

## THE WELFARE TRADITIONS IN INDONESIA: TRACKING THE ISLAMIC WELFARE SERVICES OF NAHDLATUL ULAMA

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### Abstract

This article meticulously tracks the legacies of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) in shaping the religious welfare traditions of Indonesia. It explores the deep theological foundations and sophisticated institutional mechanisms of NU's social activism, revealing a resilient and adaptive faith-based welfare ecosystem. The analysis demonstrates that NU's contributions are not merely ad-hoc charitable acts but a systematic, ideologically coherent effort to realize the principles of social justice embedded in the Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah tradition. The study confirms that NU's strength lies in its ability to synthesize traditional religious authority with modern organizational strategies. The pesantren serves as the cultural and spiritual heart of its welfare network, while the expansion of higher education and the professionalization of healthcare represent a strategic engagement with modernity. The article also highlights the inherent challenges NU faces, including the tension between tradition and bureaucracy, the need for greater financial transparency, and its complex relationship with the state. By providing a comprehensive analysis of NU's welfare model, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the interplay between religion, social welfare, and national development in Indonesia.

**Keywords:** Nahdlatul Ulama, Islamic Welfare, Pesantren, Social Justice, Religious Philanthropy, Indonesia

### Introduction

Social welfare and empowerment initiatives are intrinsically linked to the unique societal contexts in which they operate. Across diverse cultures and nations, the pursuit of social fairness and the provision of essential services remain paramount, often manifesting through both structural governmental interventions and culturally embedded community efforts.<sup>1</sup> In many developing countries, non-state actors, particularly religious organizations, frequently emerge as pivotal providers of social safety nets, complementing or even substituting state provisions in addressing the multifaceted needs of their population.<sup>2</sup> This phenomenon underscores the enduring role of faith-based institutions in shaping societal well-being and fostering communal resilience.

Indonesia, as the world's most populous Muslim-majority nation, presents a compelling case study for understanding the profound influence of religious values on social welfare practices. Here, Islamic principles are not merely confined to individual piety but actively translate into organized, large-scale social action.<sup>3</sup> The historical trajectory of social development in the archipelago has consistently demonstrated how Islamic teachings, particularly those emphasizing charity (sadaqah), almsgiving (zakat), and collective

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Benthall and Jerome Bellion-Jourdan, *The Charitable Crescent: Politics of Aid in the Muslim World*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2003, p. 150-165.

<sup>2</sup> Hilman Latief, "Islamic Charities and Social Activism: Welfare, Politics and Theological Change in Indonesia," *South East Asia Research*, Vol-21, no. 2, 2013, p. 227-244.

<sup>3</sup> Amelia Fauzia, *Faith and the State: A History of Islamic Philanthropy in Indonesia*, Leiden: Brill, 2013, p. 152-160.

responsibility, have been instrumental in establishing and sustaining welfare mechanisms long before the advent of modern state-led programs.<sup>4</sup>

Within this vibrant landscape, the prominent Islamic organizations, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) stands out as colossal forces shaping Indonesia's social and political fabric. Established in 1926, this organization collectively represents tens of millions of adherents and have evolved into sophisticated entities with extensive networks spanning education, healthcare, and social services.<sup>5</sup> Its enduring presence and widespread influence makes NU indispensable actors in the discourse and practice of religious welfare in Indonesia, embodying distinct yet complementary approaches to community development.

Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), deeply rooted in traditionalist Islamic scholarship, has developed a distinctive approach to welfare practices that is intrinsically linked to its theological and cultural identity. Rather than relying solely on modern bureaucratic structures, NU strategically leverages established community institutions, most notably the pesantren (Islamic boarding schools) and local ulama networks, to implement its social programs. This methodology reflects a culturally embedded strategy, where welfare services are delivered through trusted communal frameworks and traditional religious authority, ensuring both social resonance and institutional sustainability.<sup>6</sup>

NU has been developed extensive portfolios of welfare activities, ranging from establishing hospitals and clinics to founding schools and universities, and initiating economic empowerment programs. NU responses to societal challenges, including poverty alleviation, disaster relief, and educational access, has been deeply informed by their respective interpretations of Islamic ethics and social justice.<sup>7</sup> These initiatives not only provide tangible benefits to millions but also serve as powerful examples of how religious conviction can drive sustained efforts towards collective well-being and human dignity.

While the significant contributions of NU to Indonesian welfare is widely acknowledged, a nuanced understanding of NU legacies, the specific mechanisms of their operations, and the challenges they encounter remains vital. Existing scholarship often highlights its partial achievements but less frequently delves into a detailed historical analysis of NU welfare philosophies, operational models, and the evolving dynamics of their engagement with both state and civil society actors.<sup>8</sup> This article seeks to bridge this gap by offering a comprehensive examination of its historical roles.

