Zakat Kita: Zakat Terapan (Zakat yang Direalisasikan)" (Mimeograph, 1999).

⁹² Bambang Setiaji and Sami'an, "Pengembangan Kredit Usaha Kecil: Kasus Kredit Becak dan Gaduh Kambing di Rembang dan Masjid Ar-Rahman Surakarta", in *Muhammadiyah dan Pemberdayaan Rakyat*, ed. by Ma'ruf Ade and Heri Zulfan (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 1995), pp. 135-40.

⁹³ Sjafrin Sairin, "Profesionalisme dan Etos Kerja", in *Membangun Profesionalisme Muhammadiyah*, ed. by Edy Suandi Hamid, Muchlas Rowi and Arief Budiman (Yogyakarta: LPTP PP Muhammadiyah, 2003), pp. 3-4.

⁹⁴ Kuntowijoyo, *Paradigma Islam: Interpretasi untuk Aksi* (Bandung: Penerbit Mizan, 1991), pp. 272-3; Muslim Abdurrahman, "Munculnya Kesadaran Kritis Ber-Muhammadiyah: Sebuah Pengantar", in *Kembali ke al-Quran Menafsir Makna Zaman*, pp. xv-xvii.

bureaucratization,⁹⁵ commercialization,⁹⁶ and conservatism.⁹⁷

The emergence of critical discourses regarding *amal usaba* can be interpreted from an alternative perspective, indicating that the spirit of progress and commitment to advancement remain deeply ingrained in Muhammadiyah activists. This is particularly apparent after the 2000s when such critiques have catalyzed efforts to further develop and enrich *amal usaba*. These endeavors showcase the activists' sustained commitment to progressive actions, in line with Islam's compatibility with contemporary changes. This analysis will focus on three primary areas where these initiatives have been especially active: aiding the underprivileged, promoting economic advancement, and improving educational quality.

Responding to contemporary social changes and reaffirming its dedication to socially marginalized groups amidst economic growth, Muhammadiyah activists broadened their scope beyond the abstract category of the Muslim community.⁹⁸ They started to actively involve specific groups, including peasants, laborers, small traders, and migrant workers, in their programs. A key development in this direction was the foundation of the 'Institution for Empowering Workers, Farmers, and Fishermen' under Muhammadiyah headquarters in 2000, which later evolved into the 'Committee for Empowering the People' (*Majelis Pemberdayaan Masyarakat: MPM*) in 2005. MPM's initiatives in the agricultural sector have encompassed the development of integrated farming systems, the establishment of training centers for farmers, the creation of sustainable business models for agricultural products, and the formation of farmers' associations and cooperatives. Moreover, the scope of advocacy and empowerment efforts has broadened to include pedicab drivers, street vendors, people with disabilities, and scavengers at waste disposal sites.⁹⁹

⁹⁵ M. Amin Abdullah, "Muhammadiyah dan Pemikiran Keagamaan: Reorientasi Wawasan dan Implementasinya untuk Aksi", in *Muhammadiyah Menyongsong Abad XXI*, pp. 2-5.

⁹⁶ Yusril Ihza, "Muhammadiyah dan Pemberdayaan Masyarakat", in *Muhammadiyah Menyongsong Abad XXI*, pp. 59-60.

⁹⁷ Syafiq Mughni, "Ahlussunnah wal-Jama'ah dan Posisi Teologi Muhammadiyah", in *Muhammadiyah Kini dan Esok*, pp. 277-8.

⁹⁸ Zuly Qodir, "Muhammadiyah Sebagai Gerakan Sosial Baru: Inspirasi Menuju Masyarakat Berkemajuan", in *Islam Berkemajuan untuk Indonesia Berkemajuan*, pp. 140-1.

⁹⁹ For diverse targets of MPM activities, refer to: Dakta, "MPM PP Muhammadiyah Dampingi Program Asongan Makanan Sehat" (11 Sep 2017),

The array of initiatives led by MPM, combined with the diverse local conditions and the inherently intangible nature of these activities, poses methodological challenges in assessing their tangible impacts, especially when compared to the established *amal usaha*. Despite these complexities, the real significance of MPM's efforts lies in its acknowledgment and inclusion of groups traditionally overlooked in Muhammadiyah's activities. A notable instance of this paradigm shift occurred in 2015 when Muhammadiyah included the LGBT community as a target group for its missionary activities.¹⁰⁰ This major shift from a stance of categorical exclusion and stigmatization to one of inclusive engagement signals Muhammadiyah's openness to internal critiques positing that its initiatives were bereft of the progressive ethos.¹⁰¹

