# Contesting Colonial Hegemony: Education, Authority, and Resistance in Gorontalo in the Early 20th Century

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***Abstract***

This study analyzes the dynamics of educational transformation from a traditional, religion-based system to modern colonial education in Gorontalo in the early twentieth century. The study focuses on the introduction of modern educational models by the Dutch East Indies colonial government and examines how these policies triggered resistance among local elites. Colonial educational transformation affected not only institutional structures but also generated epistemological conflicts, shifts in the authority of knowledge, and broader socio-cultural tensions within Gorontalo society. This study employs a historical method with a qualitative-analytical approach based on colonial archival sources and local materials. The findings show that colonial education was perceived as a hegemonic instrument aimed at producing indigenous bureaucratic elites loyal to colonial interests, while simultaneously threatening the continuity of religious authority, customary values, and the socio-political position of local elites. In this study, local elites primarily refer to religious elites, ulama, religious teachers, and Sufi order leaders, as well as hybrid actors who combined religious authority with administrative roles. Resistance was not expressed through passive rejection but through organized cultural and institutional strategies. From the early twentieth century onward, particularly with the establishment of madrasahs and halaqah in Limboto and Kota Barat in 1923, religious elites pioneered alternative Islamic educational institutions that emphasized Qur'anic studies, Arabic grammar (*nahwu–ṣarf*), and Islamic history. These institutions were strengthened by broader Islamic intellectual networks linking Gorontalo with Minangkabau and Java. Colonial archival sources also indicate widespread refusal by religious families to enroll their children in government schools.

**Keywords:** Colonial Hegemony; Religious Elites; Gorontalo; Modern Education, Islamic Education; Local Resistance.

## Introduction

Education has never stood as a neutral and autonomous domain; rather, it has always been shaped by configurations of political, social, economic, and cultural power surrounding it. In many historical contexts, education has even been positioned as a political instrument to regulate, shape, and control the direction of societal development. As articulated by S. Nasution (2008: v), education is often utilized as a tool of power, while politics itself is inseparable from social, economic, and cultural determinants. In this sense, education constitutes a strategic arena in the formation of power relations.

As an instrument of social change, education plays a crucial role in the production and reproduction of power. Within the context of colonialism, education was not merely intended to enlighten the colonized population, but functioned as a medium for instilling values, ideologies, and loyalties aligned with colonial authority. Through curricula, language of instruction, and institutional structures, colonial education shaped educated subjects suited to colonial interests, while simultaneously reorganizing hierarchies of knowledge and social authority within indigenous societies.

In the *Netherlands Indies*, including Gorontalo, the early twentieth century marked a critical phase in the history of colonial education. During this period, Western educational models were systematically introduced to replace traditional systems rooted in religious and

customary institutions. This transformation affected not only educational structures but also disrupted established socio-religious orders. Islamic education and traditional institutions, which had long served as centers of knowledge transmission and elite formation, were increasingly marginalized by government schools endowed with colonial political legitimacy.

This process of transformation did not unfold without resistance. Local elites, particularly those holding religious and social authority, perceived modern colonial education as a threat to the continuity of Islamic epistemic authority, customary values, and their socio-political position within Gorontalo society. It is within this context that colonial education became an arena of contestation, where colonial hegemonic projects confronted the adaptive and resistant strategies of local religious elites. Understanding these dynamics provides an essential point of departure for examining how colonial education operated, how elite resistance emerged, and how both mutually shaped the social space of Gorontalo in the early twentieth century.

Departing from the understanding of colonial education as a hegemonic instrument shaping power relations and knowledge production, this study aims to analyze how modern colonial education in Gorontalo during the early twentieth century functioned to restructure socio-religious authority, and how local religious elites responded to and constrained this process through cultural and institutional strategies of resistance. Accordingly, this research not only traces the transformation of education but also examines education as a contested arena between colonial hegemony and the efforts of religious elites to preserve social legitimacy, intellectual authority, and political position.

A number of studies demonstrate that colonial education in the Netherlands Indies was designed as an instrument to produce indigenous elites loyal to colonial interests. Van der Wal (1963) emphasizes that education was directed toward fulfilling administrative needs and maintaining political stability, while Van Niel (1984) views formal education as a primary medium for the formation of modern elites who later played significant roles in social and political change. More recent studies, such as those by Firdiyansyah (2024, 87–105) and Prasetyo and Trilaksana (202) (2020, 123–134), highlight the ambivalent nature of this process: colonial education produced bureaucratic elites while simultaneously fostering critical consciousness and cultural resistance. Nevertheless, these studies largely focus on Java and urban settings, paying limited attention to local dynamics in Eastern Indonesia.