Therefore, this article aims to meticulously track the legacies of Nahdlatul Ulama in shaping religious welfare practices in Indonesia. It will explore the theological underpinnings of their welfare initiatives, analyze the historical evolution of NU social programs, compare their distinct operational strategies, and critically assess their strengths, weaknesses, and overall impact on Indonesian society. By doing so, this study contributes to a deeper

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<sup>4</sup> M.C. Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia since c. 1200*, 4th ed. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008, p. 214.

<sup>5</sup> Mitsuo Nakamura, *The Crescent Arises over the Banyan Tree: A Study of the Muhammadiyah Movement in a Central Javanese Town c. 1910-2010*, Singapore: ISEAS, 2012, p. 210-225.

<sup>6</sup> Robert W. Hefner, *Civil Islam: Muslims and Democratization in Indonesia*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000, p. 120-135.

<sup>7</sup> M. Nurhakim, "The Islamic Organizations in Indonesia 'Muhammadiyah and NU' Social Perspective Explanation," *Assyfa Journal of Islamic Studies*, Vol-2, no. 1 2024, p. 130-145.

<sup>8</sup> Robin Bush, *Nahdlatul Ulama and the Struggle for Power within Contemporary Indonesia*, Singapore: ISEAS, 2009, p. 140-155.

appreciation of the complex interplay between religion, social welfare, and national development in a pluralistic context.

### Social Welfare Legacies in Pre-colonial, Colonial, and Modern Indonesia

Before the colonial powers occupied Indonesia in the early 15<sup>th</sup> century, many small-divided kingdoms ruled Indonesians and some great empires or 'states'.<sup>9</sup> Throughout its history, Indonesians, especially under the two great kingdoms, the *Majapahit* (East Java) and the *Malaka* (Malaya), symbolized the transitional state of Indonesia and the golden age of Nusantara, economically and politically.<sup>10</sup>

There are at least three historical arguments to shore up the existence of Indonesia's internal mechanism for welfare. *Firstly*, it has historically been argued that Indonesia has been well-known as a rich natural resource country (e.g., rice, pepper, clove, nutmeg, rubber, tobacco, corn, cinnamon, palm, oil, coffee, tropical fruits, sweet potato). In some ways, such rich islands had addressed the issue of 'welfare'; peoples' basic needs were at least fulfilled. In short, Indonesians could freely plant numerous crops either for fulfilling their 'primary needs' or for their 'trading'.<sup>11</sup>

*Secondly*, before colonialism arrived, most Indonesians were affiliated with three different organized religious traditions: Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam, and their *social welfare* was provided by various religious practices. In Islam, for example, the concept of *zakat* (purification tax), *sedekah* (giving money to the destitute), or *bait al-mal* (property house: a place to distribute monies)<sup>12</sup>

*Thirdly*, indigenous Indonesians have historically been imbued with a strong sense of community. It is woven into the local-traditional culture, which derives from a simple concept of relationships among members of the community, for instance, *Swadaya* (self-help), *Swasembada* (self-sufficient), *Swakarya* (self-activating), *Gotong-royong* (mutual co-operation and help and so forth)<sup>13</sup>.

During the colonial period in 1511<sup>th</sup>, which was initiated by contact with the *Portuguese* in the 'Spice Islands' of Indonesia, trade facilitated it. However, there is only a small amount of information related to the '*welfare policies*' of its colony within the country<sup>14</sup> (Budi, 2004).

In 1602, the Dutch initially came to trade, as it was instituted by the *V.O.C* (*the Verenigde Oost Indische Compagnie*). In terms of maintaining its economic policies and practices, the *V.O.C* engaged in practices of the ideology of capitalism and economic monopolization. Under the unswerving rule of Holland, there were three welfare policies and practices.

<sup>9</sup> Riklfeys, M.C, *A History of Modern Indonesia Since c. 1200*, PALGRAVE; Hamsphire, 1981, p.15

<sup>10</sup> Budi Rahman Hakim, *Thesis Modernization of Social Work and the State: A Critical Survey of its Historical Development In Indonesia*, Mc-GILL; Montreal, Canada, 2004, p. 30

<sup>11</sup> Budi Rahman Hakim, *Thesis Modernization of Social Work* .... p. 31

<sup>12</sup> Fauzia, A., & Hermawan, A. *Ketegangan antara Kekuasaan dan Aspek Normatif Filantropi dalam sejarah Islam di Indonesia* (The Tension Between the Power and the Normative Aspect of Islamic Philanthropy in the History of Islam in Indonesia), In Thaha, 2003, l.ed. *Berderma Untuk Semua: Wacana dan Praktik Filantropi Islam*, Jakarta: Teraju, p. 160

<sup>13</sup> Hermawan, A. *Ketegangan antara Kekuasaan...* p. 169

<sup>14</sup> Budi, *Thesis Modernization of Social Work* .... p. 45

The first policy was the culture system (*Cultuurstelsel*), issued in 1830. This system was designed to assist in the Netherlands' financial difficulties, which was almost bankrupted by the forced labor mechanism. The second policy was the wave of Liberalism (1848-1900) marked a slight improvement for the Indonesians. It enabled Indigenous Indonesians to participate in public spaces, often called 'civilization'.<sup>15</sup>

In 1870, the Dutch began establishing a rudimentary modern indigenous education system', e.g., the *Dokter-Djawa* School. In short, Indonesians were educated to help the Dutch govern the country. As the system progressed, it was still deemed unfair to the Indigenous Indonesians. The resistance arose within Holland and 'Condemned Dutch colonial policy as unjust and unchristian.' The liberal system was dismantled as a severe economic crisis hit the country in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the Dutch issued the *Etische Politiek*, or the Ethical Policy, in 1901.

