

Islamic Education in Java: A Historical Study of Sunan Ampel's Educational System

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to reconstruct and critically examine the Islamic education system developed by Sunan Ampel during the historical process of Islamization in Java, with particular attention to its educational objectives, curriculum, learning methods, institutional development, and educational outcomes. Employing a qualitative historical research design, the study uses a library research approach by analyzing primary and secondary historical sources, including classical Islamic texts, books, scholarly journal articles, and relevant historical documents. The collected data were examined through content analysis and historical-contextual analysis to identify the educational principles, practices, and socio-cultural functions underlying Sunan Ampel's educational system. The findings demonstrate that the educational model developed through Ampel Denta pesantren was holistic, integrative, and contextual. Its primary objective was not merely to transmit Islamic knowledge but to form faith, moral character, intellectual competence, and social responsibility. The curriculum integrated the Qur'an, hadith, fiqh, and Sufism with contextual knowledge relevant to Javanese society. Learning was implemented through lectures, exemplary conduct, habituation, dialogue, and culturally adaptive preaching. Importantly, the study finds that Ampel Denta functioned not only as a religious learning institution but also as a center for forming ulama networks and gradually transforming Javanese socio-cultural life through peaceful, adaptive Islamization. This study's novelty lies in conceptualizing Sunan Ampel's educational practice as an integrated model of knowledge transmission, character formation, institutional networking, and cultural transformation. These findings suggest that historical Islamic education can offer valuable principles for contemporary educational models that seek to integrate religious knowledge, ethical formation, contextual learning, and culturally responsive practices.

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INTRODUCTION

Islamic education has played a significant role in the historical development of Islam in the Indonesian archipelago, not only as a means of transmitting religious knowledge but also as an instrument for shaping faith, morality, social identity, and community life (Ar et al., 2025; Hasanah & Husna, 2025; Ilham & Syauqi, 2025; Isbah, 2020; Istiyani et al., 2024; Matos, 2025; Susilo & Wulansari, 2020). This role became particularly important in Java, where the Islamization process took place within a complex socio-cultural environment influenced by Hindu-Buddhist traditions and local beliefs (Afendi et al., 2025; F. Hakim & Sumadi, 2026; L. Hakim & Muhid, 2025; Prasetyo et al., 2025; Susmihara, 2017). Rather than developing solely through doctrinal transmission, the Islamization of Java involved adaptive and contextual strategies that incorporated education, cultural interaction, and social transformation. Within this historical context, the Walisongo played an important role as religious teachers and educators, and Sunan Ampel emerged as one of the prominent figures who developed an educational network centered on Ampel Denta. His educational activities are therefore important to examine because they illustrate how Islamic education functioned as both a pedagogical process and an instrument of peaceful social transformation in Java (Rosyidah et al., 2025); (Mustaqim, 2022).

Previous studies have discussed the role of the Walisongo and Sunan Ampel primarily in relation to the Islamization of Java, da'wah, cultural adaptation, and the development of Islamic educational traditions (Ismail et al., 2024); (Susmihara, 2017); (Rosyidah et al., 2025). Studies have also highlighted the role of pesantren as institutions for transmitting Islamic knowledge and developing students' moral, spiritual, social, and cultural character (Susilo & Wulansari, 2020); (Ulayya, 2018). In particular, existing literature indicates that Sunan Ampel developed Islamic learning that incorporated the Qur'an, hadith, fiqh, and other Islamic values while employing approaches that were responsive to local cultural conditions (Dewi et al., 2025; Jannah & Jumari, 2024; Rosyidah et al., 2025; Sabarudin et al., 2023). Other studies have emphasized educational practices in pesantren such as exemplary conduct (*uswah*), emotional closeness (*shohbah*), habituation, and the internalization of moral values (Aisah et al., 2025; Amalia et al., 2025; Mf et al., 2025; Rahman et al., 2025; Supriyanto et al., 2025); (Rahmawati, 2017); (Ruhdiyanto et al., 2024). However, studies concerning the Walisongo and the Islamization of Java have tended to emphasize the general history of da'wah (Ismail et al., 2024), while research that systematically reconstructs Sunan Ampel's educational system as an integrated system remains limited. In particular, the relationships among educational objectives, curriculum, learning methods, institutional arrangements, and educational outcomes have not been sufficiently examined as interconnected components of a historical educational system.