In the economic sphere, Muhammadiyah launched new ventures,

<https://www.dakta.com/news/10961/mpm-pp-muhammadiyah-dampingi-program-asongan-makanan-sehat>, accessed 16 Jan 2024; Menara, "MPM PP Muhammadiyah Berdayakan Kaum Difabel", *Menara*, (6 Jan 2017), <https://menara62.com/mpm-pp-muhammadiyah-berdayakan-kaum-difabel/>, accessed 16 Jan 2024; Suara Muhammadiyah, "MPM Berdayakan Pemulung, Mengais Sampah Menuai Berkah", *Suara Muhammadiyah* (4 May 2017), <https://web.suaramuhammadiyah.id/2017/05/04/mpm-berdayakan-pemulung-mengais-sampah-menuai-berkah/>, accessed 16 Jan 2024; Syah, "Berita: MPM Muhammadiyah Dampingi Paguyuban Becak Yogyakarta" (15 Dec 2013), <https://www.umy.ac.id/mpm-muhammadiyah-dampingi-paguyuban-becak-yogyakarta>, accessed 16 Jan 2024.

¹⁰⁰ *Tanfidz Keputusan Muktamar Muhammadiyah Ke-47* (Yogyakarta: Pimpinan Pusat Muhammadiyah, 2015), p. 108.

¹⁰¹ The inclusion of the LGBT community in the official program does not automatically imply widespread acceptance among Muhammadiyah activists. Decisions made at the Congress often originate from restricted activists at the headquarters level, which may not always mirror the sentiments of the wider base of activists and supporters. An illustrative example of this is the call from two members of the central board, who urged the government to revoke Starbucks' operating license due to the company's support for LGBT rights, while also encouraging Muslims to boycott Starbucks. Despite such instances, this inclusion does indicate a shift in attitude towards LGBT issues within Muhammadiyah. This shift may imply, as noted by another member of the central board, that although considering LGBT behaviors as immoral, the organization is prepared to offer assistance to LGBT individuals without publicly condemning them. Jakarta Post, "National Scene: Muhammadiyah Takes Soft Approach on LGBT", *Jakarta Post* (11 Mar 2016), <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2016/03/11/national-scene-muhammadiyah-takes-soft-approach-lgbt.html>, accessed 16 Jan 2024; Today, "Indonesia, Malaysia Muslims Call for Starbucks Boycott over LGBT Stance", *Today* (4 Jul 2017), <https://www.todayonline.com/world/asia/indonesia-malaysia-muslims-call-starbucks-boycott-over-lgbt-stance>, accessed 16 Jan 2024.

focusing particularly on *syariah*-compliant microfinance, made viable following the legalization of interest-free financial transactions in 1991. From this landmark year until 2000, under Muhammadiyah's guidance, a total of 190 microfinance institutions and 19 small credit banks were established.¹⁰² With these foundations, there was a marked intensification in efforts to tackle the economic powerlessness of Muslims, leading to a significant increase in such institutions. By 2015, the number had grown significantly to 437 microfinance institutions and 762 small credit banks.¹⁰³

This active involvement in economic pursuits has transformed the perception of economic activities within a religious context. This shift is succinctly captured in the 'Treatise on Progressive Islam' (*Risalah Islam Berkemajuan*) from the 2022 Muhammadiyah Congress, which asserts that "the struggle to develop the economy is a form of worship (*ibadah*)".¹⁰⁴ This document underscores Muhammadiyah's commitment to elevating the economic status of the Muslim community, particularly by supporting marginalized and vulnerable groups and facilitating their access to capital. These endeavors are viewed as a complement to the organization's educational initiatives, addressing the concern that poverty is a major obstacle that prevents many Muslims from pursuing further education.¹⁰⁵ Additionally, these efforts posit that poverty can impede Muslims from following a purified and reformed Islamic faith and practice. Therefore, with this reformulation, economic activities have become a pivotal element of Muhammadiyah's struggle.

As previously discussed, Muhammadiyah faced criticism for perceived stagnation due to its overemphasis on establishing and managing schools. Although many activists accepted these critiques, it is crucial to note that this acknowledgement did not imply a complete lack of innovation in the educational sector. Despite the predominance of routine activities, there were subtle yet noteworthy efforts to adapt Muhammadiyah's educational initiatives with contemporary developments. A prime example is the 'Pondok Pesantren Modern Muhammadiyah Boarding School' (MBS), inaugurated in Yogyakarta in 2008. MBS distinguished itself by aiming to provide high-quality

¹⁰² *Profil Muhammadiyah 2000* (Yogyakarta: Pimpinan Pusat Muhammadiyah, 2000), p. 424.