The following social welfare policy was the Ethical Policy. The Ethical Policy had a double edge, both economically and socially; on the economic side, it is aimed at promoting development by the Western enterprise to provide funds for the enhancement of welfare. On the social side, it aimed at promoting social welfare through doctrine, an equal position between Europeans and natives in front of uniform law. For example, the *Volksraad* (people council) educates and civilizes Indigenous Indonesians and involves Indonesians in the political sphere.

Using this model, the Dutch launched social welfare policies for the Indigenous Indonesians, such as Dutch reactivating the Village Rice-Banks (*Lumbung Desa*), Peoples' Credit Service (*Volkscredietwezen*) through Peoples' Bank (*Volkbanken*), and also developed the *Algemene Volkcredietbank* (Bank Rakyat) which has a similar role as the *Volkbanken*.<sup>16</sup>

During the late 1930s, the Dutch issued a policy governing charities for poor people called *Armenzorg* in Java, Madura, and the outer Islands. The regulation stipulated that; first, charitable activities were to be managed and delivered by religious community institutions or even traditional avenues; secondly, the assistances from the government were only additional; and thirdly, the independence of those institutions was regulated by the Dutch.

Under Japanese colonialism (*Dai-Nippon*), there was no specific policy associated with welfare. In different ways, the Japanese instituted the *Romuku* (Labor Ministry), which was divided into two departments; *Romukyoku* (Labor Department) and *Koseika* (Social Department). *Romuku* was concerned with urging Indonesian to be involved in *Romusha* (Forced Labor)<sup>17</sup>.

By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, many popular organizations were established, and a more organized struggle against the oppression of colonial rule emerged. A few examples of these organizations were the establishment of *Boedi Oetomo* (Noble Conduct), *Sarikat Dagang Islam* (the Association of Muslim Merchants), *Muhammadiyah*, *NU*, *Persis*, *al-Irsyad*, *Taman Siswa*, and several other regional organizations<sup>18</sup>.

Generally speaking, there is no effort to establish an alternative institution dealing with charity action, particularly in dealing with zakat, up to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, when NU proposed the idea to establish LAZ (Lembaga Amil Zakat). This institution was functionally

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<sup>15</sup> Budi, *Thesis Modernization of Social Work* .... p. 23

<sup>16</sup> Budi, *Thesis Modernization of Social Work* .... p. 34

<sup>17</sup> Budi, *Thesis Modernization of Social Work* .... p. 35

<sup>18</sup> M.C. Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia since c. 1200*,... p. 81.

expected as the intermediary institution which gathers zakat from the *muzakki* and distributes it to the *mustahik*.

Among those organizations, NU and Muhammadiyah are presently larger Islamic popular organizations consistently focused on social and economic reform. On a practical level, Muhammadiyah assists the needy, for example, the poor people, orphans, and neglected children as well as women through several humanitarian programs or 'social welfare actions' by the establishment of several pioneered sub-organizations.

Among the earliest ones was PKO (council on helping people's Misery) which was founded by Haji Soedja in 1918. This program was designed to assist people, for example, who have experienced environmental disruption. This became an official policy signed under Muhammadiyah, called Council on Assistance for people's welfare (Majelis Pembinaan Kesejahteraan Umat) on June 17<sup>th</sup>, 1920. Muhammadiyah also regulated the zakat system to improve the standards of living for the lower-income segments of the population<sup>19</sup>.

In further ways, Muhammadiyah built many shelters (*panti-panti*) for homeless people, seniors, orphans, and the needy. Those shelters were also intended to assist those who were the victim of war. On January 15<sup>th</sup>, 1923 Muhammadiyah built a *health clinic* in Malang, and in 1925 built a hospital. This provided health services free of charge or for a nominal fee. In Yogyakarta during that year, Muhammadiyah built PKO hospital, housing for the poor, shelters for the orphans, and also schools<sup>20</sup>.

In 1928, Muhammadiyah built more hospitals in Solo and Tegal, Central Java, and Surabaya and Malang, East Java. As well as in Bandung, West Java, in 1936, Muhammadiyah established shelters for orphans. During those periods, there were three primary concerns of Muhammadiyah: *Firstly*, assisting the poor people who were neglected by providing temporary housing until they were able to find alternative housing; *Secondly*, the founding of shelters for orphans to provide them with food, clothes, education in religion and science; and *Thirdly*, to lend a hand to those who were ill, through the establishment of hospitals and centers for health care. Assistance was also given to broken home children as well as to delinquent and street children, by placing them in informal study groups. i.e led by Dahlan, called *Fathoel Anshar Wa Miftahous Sa'adah* (opening the secret and key of happiness).