This gap is important because examining Sunan Ampel's educational practices only from the perspective of da'wah does not fully explain the educational mechanisms through which Islamic values were transmitted, internalized, and reproduced across generations (Ismail et al., 2024). A systematic historical examination can provide a more comprehensive understanding of how education contributed to the formation of religious and moral character, the development of ulama, and the establishment of Islamic educational networks in Java. Therefore, this study seeks to complement previous research by reconstructing Sunan Ampel's Islamic education system through five interconnected dimensions: educational objectives, curriculum, learning methods, educational institutions, particularly pesantren, and educational outcomes. Unlike studies that primarily discuss Sunan Ampel's role in the broader history of Islamization, this study positions his educational activities as an integrated

educational system and examines their relationship with the social and cultural transformation of Javanese society.

Based on this focus, the specific objective of this study is to analyze the characteristics and contributions of Sunan Ampel's Islamic education system within the historical context of Islamization in Java. The study examines how educational objectives were formulated, what knowledge and values constituted the curriculum, how learning was conducted, how Ampel Denta functioned as an educational institution, and what kinds of educational outcomes emerged from the system. Through this approach, the study aims to provide a more systematic historical interpretation of Sunan Ampel's educational contribution rather than merely describing his role as a Wali or preacher.

This study argues that Sunan Ampel's Islamic education system was not merely a mechanism for transmitting religious teachings but a holistic and contextual educational process that integrated religious knowledge, moral formation, spiritual development, cultural adaptation, and social leadership. The study further argues that the combination of curriculum, exemplary practice, habituation, dialogue, cultural preaching, and the pesantren environment enabled Islamic education to function as an instrument of peaceful Islamization and social transformation. By demonstrating these interconnections, this study seeks to contribute a historical perspective to the study of Islamic education and to clarify the educational foundations underlying the development of Islam in Java.

METHODS

This article uses a qualitative approach with library research, which aims to examine the Islamic education system developed by Sunan Ampel in depth within a historical context. This qualitative approach was chosen because it can explore the meanings, values, and educational concepts contained in various sources, including books, journal articles, and other historical documents. Through this approach, the researcher seeks to understand the phenomenon of Islamic education comprehensively, emphasizing descriptive-analytical data interpretation. The library method is used because the object of study is conceptual and historical, so data is obtained from written sources relevant to the research theme (Kaelan, 2010).

The data collection technique in this study was conducted through a documentation study, namely by collecting, identifying, and reviewing various literature related to Islamic education during the Walisongo era, particularly the educational thoughts and practices of Sunan Ampel. Data sources used included Islamic history books, national and international scientific journal articles, and other academic documents relevant to the research topic. The collected data were then selected based on their level of validity and credibility, so that only sources of good academic quality were used in the analysis. This process is crucial to ensure that the research results have a strong scientific basis and can be accounted for.

Next, the data analysis in this article uses the content analysis method, an approach that aims to examine the content of written or printed information in depth. The data obtained is analyzed by organizing, classifying, and interpreting information related to educational objectives, curriculum, learning methods, Islamic boarding schools, and educational output produced by Sunan Ampel. A historical approach is used to understand the social, cultural, and religious contexts underlying the emergence of this educational system, thus producing a comprehensive and contextual understanding. Through this analysis, the researcher attempts to draw systematic conclusions regarding Sunan Ampel's educational contribution to the development of Islam in the Indonesian archipelago (Afifuddin & Saebani, 2009).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Short Biography

Sunan Ampel is the son of Sheikh Ibrahim As-Samarkandi (Sunyoto, 2018, p. 190) with Dewi Condrowulan (Abdullah, 2017, p. 90). His real name is Raden Ahmad Rahmatullah or Sayyid Ali Rahmatullah. He is one of the important figures in Walisongo who played a major role in the process of Islamization in Java in the 15th century. He is estimated to have been born in the Champa region and then came to Java around 1443 AD. During his preaching journey, Sunan Ampel settled in the Ampel Denta area (Surabaya) and became the center of the spread of Islam through a peaceful and adaptive approach to local culture. Apart from being a preacher, he is also known as a figure who had a major influence in the formation of a network of ulama and preaching cadres in the archipelago (Mustaqim, 2022, p. 1).