Beyond bureaucratic approaches, several studies emphasize Islamic education as a medium of cultural resistance to colonial hegemony. Wahyudhi (2024) highlights the role of tarekat teachers in constructing socio-religious networks that resisted the penetration of colonial values, while Falahuddin (2017, 12–25) and Gaffar and Takbir (2018, 66–80) argue that the modernization of Islamic education through *madrasah* represented a strategy of selective adoption rather than outright rejection of modernity. This body of literature demonstrates that Islamic education did not exist outside the currents of change, but rather functioned as a site of negotiation between tradition, religion, and colonial power. However, such studies have rarely been applied specifically to the Gorontalo context.

Drawing on this literature, it becomes evident that colonial education has not been sufficiently examined as an arena of cultural contestation at the local level, particularly in Gorontalo, which possessed a strong Islamic tradition and an influential structure of religious elites. Unlike previous studies that emphasize bureaucratic elites or nationalist organizations, this article focuses on religious elites as the primary agents of resistance, positioning Islamic education and tarekat networks as cultural and symbolic strategies for constraining the hegemony of colonial education.

To examine the relationship between colonial education and local elite resistance in Gorontalo, this study employs an interdisciplinary approach that integrates Gramscian hegemony theory, postcolonial theory, and elite theory. Together, these frameworks provide a conceptual lens capable of capturing the complex interactions between power, education, and resistance within the colonial context.

Gramsci's concept of hegemony explains how power is sustained not only through coercive domination but also through active consent constructed within ideological and cultural domains. Modern colonial education is thus viewed as a primary medium for producing elite consensus, aimed at creating an indigenous intellectual class loyal to colonial values. In Gorontalo, education functioned as an instrument for shaping a new intellectual structure detached from local cultural roots and Islamic traditions. Resistance emerged, however, when local elites did not fully internalize these values but selectively reinterpreted them in accordance with local contexts (Gramsci 1971, 12–27, 245–266; Battes 1975, 351–366).

Postcolonial theory offers a conceptual framework for understanding how local elites, as colonial subjects, were not merely passive recipients of Western values but occupied ambivalent zones in which they simultaneously imitated and resisted colonial power. The concept of "ambivalence" (Bhabha and Edward 1994, 85–92, 122–123) is employed to explain the position of local elites who utilized colonial education for social mobility while maintaining cultural and religious structures rooted in Islam. Furthermore, Said's (1978, 203–225) concept of "Orientalism" underscores how knowledge, including education, was produced to frame the East as inferior and in need of Western intervention. The resistance of Gorontalo's local elites can thus be interpreted as an effort to deconstruct this orientalist framework. Finally, elite theory is employed to understand how modern education generated new forms of social stratification in Gorontalo (Kerstiens 1966, 4; Kartodirdjo 1981, x; Van Niel 1984, 12; Abdullah 1985, 1–2).

## Method

Previous studies indicate that colonial education functioned as a site of contestation between colonial hegemony and the adaptive–resistant strategies of local elites. These insights provide the basis for this study, which employs the historical research method. The research follows four main stages. First, heuristics, involving the identification and collection of relevant primary and secondary sources related to colonial education and local responses in Gorontalo. Second, source criticism, which consists of verifying the authenticity and credibility of sources through external criticism (to assess the originality of documents) and internal criticism (to evaluate the reliability and accuracy of their content). Third, interpretation, in which the collected data are analyzed within the social, cultural, and political context of early twentieth-century Gorontalo in order to understand the processes of educational transformation and their implications. Fourth, historiography, which involves constructing a systematic and analytical historical narrative based on critically examined sources and verified historical facts (Kartodirdjo 1993, 30–53; Sjamsuddin 2007, 85–155; Sulasman 2014, 93–147; Daliman 2012, 51–99).

The historical method enables the systematic reconstruction of past events based on empirical evidence. The use of both primary and secondary sources provides a rich and diverse empirical foundation for analysis, while a critical historical approach allows for a nuanced understanding of complex social and cultural contexts. Through this approach, the study aims to offer a comprehensive account of educational transformation in Gorontalo, including its driving factors, processes, and impacts on the formation of new social and educational elites.