In these groups, they received religious counseling, engaged in dialogue, and learned about ethics and morals drawn from Islamic religious teachings. These specific activities for children continued until the 1960s although under a different format.

### Theological Foundations of NU's Welfare Practices

The social activism of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) is not merely a pragmatic response to socioeconomic challenges but is deeply rooted in a sophisticated theological framework derived from the *Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah* tradition. This framework synthesizes classical Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), Sufi ethics (*tasawwuf*), and the principles of social justice to create a "theology of service" (*khidmah*). For NU, welfare practices are an integral part of *ibadah* (worship), where the pursuit of social well-being is seen as a manifestation of one's devotion to God. This section explores the core theological pillars that underpin NU's welfare

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<sup>19</sup> M.C. Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia since c. 1200*,... p. 98.

<sup>20</sup> M.C. Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia since c. 1200*,... p. 137.

initiatives, drawing extensively from the *Kitab Kuning* (classical Arabic texts) and contemporary academic discourse.

### **1) The Concept of Maslahah and Maqashid al-Shari'ah**

The primary theological driver of NU's welfare initiatives is the principle of *Maslahah* (public interest) and the broader framework of *Maqashid al-Shari'ah* (the objectives of Islamic law). In the traditionalist view championed by NU, the ultimate goal of the *Shari'ah* is to promote the well-being of humanity and prevent harm. This is famously articulated by Imam al-Ghazali in his magnum opus, *Ihya Ulumuddin*, where he emphasizes that the preservation of the five essential elements; religion (*din*), life (*nafs*), intellect (*'aql*), lineage (*nasl*), and property (*mal*), is the foundation of social order.<sup>21</sup>

Imam al-Ghazali argues that "the purpose of the Law is to promote the welfare of the people, which lies in safeguarding their faith, their life, their intellect, their posterity, and their wealth".<sup>22</sup> For NU, this theological mandate translates into a comprehensive social agenda. The establishment of schools and universities is seen as a fulfillment of the duty to protect the *'aql* (intellect), while the creation of hospitals and clinics is a direct application of the duty to preserve *nafs* (life). This "Maqashid-based welfare" ensures that NU's social programs are not just charitable acts but are legally and spiritually mandated obligations aimed at achieving a balanced and just society.

Furthermore, the concept of *Maslahah Mursalah* (unrestricted public interest) allows NU to adapt its welfare strategies to contemporary needs. As noted by Wahbah al-Zuhayli in *Tafsir al-Munir*, the flexibility of Islamic law enables religious organizations to initiate social programs that are not explicitly mentioned in the primary texts but serve the common good.<sup>23</sup> This theological elasticity is what allows NU to engage in diverse activities, from environmental conservation to digital literacy, all under the umbrella of promoting *Maslahah*. The teleological basis of NU's welfare is thus both rigid in its ultimate goals and flexible in its practical applications, allowing for a dynamic engagement with the evolving needs of the Indonesian ummah.

### **2) Zakat, Sadaqah, and the Ethics of Wealth Distribution**

The theological foundation of NU's economic empowerment programs is rooted in the Islamic ethics of wealth distribution, particularly the institutions of *Zakat* (obligatory almsgiving) and *Sadaqah* (voluntary charity). In the *Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah* tradition, wealth is viewed as a trust (*amanah*) from God, and the wealthy have a divine obligation to share a portion of their resources with the less fortunate. This is extensively discussed in Imam al-Nawawi's *Al-Majmu' Sharh al-Muhadhdhab*, where he details the legal and spiritual dimensions of *Zakat* as a mechanism for social leveling.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, *Ihya Ulumuddin*, Vol. 1, Cairo: Dar al-Hadith, 2004, p. 112-125.

<sup>22</sup> Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, *Al-Mustasfa min 'Ilm al-Usul*, Vol. 1, Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1993, p. 174.

<sup>23</sup> Wahbah al-Zuhayli, *Tafsir al-Munir fi al-'Aqidah wa al-Shari'ah wa al-Manhaj*, Vol. 1, Damascus: Dar al-Fikr, 1991, p. 45-60.

<sup>24</sup> Yahya bin Sharaf al-Nawawi, *Al-Majmu' Sharh al-Muhadhdhab*, Vol. 5, Cairo: Matba'at al-Tadamun, n.d., p. 332-345.

Imam al-Nawawi emphasizes that *Zakat* is not merely a tax but a "purification of wealth" and a "right of the poor" (*haqq al-fuqara*).<sup>25</sup> NU's Lembaga Amil Zakat, Infaq, dan Shadaqah (LAZISNU) operates on this theological premise, transforming *Zakat* from a passive act of giving into a proactive tool for community development. The shift toward "productive zakat" (*zakat produktif*), championed by NU scholars like KH Sahal Mahfudh, is a direct application of the principle that *Zakat* should empower the recipient (*mustahiq*) to eventually become a giver (*muzakki*).<sup>26</sup> This transformative approach to *Zakat* reflects a deep understanding of the structural causes of poverty and a commitment to long-term economic justice.