¹⁰³ *Laporan Pimpinan Pusat Muhammadiyah* (Yogyakarta: Pimpinan Pusat Muhammadiyah, 2015), p. 23.

¹⁰⁴ *Risalah Islam Berkemajuan: Keputusan Muktamar ke-48 Muhammadiyah Tabun 2022* (Yogyakarta: Pimpinan Pusat Muhammadiyah, 2022), p. 47.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

education and foster excellence, targeting a select student body, and setting its academic standards notably higher than ordinary schools.

The success of MBS became apparent as it attracted thousands of students from across Indonesia.¹⁰⁶ Despite its deviation from the traditional focus of Muhammadiyah schools on providing equal educational opportunities for all, and from the recent emphasis on aiding the deprived through MPM, MBS has not encountered internal criticism. This lack of censure seems connected to the understanding that MBS primarily serves the growing middle-class Muslim population, a demographic that is integral to Muhammadiyah's activities but was previously somewhat neglected. This recognition has led to the rapid establishment of numerous schools following the MBS model. The enthusiastic reception of these schools indicates a strong desire among Muhammadiyah activists to adapt and evolve in response to the changing dynamics of Indonesian society, even within the traditional realms of *amal usaha*.

E. Concluding Remarks

While Peacock's characterization of Muhammadiyah as 'purifying the faith' aptly underscores a key focus of the organization, it may not fully encompass the breadth of its mission, particularly its commitment to 'acting for progress.' As explored in this article, the fusion of purification with social activism forms the cornerstone of Muhammadiyah's approach. Both elements are seen as vital tools for addressing and surmounting the challenges confronting the Muslim community.

Muhammadiyah's pursuit of these dual goals, steered by the principle of *ijtihad*, has led to a diverse range of outcomes. In terms of purification, the organization adopts a broad array of approaches, ranging from the outright rejection to the accommodation and reinterpretation of traditional practices. In the domain of social activism, Muhammadiyah showcases a dynamic array of initiatives. This encompasses not only the establishment and maintenance of *amal usaha* but also the crafting of innovative strategies aimed at empowering marginalized and disadvantaged groups.

The coexistence of diverse orientations and initiatives within Muhammadiyah has, at times, caused internal conflicts, particularly evident

¹⁰⁶ Samsu Riski, "Perkembangan Kurikulum Muhammadiyah Boarding School dalam Penguatan Amal Usaha Muhammadiyah", *Jurnal Studi Islam dan Kemuhammadiyaan*, vol, 2, no. 2 (2022), pp. 106-7.

during the clashes between conservatives and liberals (progressives) in the 2000s. Conservatives, favoring a literal interpretation of religious texts and a strict purification of TBC, were at odds with liberals, who championed a contextual approach and prioritized social progress. These conflicts saw escalated tensions, with conservatives labeling liberals as a ‘virus’ of Muhammadiyah and seeking to marginalize them. Both groups asserted exclusive claims to the correct interpretation of Islam that led to mutual condemnations. Pradana Boy and Najib Burhani painted a somber picture, depicting that the organization’s stability was at risk, and the exertion of hegemonic power by conservatives posed a threat to Muhammadiyah’s progressive and dynamic orientations.¹⁰⁷

Boy and Burhani’s study of Muhammadiyah, conducted during a heyday of internal conflicts, prompted them to focus on the shift from tolerance to the outright suppression of diversity and a diminished emphasis on *ijtihad* and progress. However, a broader perspective that looks beyond this tumultuous period reveals an alternative insight, especially when considering the subsequent trajectories of those involved in these conflicts. Over a decade later, most individuals who were part of these conflicts have continued their active involvement in Muhammadiyah. This endurance suggests that the once-prevalent exclusive attitudes did not leave a lasting negative impact. Moreover, it is crucial to emphasize that the activists who left Muhammadiyah in the 2010s were primarily from the conservative group. Their decision to discontinue their efforts within the organization and to join other groups, fervently committed to the elimination of non-Islamic elements,¹⁰⁸ serves as a testament to Muhammadiyah’s prevailing inclination towards a purification approach that integrates the principles of *ijtihad* and progress.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ Pradana Boy, *Para Pembela Islam: Pertarungan Konservatif and Progresif di Tubuh Muhammadiyah* (Depok: Gramata Publishing, 2009), p. 196; Najib Burhani, “Liberal and Conservative Discourses in the Muhammadiyah: The struggle for the Face of Reformist Islam in Indonesia”, in *Contemporary Developments in Indonesian Islam: Explaining the ‘Conservative Turn’*, ed. by Martin van Bruinessen (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2013), p. 138.