Furthermore, Sunan Ampel is known as an educator who founded an early Islamic educational institution, the Islamic boarding school (pesantren) in Ampel Denta. Through this institution, he taught various Islamic disciplines such as the Qur'an, hadith, and fiqh, while instilling moral values in the community. From this pesantren, many important figures emerged, including other saints who later continued the Islamic missionary work in various regions of Java. Sunan Ampel's role in developing an Islamic education system based on local values and culture made him one of the pioneers of Islamic education in the Indonesian archipelago (Rosyidah et al., 2025).

Educational Objectives: Faith, Morality, and Cadre Formation

The primary goal of Sunan Ampel's education was to shape the community's faith and Islamic beliefs. During the Islamization process in Java, he not only introduced formal Islamic teachings but also gradually instilled the belief in monotheism through a contextual educational and preaching approach. The education he developed focused on strengthening the community's faith through the teaching of the Qur'an, Hadith, and the fundamentals of Islamic teachings within the pesantren he established (Rosyidah et al., 2025).

Furthermore, the education developed by Sunan Ampel aimed to foster morality in both individual and social dimensions. Values such as honesty, justice, and social concern were instilled through exemplary behavior and daily practice. His preaching was therefore not merely theoretical but was applied in social life (Ramadhani, 2023).

Another important objective was the development of cadres of preachers and ulama who could continue the Islamic mission. The pesantren became a center for developing religious knowledge, leadership, and da'wah skills among students, thereby giving Sunan Ampel's educational system a long-term orientation toward the continuity of Islamic preaching (Harahap et al., 2023). The educational system also incorporated Islamic values with local culture. Sunan Ampel accommodated local traditions that did not contradict Islamic teachings, enabling Islamic teachings to be communicated through a culturally adaptive approach (Habib et al., 2025).

These findings indicate that Sunan Ampel's educational objectives were not limited to the transmission of religious knowledge. Instead, they followed a transformative sequence: faith formation → moral formation → leadership development → regeneration of religious cadres. The significance of this orientation lies in its understanding of education as a process of individual and social transformation. Religious knowledge was expected to influence behavior and social responsibility rather than remain at the cognitive level. This interpretation is consistent with studies on Walisongo education that emphasize the integration of religious teaching, moral formation, and social transformation (Susmihara, 2017); (Ibdalsyah & Rosyadi, 2022).

However, the present study extends this perspective by emphasizing cadre formation as an integral educational objective. Thus, the success of education was not only reflected in students' religious understanding but also in their capacity to continue Islamic education and da'wah. This finding suggests that the educational objectives of Sunan Ampel can be understood as having a regenerative orientation, in which students were prepared not merely as recipients of knowledge but as future educators, preachers, and leaders.

Educational Curriculum: Integration of Religious Knowledge, Spirituality, and Local Context

The curriculum developed by Sunan Ampel focused on fundamental Islamic subjects, including the Qur'an, Hadith, fiqh, morality, and Sufism. The combination of these subjects indicates attention not only to cognitive development but also to spiritual and moral formation (Nursaudah, 2020). The curriculum was also adapted to the needs and conditions of Javanese society. Teaching materials were delivered gradually and contextually according to the social, cultural, and intellectual conditions of the community (Harahap et al., 2023). In addition, local values and Javanese cultural wisdom were incorporated insofar as they did not conflict with Islamic principles. This process facilitated cultural accommodation between Islamic teachings and local traditions (Aziz, 2013).

The composition of the curriculum indicates that Sunan Ampel's educational system was holistic. Qur'an and Hadith provided the foundation of religious knowledge, fiqh translated religious principles into practical life, while morality and Sufism addressed ethical and spiritual development. Thus, the curriculum can be understood as an integration of knowledge, faith, practice, morality, and spirituality, rather than a collection of religious subjects taught independently.

This finding is consistent with research describing Islamic education in the Walisongo period as an educational process that integrates religious knowledge with moral and spiritual formation (Nursaudah, 2020). The contextual dimension also corresponds with studies emphasizing the importance of cultural adaptation in the spread of Islam in Java (Susmihara, 2017); (Aziz, 2013).