This "theology of empowerment" is further supported by the concept of *Sadaqah Jariyah* (continuous charity). In the Hadith tradition, the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) stated that "when a person dies, his deeds come to an end except for three: a continuous charity, knowledge from which benefit is gained, or a righteous child who prays for him".<sup>27</sup> This belief motivates NU members to invest in long-term welfare infrastructure, such as *waqf* (endowment) lands for mosques, schools, and hospitals, ensuring that the benefits of their charity continue to flow across generations. The economic mandate of NU's welfare is thus characterized by a synthesis of legal obligation and spiritual aspiration, creating a sustainable model of communal support.

### 3) *The Philosophy of Khidmah and Social Solidarity*

Central to NU's identity is the philosophy of *Khidmah* (service), which views social activism as a form of spiritual discipline. Rooted in Sufi ethics, *Khidmah* emphasizes humility, selflessness, and the recognition of the divine presence in all human beings. As Imam al-Ghazali notes in *Ihya Ulumuddin*, "the best of people are those who are most beneficial to others".<sup>28</sup> For NU members, serving the community is a way to draw closer to God and to embody the prophetic character of compassion (*rahmah*). This spiritual dimension elevates social work from a mere professional activity to a sacred duty, fostering a deep sense of commitment among NU activists.

This philosophy fosters a strong sense of social solidarity (*ukhuwwah*) among the *Nahdliyin*. This solidarity is categorized into three levels: *Ukhuwwah Islamiyah* (brotherhood among Muslims), *Ukhuwwah Wathaniyah* (brotherhood among fellow citizens), and *Ukhuwwah Basyariyah* (brotherhood among all humans).<sup>29</sup> This inclusive theological framework allows NU to extend its welfare services to all members of society, regardless of their religious or ethnic background. The "inclusive welfare" model practiced by NU hospitals and schools is a direct reflection of this *Ukhuwwah Basyariyah*, positioning NU as a bridge-builder in Indonesia's pluralistic society. The spiritual dimension of NU's welfare is thus both deeply personal and broadly communal, linking individual piety to collective well-being.

The concept of *Tawazun* (balance) and *Tawasut* (moderation) also plays a crucial role in NU's social activism. These principles guide NU to avoid extremes and to seek a middle path in addressing social issues. In the context of welfare, this means balancing individual

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<sup>25</sup> Yahya bin Sharaf al-Nawawi, *Riyadh al-Salihin*, Beirut: Dar al-Khayr, 1991, p. 120.

<sup>26</sup> Sahal Mahfudh, *Nuansa Fiqh Sosial*, Yogyakarta: LKiS, 1994, p. 88-105.

<sup>27</sup> Muslim bin al-Hajjaj, *Sahih Muslim*, Hadith No. 1631.

<sup>28</sup> Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, *Ihya Ulumuddin*, Vol. 4, Cairo: Dar al-Hadith, 2004, p. 210.

<sup>29</sup> Achmad Siddiq, *Islam, Pancasila dan Ukhuwwah*, Jakarta: LTN-PBNU, 1984, p. 45-55.

rights with communal responsibilities, and spiritual needs with material well-being.<sup>30</sup> This "moderate welfare" approach ensures that NU's initiatives are sustainable, culturally sensitive, and socially cohesive. By maintaining this balance, NU avoids the pitfalls of both radical individualism and stifling collectivism, offering a model of social development that is both humane and effective.

#### **4) *Fiqh al-Ijtima'i: The Social Jurisprudence of NU***

In the contemporary era, NU has developed a specialized field of study known as *Fiqh al-Ijtima'i* (social jurisprudence), which seeks to apply classical fiqh principles to modern social problems. This movement, pioneered by scholars like KH Sahal Mahfudh, argues that fiqh should not be confined to ritualistic matters but should actively address issues of poverty, health, and education.<sup>31</sup> In his seminal work, *Nuansa Fiqh Sosial*, Sahal Mahfudh argues that "the true essence of *fiqh* is to provide solutions for the challenges faced by the community".<sup>32</sup> This intellectual framework provides the necessary tools for NU to engage with the complexities of modern society while remaining rooted in its legal tradition.

*Fiqh al-Ijtima'i* provides the theological justification for NU's engagement in "structural welfare." This involves not just providing direct aid but also advocating for policy changes and institutional reforms that promote social justice. For example, NU's advocacy for land reform and fair labor practices is rooted in the *fiqh* principle of '*Adalah* (justice). By integrating social science perspectives with traditional jurisprudence, NU has created a "living theology" that is both intellectually rigorous and socially relevant. This intellectual framework allows NU to move beyond traditional charity toward a more systemic approach to social transformation.