¹⁰⁸ Masdar Hilmy, “The Double-Edged Sword of Islamic Reform: Muhammadiyah and the Dilemma of Tajdid within Indonesian Islam”, *Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs*, vol. 48, no. 1 (2014), pp. 187-9; Sholihul Huda, “Konversi Ideologi Muhammadiyah ke Gerakan Front Pembela Islam”, *Al-Hikmah: Jurnal Studi Agama-Agama*, vol. 4, no. 2 (2018), pp. 7-10.

¹⁰⁹ In reflecting on the developments during the 2010s, Burhani has revised his stance. He acknowledges that the emphasis on action and progress has been crucial in preventing the organization from succumbing to its conservative tendencies. Najib

The profound influence of Muhammadiyah's foundational principles is vividly illustrated in episodes related to Christmas greetings. Boy's analysis focuses on an incident where a lecturer at a Muhammadiyah University was dismissed for extending Christmas greetings to Christians, reflecting a period of conservative dominance.¹¹⁰ However, a contrasting stance emerged a decade later, with an activist elucidating Muhammadiyah's progressive inclinations by asserting that saying "Merry Christmas" to Christians is acceptable and should not be condemned.¹¹¹ In a more recent development, the 'Committee for Religious Deliberation and Renewal' (*Majelis Tarjih dan Tajdid*), without overturning its earlier prohibition on Christmas greetings, suggested that such greetings are permissible, depending on the context.¹¹² These varied positions on the matter mirror the broad spectrum of stances held by Muhammadiyah activists towards traditional practices, as explored earlier in this paper.

From these discussions, it becomes evident that despite experiencing internal fluctuations and external pressures, Muhammadiyah's steadfast commitment to *ijtihad* and progress continues to shape its trajectory profoundly. *Ijtihad*, with its focus on avoiding religious compulsion and emphasizing the intentions behind actions, offers activists the flexibility to navigate within Muhammadiyah's framework, fostering an environment that embraces diversity. Simultaneously, this commitment to *ijtihad*, combined with a focus on progress, empowers activists to pursue innovative methods that align with contemporary changes and their vision of social advancement. In this light, characterizing Muhammadiyah's purification efforts as analogous to Wahhabism—a perspective that has persisted for over a century¹¹³—misrepresents the organization. Such a characterization narrowly fixates on one facet of Muhammadiyah's dynamism, neglecting the essential role of its foundational principles of

Burhani, *Between Social Services and Tolerance: Explaining Religious Dynamics in Muhammadiyah* (Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2019), pp. 20-3.

¹¹⁰ Pradana Boy, *Para Pembela Islam*, p. 149.

¹¹¹ Noor Chozin Agham, *Islam Berkemajuan Gaya Muhammadiyah: Telaah terhadap Akidah, Akhlak, Ibadah & Muamalah Duniawiyah* (Jakarta: UHAMKA Press, 2015), p. 32.

¹¹² Ilham, "Hukum Mengucapkan Selamat Hari Natal Kepada Umat Kristen", *Muhammadiyah* (22 Dec 2022) <https://muhammadiyah.or.id/hukum-mengucapkan-selamat-hari-natal-kepada-umat-kristen/>, accessed 16 Jan 2024; Tim PP Muhammadiyah Majelis Tarjih, "Masalah Hubungan Dengan Non Muslim", in *Tanya-Jawab Agama II* (Yogyakarta: Suara Muhammadiyah, 1992), pp. 236-7.

¹¹³ "Pemandangan jang terhadap pada Perkoempoelan Mohammadijah", SM (1923), p. 40; Masdar Hilmy, "The Double-edged Sword of Islamic Reform", pp. 187-9. *Al-Jāmi'ah*, Vol. 62, No. 2, 2024 M/1445 H

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‘purifying the faith’ and ‘acting for progress’.

The history of Muhammadiyah has witnessed fluctuations in how purification, progress, and *ijtihad* are perceived as interconnected. Given the recent prominence of the concept of progress in Muhammadiyah discourse, the drive for purification may increasingly be shaped by more flexible and contextually relevant approaches. A key factor in determining the future of ‘acting for progress’ is whether it can yield tangible outcomes across the various arenas of activism it promotes. This is crucial because Muhammadiyah’s orientation is fundamentally action-driven rather than purely ideological. As long as ‘acting for progress’ continues to produce results that can be emulated by a broader circle of activists, it has the potential to attract grassroots supporters who remain committed to realizing the ideal of ‘purifying the faith’ in practical, real-world contexts.

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