Table 1. Curriculum Components and Educational Functions

Curriculum Component	Educational Function	Dimension Developed
Qur'an	Foundation of Islamic understanding	Religious knowledge
Hadith	Understanding prophetic guidance	Religious knowledge and practice
Fiqh	Guidance for religious practice	Practical competence
Morality	Formation of ethical conduct	Character
Sufism	Development of spiritual awarness	Spirituality
Local cultural vales	Contextualization of Islamic teachings	Social and cuktural competence

Source: Authors' synthesis based on Nursaudah (2020), Harahap et al. (2023), and Aziz (2013).

Learning Methods: Knowledge Transmission and Value Internalization

The learning methods used by Sunan Ampel included oral instruction, lectures, *mau'izhah*, exemplary behavior (*uswah hasanah*), habituation, cultural preaching, and dialogue (Rosyidah et al., 2025); (Arifin & As'ad, 2025); (Ibdalsyah & Rosyadi, 2022). Oral instruction and *mau'izhah* functioned as means of transmitting religious knowledge and moral values. The use of simple and communicative language facilitated the delivery of Islamic teachings to the community (Rosyidah et al., 2025).

The exemplary method placed the educator's behavior at the center of the learning process. Students learned not only through theoretical instruction but also by observing and imitating the teacher's behavior (Arifin & As'ad, 2025). Habituation further reinforced this process through repeated religious practices and social interactions based on Islamic values (Ibdalsyah & Rosyadi, 2022). Cultural preaching and dialogue enabled Islamic teachings to be adapted to local social and cultural conditions. Such approaches emphasized persuasion, communication, and avoidance of social conflict (Yahya, 2020); (Musdhalifah & Istiqomalia, 2024); (Hatmansyah, 2015).

The findings indicate that Sunan Ampel did not rely on a single pedagogical method. Rather, different methods performed complementary functions. Oral instruction facilitated knowledge transmission, *mau'izhah* provided moral direction, *uswah hasanah* enabled learning through modeling, habituation facilitated value internalization, while cultural preaching and dialogue supported contextual communication.

This means that the learning system moved beyond the simple transmission of knowledge toward a process of knowledge → practice → habituation → character formation. This interpretation is supported by contemporary studies of pesantren education, which emphasize the importance of exemplary behavior and habituation in character formation (Rahman et al., 2025); (Ruhdiyanto et al., 2024). Similarly, studies on Walisongo preaching emphasize cultural adaptation and dialogue as important mechanisms for communicating Islamic teachings within the Javanese cultural context (Yahya, 2020); (Musdhalifah & Istiqomalia, 2024).

The contribution of this finding lies in showing that Sunan Ampel's pedagogical system can be interpreted as an integrated learning mechanism, in which cognitive, affective, behavioral, and socio-cultural dimensions operated simultaneously.

Table 2. Learning Methods and Their Pedagogical Functions

Method	Primary Function	Learning Process	Expected Outcome
Lecture/oral instruction	Knowledge transmission	Explanation and communication	Religious understanding
Mau'izhah	Moral guidance	Advice and reflection	Moral awareness
Uswah hasanah	Modeling	Observation and imitation	Character formation
Habituation	Value internalization	Repeated practice	Consistent behavior
Cultural preaching	Contextual communication	Cultural adaptation	Social acceptance
Dialogue	Two-way communication	Question, response, persuasion	Deeper understanding

Source: Authors' synthesis based on Rosyidah et al. (2025), Arifin and As'ad (2025), Ibdalsyah and Rosyadi (2022), Yahya (2020), Musdhalifah and Istiqomalia (2024), and Hatmansyah (2015).

Ampel Denta Pesantren as a Living Educational Environment

Pesantren played an important role in the peaceful Islamization of Java and functioned not only as a place for religious learning but also as a center of character formation and social transformation (Hilmy, 2014). Sunan Ampel is identified as a pioneer in the development of pesantren education through Ampel Denta in Surabaya. The institution functioned as a center of Islamic education and cadre formation (Hilmy, 2014).

Ampel Denta subsequently developed into an influential center of Islamic education and contributed to the formation of networks of religious scholars (Syafrizal, 2015). The residential system allowed students to live within the pesantren environment, enabling religious, moral, and spiritual formation through daily activities (Saleh, 2015). The close relationship between kiai and santri also played an important role. The kiai functioned not only as a teacher but also as a spiritual guide and role model (Setiawan, 2016).