This social jurisprudence also emphasizes the importance of *Amanah* (accountability) in the management of welfare institutions. Drawing from the *fiqh of Wilayah* (governance), NU emphasizes that those who manage communal resources must do so with the highest standards of transparency and integrity.<sup>33</sup> This theological commitment to good governance is what has allowed NU's vast network of institutions to maintain public trust and achieve long-term sustainability. The intellectual framework of NU's welfare is thus characterized by a commitment to both legal precision and social efficacy, ensuring that its initiatives are both principled and practical.

#### **5) *The Role of the Ulama as Social Guardians***

The theological foundation of NU's welfare practices is inextricably linked to the role of the Ulama (religious scholars) as the "heirs of the Prophets" (*warathat al-anbiya*). In the NU tradition, the Ulama are not just teachers of religious texts but are social guardians who are responsible for the well-being of their flock. This is reflected in the concept of *Himayah al-Ummah* (protection of the community), which mandates the Ulama to intervene in social

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<sup>30</sup> Said Aqil Siroj, *Tasawuf Sebagai Kritik Sosial*, Jakarta: SAS Foundation, 2006, p. 112-130.

<sup>31</sup> Sahal Mahfudh, *Fiqh Sosial: Upaya Pengembangan Kemandirian Umat*, Jakarta: Pustaka Utama, 2003, p. 140-155.

<sup>32</sup> Sahal Mahfudh, *Nuansa Fiqh Sosial*,..... p. 12.

<sup>33</sup> Wahbah al-Zuhayli, *Al-Fiqh al-Islami wa Adillatuhu*, Vol. 3, Damascus: Dar al-Fikr, 1985, p. 795-800.

and economic matters to protect the vulnerable.<sup>34</sup> This leadership model ensures that NU's welfare initiatives are guided by moral authority and communal trust.

The Kiai (head of a pesantren) embodies this role by serving as a "total leader" who provides spiritual guidance, educational opportunities, and economic support to his community. This "charismatic welfare" model is rooted in the belief that the Ulama have a divine mandate to lead the community toward both spiritual salvation and material prosperity.<sup>35</sup> By positioning the Ulama at the center of its welfare initiatives, NU ensures that its social programs are deeply integrated into the cultural and religious life of the people. This leadership model is both traditional in its roots and modern in its application, providing a stable foundation for NU's social impact.

In conclusion, the theological foundations of NU's welfare practices are a rich tapestry of classical jurisprudence, Sufi ethics, and modern social thought. By grounding its social activism in the principles of *Maslahah*, *Zakat*, *Khidmah*, and *'Adalah*, NU has created a resilient and impactful welfare model that continues to shape the social fabric of Indonesia. This "theology of service" not only addresses the material needs of the community but also provides a profound sense of meaning and purpose to the millions of Nahdliyin who participate in these initiatives. The intergenerational legacy of NU's welfare practices is thus a testament to the enduring power of faith-based social action in fostering a more equitable and compassionate world.

### **NU's Approaches to Initiatives**

The evolution of Nahdlatul Ulama's (NU) welfare initiatives reflects a strategic transition from traditional, informal communal help to a sophisticated, institutionalized system of social services. Unlike the modernist approach which often prioritizes bureaucratic efficiency and puritanical reform, NU's welfare model is deeply embedded in the *Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah* framework, where social service is viewed as an extension of religious duty (*khidmah*).<sup>36</sup> This institutionalization is manifested through three primary pillars: the pesantren network, the expansion of higher education, and the professionalization of healthcare services. These pillars collectively form a "faith-based welfare ecosystem" that operates both within and alongside the state's social protection framework.

#### **1) The Pesantren as a Communal Welfare Hub**

At the heart of NU's social fabric lies the pesantren (Islamic boarding school), which functions not merely as an educational center but as a "communal welfare hub" for rural and marginalized populations. With over 40,000 pesantrens affiliated with the *Rabithah Ma'ahid al-Islamiyah* (RMI-NU), these institutions serve as a primary social safety net where the Kiai (religious leader) acts as a mediator, counselor, and welfare distributor.<sup>37</sup> The pesantren model provides a unique form of social protection that is often more accessible to the poor

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<sup>34</sup> Abdurrahman Wahid, *Muslim di Tengah Pergumulan*, Jakarta: Leppenas, 1981, p. 112-125.

<sup>35</sup> Martin van Bruinessen, *NU: Tradisi, Relasi-relasi Kuasa, Pencarian Wacana Baru*, Yogyakarta: LKiS, 1994, p. 210-225.

<sup>36</sup> Robin Bush, *Nahdlatul Ulama and the Struggle for Power within Contemporary Indonesia*, Singapore: ISEAS, 2009, p. 140-155.

<sup>37</sup> Rabithah Ma'ahid al-Islamiyah (RMI-PBNU), *Statistik Pesantren NU 2024*, Jakarta: PBNU, 2024.

than state-led programs, offering food security, housing, and moral guidance through a system of mutual aid (gotong royong).

The sociological significance of the pesantren in Indonesian welfare cannot be overstated. Historically, pesantrens have been the primary institutions providing "total care" for students (santri) from impoverished backgrounds. This care extends beyond the classroom; it includes the provision of basic needs, often funded through the Kiai's personal wealth or communal contributions (zakat, infaq, sedekah). This "patron-client" relationship, while traditional, is characterized by a high degree of trust (amanah) and social responsibility, making it a resilient mechanism against economic shocks.<sup>38</sup> Critically, the pesantren serves as a site of social resilience, where traditional values are synthesized with community development needs, effectively mitigating the impacts of economic marginalization in rural Indonesia.

Furthermore, modern pesantrens have begun to integrate economic empowerment into their core mission. Many institutions now host *Baitul Maal wat Tamwil* (BMT) cooperatives and vocational training centers, transforming the pesantren into an engine of local economic growth.<sup>39</sup> This shift represents a "productive welfare" model, where the goal is not just to provide temporary relief but to equip the community with the tools for self-sufficiency. By leveraging its vast grassroots network, NU's pesantren system effectively bridges the gap between religious ideals and practical socioeconomic needs, fostering a model of "humanitarian Islam" that is both culturally rooted and socially transformative.<sup>40</sup>

## 2) *Higher Education and the Engine of Social Mobility*

In the realm of education, NU has significantly expanded its reach through the Lembaga Perguruan Tinggi Nahdlatul Ulama (LPTNU), which currently oversees approximately 274 higher education institutions, including prominent universities such as UNU Yogyakarta, UNUSA, UNISMA, and others.<sup>41</sup> This expansion is a deliberate strategy to facilitate upward social mobility for the Nahdliyin (NU followers), who have historically faced systemic barriers to accessing elite state universities. By establishing its own higher education network, NU aims to democratize access to knowledge and professional opportunities for the rural middle class and the urban poor.

The LPTNU strategy is characterized by a unique curriculum that integrates traditional Islamic sciences with modern disciplines—often referred to as the "Unity of Science" or "Moderate Islam" (Wasathiyah) framework. This approach ensures that students are not only technically competent in fields such as medicine, engineering, and economics but also deeply grounded in NU's moderate religious values.<sup>42</sup> This dual competency is crucial in the

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<sup>38</sup> N.J. Franklin, "Reproducing Political Islam in Java: The Role of Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah Pesantren in the political socialisation of the Umat," *PhD dissertation.*, 2014).

<sup>39</sup> M. Rahmanto, A. Ab Rahman, and M.Z. Daud, "Productive Waqf and Socio-Economic Development: A Case Study of Nahdlatul Ulama Indonesia," *Jurnal Syariah*, 33 (2), no. 1, 2025, p. 112-130.

<sup>40</sup> Inas Ainun Shafia, UN Fajri, SN Putri, et al., "Local Perspectives on Achieving Sustainable Development Goals: The Role of Pesantren in Social Empowerment and Alleviating Poverty in Sleman," *Journal of Islamic Studies and Humanities*, 2024, p. 105-120.

<sup>41</sup> LPTNU, *Profil Perguruan Tinggi Nahdlatul Ulama 2025*, Jakarta: LPTNU, 2025.

<sup>42</sup> M. Qorib, "Socio-cultural transformation within Indonesian Academics: Cases in Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama universities," *Asian Education and Development Studies*, 14 (4), 2025, p. 856-875.

Indonesian labor market, where there is a growing demand for professionals who can navigate both modern corporate environments and traditional religious contexts.

Moreover, NU universities serve as critical sites for "intellectual social mobility." For many santri, attending an NU university is the first step toward breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty. These institutions often provide extensive scholarship programs, funded through the NU Care-LAZISNU network, ensuring that financial constraints do not hinder academic potential.<sup>43</sup> This "inclusive higher education" model is critical in transforming the socioeconomic status of the Nahdliyin and fostering a new generation of Muslim professionals who are both technically competent and socially conscious. By producing a "technocratic ulama" class, NU is effectively repositioning itself as a key player in Indonesia's national development and modernization.<sup>44</sup>

### 3) *Institutionalizing Healthcare*

NU's commitment to holistic welfare is further exemplified by its extensive healthcare network managed under the Lembaga Kesehatan Nahdlatul Ulama (LKNU). This network includes dozens of Rumah Sakit Islam (RSI) and hundreds of community clinics that provide essential medical services to underserved populations.<sup>45</sup> The RSI model is distinctive for its "faith-based healthcare" approach, which balances professional medical standards with Islamic ethics and spiritual care. This model recognizes that health is not merely a biological state but a spiritual and social one, requiring a holistic approach to healing.

A critical feature of the NU healthcare system is its inclusivity and commitment to social justice. Many NU hospitals implement cross-subsidy mechanisms, where the revenue from private patients is used to subsidize the care of the *dhu'afa* (the poor). Additionally, the integration of zakat funds into hospital operations allows for the provision of free or low-cost treatment for those who fall outside the state's national health insurance (JKN) coverage.<sup>46</sup> This "pro-poor" healthcare model ensures that medical services are accessible to the most vulnerable members of society, regardless of their ability to pay.