These findings suggest that Ampel Denta should be understood not merely as an educational institution but as a living educational environment. Education occurred through the combination of formal learning, daily religious practice, social interaction, habituation, and direct interaction with the kiai. Therefore, the educational environment itself became part of the curriculum. The significance of this model is that values taught in the classroom were continuously reinforced through students' everyday experiences.

This interpretation corresponds with studies describing pesantren as institutions that integrate intellectual, spiritual, social, and moral dimensions of education (Susilo & Wulansari, 2020); (Ulum, 2018). Research on contemporary pesantren also indicates that close interaction between kiai and santri contributes to value internalization and character formation (Sauri et al., 2022); (Karim et al., 2025).

The present study therefore reframes Ampel Denta as an educational ecosystem, in which the relationship between teacher, student, curriculum, daily practice, and institutional environment jointly contributes to character formation.

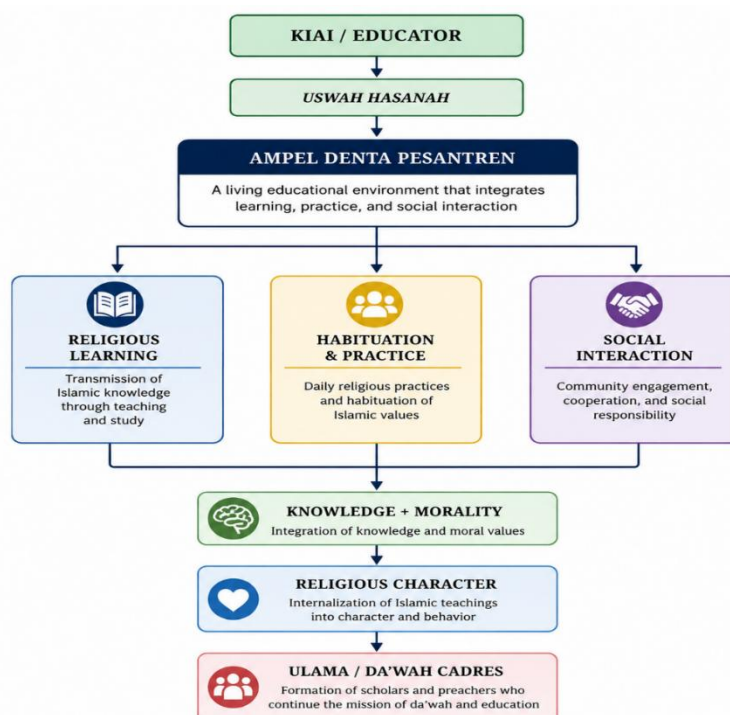


Figure 1. Ampel Denta as a Living Educational Environment

Source: Authors' synthesis based on Hilmy (2014), Saleh (2015), Setiawan (2016), and Syafrizal (2015).

Educational Output: Scholars, Networks, and Social Transformation

One of the major outputs of Sunan Ampel's educational system was the emergence of prominent religious figures who continued Islamic preaching in various regions. Sunan Giri and Sunan Bonang are identified as examples of figures associated with this educational network (Rosyidah et al., 2025). The educational process also contributed to the development of a network of ulama. Students who completed their education spread to various regions and established new educational centers (Mustaqim, 2022).

The disciples' preaching was characterized by peaceful, persuasive, culturally adaptive, and dialogical approaches (Habib et al., 2025). The educational network subsequently contributed to social and cultural transformation in Javanese society (Ramadhani, 2023). Students also continued the pesantren tradition by establishing new educational institutions, creating continuity between one generation and the next (Aulia et al., 2026; Bakar et al., 2023; Harahap et al., 2023; Hidayati et al., 2025).

The significance of these outputs extends beyond the formation of individual students. The educational system generated three interconnected levels of output: individual → institutional → social.

At the individual level, students became scholars and preachers. At the institutional level, graduates established new centers of education. At the social level, these institutions and networks contributed to wider religious and cultural transformation. Thus, the students were not merely the **products** of Sunan Ampel's educational system. They became agents of educational reproduction. The process can therefore be conceptualized as: Education Cadre Formation Da'wah New Educational Institutions New Cadres

Previous studies have emphasized the contribution of Walisongo networks to the spread of Islam in Java and the development of Islamic educational institutions (Ismail et al., 2024); (Sha'af, 2025). The present study adds an educational interpretation by emphasizing the relationship between cadre formation and institutional regeneration.

The main contribution of this finding is the identification of a regenerative dimension in Sunan Ampel's educational system. Educational success was not limited to producing knowledgeable individuals but included the capacity to reproduce religious knowledge, educational institutions, and networks across generations.

Table 3. Levels of Educational Output

Level	Output	Significance
Individual	Scholars and preachers	Religious leadership
Institutional	New educational centers	Continuity of Islamic education
Network	Ulama and da'wah networks	Dissemination of knowledge
Social	Religious and cultural transformation	Community development

Source: Authors' synthesis based on Rosyidah et al. (2025), Mustaqim (2022), Habib et al. (2025), Ramadhani and E-mail (2023), and Harahap et al. (2023).

Integrated Model of Sunan Ampel's Islamic Educational System

The five dimensions identified in this study demonstrate that Sunan Ampel's educational system did not operate through independent components. Educational objectives, curriculum, learning methods, pesantren institutions, and educational outputs were interconnected within a continuous educational process.

The relationship among these dimensions indicates that Sunan Ampel's educational system can be characterized by four principal features: holistic, contextual, exemplary, and regenerative. It was **holistic** because it integrated knowledge, faith, morality, spirituality, and social responsibility (Nursaudah, 2020); (Agustin & Kistoro, 2024; Damanhuri et al., 2025; Hadisi et al., 2025; Ramadhan & Albab, 2025; Ulayya, 2018).

It was contextual because Islamic teachings and educational practices were adapted to the social and cultural realities of Javanese society (Aziz, 2013); (Susmihara, 2017). It was exemplary and practice-oriented because students learned through the behavior of the kiai and through repeated daily practices (Arifin & As'ad, 2025); (Ibdalsyah & Rosyadi, 2022). Finally, it was regenerative because students became preachers and educators who continued the development of Islamic institutions and networks (Mustaqim, 2022); (Harahap et al., 2023).

CONCLUSION

The most significant finding of this study is that Sunan Ampel's Islamic education cannot be adequately understood merely as a form of religious knowledge transmission or as an instrument of da'wah. The historical synthesis demonstrates that his educational system operated as an integrated process connecting educational objectives, curriculum, learning methods, the pesantren environment, and educational outcomes. The system combined faith formation, religious knowledge, moral and spiritual development, exemplary practice, habituation, cultural adaptation, and cadre formation. More importantly, Ampel Denta functioned as a living educational environment in which learning extended beyond formal instruction into daily practice and social interaction. This interconnected system enabled students not only to acquire religious knowledge but also to develop into religious scholars, preachers, and agents who reproduced Islamic education and contributed to the peaceful socio-cultural transformation of Javanese society.

Scientifically, this study contributes a more systematic historical interpretation of Sunan Ampel's educational contribution by positioning his educational activities as an integrated educational system rather than examining them separately through the perspectives of da'wah, Islamization, or cultural adaptation. The findings confirm previous studies concerning the importance of religious knowledge, moral formation, exemplary conduct, pesantren, and cultural adaptation in the development of Islamic education in Java, while extending them by demonstrating the interrelationship among these dimensions. The study proposes that the distinctive character of Sunan Ampel's educational system can be understood through four interconnected principles: holistic, contextual, exemplary, and regenerative. This perspective offers a conceptual contribution to the historical study of Islamic education by showing how education can connect individual formation, institutional development, cadre regeneration, and broader social transformation across generations.

This study is limited by its reliance on library research and documentary sources, which means that the interpretation depends on the availability, reliability, and historical perspective of existing literature. The study also focuses specifically on Sunan Ampel and the educational environment of Ampel Denta, so its findings should not be generalized directly to the entire

Walisongo educational tradition or to all forms of pesantren education in Java. In addition, because the study reconstructs a historical educational system from secondary and documentary sources, some aspects of educational practice may remain difficult to verify empirically. Future research should therefore employ broader comparative historical studies involving other Walisongo figures and early pesantren institutions, as well as interdisciplinary approaches combining historical, educational, anthropological, and archaeological evidence. Such research could further examine how the educational principles identified in this study were transmitted across generations and how their core principles can be meaningfully adapted within contemporary Islamic educational institutions.

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