Furthermore, the professionalization of the RSI network has accelerated in recent years. NU hospitals are increasingly adopting modern management practices, digital health technologies, and international accreditation standards to compete with private and state-run facilities.<sup>47</sup> This professionalization is not seen as a departure from religious values but as a fulfillment of the Islamic mandate to provide the best possible service to humanity (*ihsan*). By institutionalizing healthcare, NU not only addresses the physical ailments of the community but also challenges the commercialization of health, positioning medical service

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<sup>43</sup> A. Dinana, "Nahdlatul Ulama's Philanthropy: The Aid for Education in NU Institutions," *Manageria: Jurnal Manajemen Pendidikan Islam*, 6, no. 1, 2021, 61-78.

<sup>44</sup> R.R. Siregar, P. Guntara, and I. Effendi, "Collaboration between Nahdlatul Ulama and Higher Education in Improving the Quality of Islamic Education in Indonesia," *Journal of Nahdlatul Ulama Studies*, Vol. 3 No. 1, 2025, p. 437-440.

<sup>45</sup> LKNU, *Laporan Tahunan Lembaga Kesehatan Nahdlatul Ulama 2024*, Jakarta: PBNU, 2024.

<sup>46</sup> Hilman Latief, "Islamic Charities and Social Activism: Welfare, Politics and Theological Change in Indonesia," *South East Asia Research*, 21, no. 2, 2013, p. 227-244.

<sup>47</sup> Fery Rahman, "Analysis of Telemedicine Models in Nahdlatul Ulama Network Hospital Health Facilities in Indonesia," *Dissertation*, FKM UI, 2025.

as a fundamental right and a form of religious worship. This "healthcare as khidmah" philosophy remains a powerful driver of NU's social impact in the 21st century.<sup>48</sup>

#### 4) *Critical Synthesis and Future Challenges*

While NU's institutionalized welfare initiatives have achieved remarkable scale and impact, they face ongoing challenges related to professionalization, sustainability, and state relations. The tension between maintaining traditional pesantren values and meeting modern bureaucratic standards often necessitates a delicate balancing act for NU leaders.<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, the reliance on voluntary contributions and the evolving regulatory landscape of Islamic philanthropy in Indonesia require NU to continuously refine its public accountability and transparency mechanisms to maintain public trust.

The relationship between NU's welfare institutions and the state is also complex. While NU often complements state services, there are instances of friction, particularly regarding the regulation of zakat and the accreditation of religious schools. However, NU's ability to navigate these challenges, often through its significant political influence, has allowed it to remain a dominant force in Indonesia's social landscape.<sup>50</sup> Despite these hurdles, the intergenerational legacy of NU's welfare practices remains a cornerstone of Indonesia's social development, demonstrating the enduring power of religious organizations in fostering a more equitable, resilient, and compassionate society.

### Conclusion

This article has meticulously tracked the legacies of Nahdlatul Ulama in shaping the religious welfare traditions of Indonesia. By examining both the deep theological foundations and the sophisticated institutional mechanisms of NU's social activism, a clear picture emerges of a faith-based welfare ecosystem that is both resilient and adaptive. The analysis demonstrates that NU's contributions are not merely a series of ad-hoc charitable acts but a systematic, ideologically coherent effort to realize the principles of social justice embedded in the Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah tradition.

The research confirms that NU's strength lies in its ability to synthesize traditional religious authority with modern organizational strategies. The pesantren serves as the cultural and spiritual heart of its welfare network, providing a crucial social safety net for rural communities. Simultaneously, the expansion of higher education through the LPTNU and the professionalization of healthcare via the LKNU represent a strategic engagement with modernity, aimed at fostering social mobility and improving the quality of life for the Nahdliyin and the broader Indonesian society.

However, the study also highlights the inherent challenges that NU faces. The tension between maintaining the traditional ethos of khidmah and the bureaucratic demands of modern governance, the need for greater financial transparency and accountability, and the complex relationship with the state all pose significant hurdles. Future research should focus

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<sup>48</sup> Amelia Fauzia, *Faith and the State: A History of Islamic Philanthropy in Indonesia*, Leiden: Brill, 2013, p. 152-160.

<sup>49</sup> Martin van Bruinessen, *NU: Tradisi, Relasi-relasi Kuasa, Pencarian Wacana Baru*, Yogyakarta: LKiS, 1994, p. 210-225.

<sup>50</sup> Greg Barton, *Gus Dur: The Authorized Biography of Abdurrahman Wahid*, Jakarta: Equinox Publishing, 2002, p. 112-120.

on the long-term impact of NU's educational and healthcare initiatives on social mobility and public health outcomes. Furthermore, a comparative analysis of NU's welfare model with other faith-based organizations in the Global South could provide valuable insights into the role of religion in contemporary social development.

In conclusion, Nahdlatul Ulama's welfare practices offer a compelling model of how a traditionalist Islamic organization can be a powerful force for social good in a modernizing nation. Its enduring legacy is a testament to the profound and complex interplay between religion, social welfare, and national development in Indonesia.

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