## Education in Gorontalo in the Colonial Era

Education in Gorontalo prior to Dutch colonial intervention was predominantly informal and centered on religious institutions such as langgar, surau, and mosques. These institutions were led by ulama, saradaa, and customary leaders. Educational authority was derived from religious legitimacy and customary structures, while the learning process relied heavily on personal relationships between teacher and student. This system possessed distinctive characteristics rooted in local cultural values and Islamic teachings (Tacco 1935, 26; Brugmans 1938, 1).

Such education operated within a community-based social environment, with the primary aim of preserving the cultural and moral identity of society. The existence of pesantren in Gorontalo cannot be separated from the influence

of the reign of Motolodulakiki, during which royal officials were sent to study Islam in Ternate. This process emphasized teachings of tawḥīd and ma'rifah, as well as the implementation of the customary legal principle *adati hula-hula to saraa, saraa hula-hula to adati*, meaning that customary law is grounded in Islamic law, and Islamic law is grounded in custom. This principle reflects the equal standing of Islamic law and customary law within Gorontalo society (Tacco 1935, 25).

During the reign of Amai in 1560, a mosque known as Tihi lo Hunto was established (Tacco 1935, 26). The Hunto Mosque functioned not only as a center of worship but also as an educational space, given that pesantren as formal institutions had not yet taken a definitive shape in this early period. Mosques and pesantren functioned as complementary centers of excellence in shaping Muslim character. Indeed, da'wah and education are inseparable in the historical development and foundational teachings of Islam (Mas'ud 2002, 6).

As the principal center of Islamic education and culture in Gorontalo, the Hunto Mosque became the core of the traditional educational system, serving as the primary site of instruction. Children were taught Qur'anic recitation, Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), and moral values from an early age. Teachers, commonly referred to as tuan *guru*, *imams*, or *saradaa*, played a central and highly respected role within society (Tacco 1935, 97). Pesantren-based education provided more advanced religious instruction, including tawḥīd, taṣawwuf, fiqh, and ḥadīth. Learning took place both individually and collectively, with students (santri) studying directly under local *kiai* or ulama.

Pesantren in Gorontalo developed more fully during the reign of Eyato (1673–1679) (Nur 1979, 21). These institutions not only educated students in religious knowledge but also cultivated community leaders who played important roles in the dissemination of Islam. Education was deeply embedded within family structures and customary communities, where parents and traditional elders were responsible for transmitting social norms, customs, and life skills grounded in Islamic moral values and adat. These practices included traditional knowledge such as panggoba, a form of local agricultural wisdom, as well as skills related to fisheries and trade (Tacco 1935, 25; Tamu 2022, vii).

Over time, pesantren education underwent continuous transformation in response to broader social changes. Pesantren functioned not merely as sites of individual learning but also as key institutions within the social and political structure of Gorontalo society. Despite colonial pressures, the Gorontalo people maintained their cultural identity through this educational system, which ensured the continuity of social norms and Islamic values as the foundation of communal life. While education in langgar, surau, and mosques focused primarily on basic religious instruction, pesantren offered more advanced and systematic learning. Students, commonly referred to as santri, came from various regions and resided in dormitories located near the mosque and the teacher's residence (Sarkawi 1997, 58).

Subjects taught in pesantren included naḥwu, ṣarf, fiqh, uṣūl al-fiqh, ḥadīth, tafsīr, tawḥīd, taṣawwuf, ethics, as well as tārīkh and balāghah (Dhofier 1982, 44–55; Rahardjo 1973; Prasodjo 1974; Steenbrink 1986). Over time, pesantren also began to adopt non-religious subjects such as mathematics, history, and geography. This development indicates an effort to bridge traditional education with emerging modern educational systems. The colonial transition from an education system rooted in adat and religion toward modern Western schooling not only reshaped patterns of thought but also transformed social structures, leading to the emergence of local elites who played significant roles in political, economic, and cultural life.

## Colonial Hegemony and Intervention

The Dutch colonial education system implemented in Gorontalo cannot be separated from its political objectives of maintaining colonial power. This fundamental objective remained unchanged despite the shift in the Netherlands from liberal colonial policy to the Ethical Policy. Consequently, education as a crucial instrument for sustaining colonial rule in Gorontalo, was consistently directed toward achieving these political aims. Its primary function was to address the shortage of personnel within the local colonial

bureaucracy and to supply labor for private industrial and commercial enterprises closely linked to the colonial administration (Furnivall 1943, 35; Zed 1991, 19; Sarkawi 1997, 77). The transition from a traditional education system rooted in adat and religion to a modern system introduced by the Dutch not only reshaped patterns of thought but also transformed social structures through the emergence of local elites who played significant roles in political, economic, and cultural life.

Colonial education was organized according to principles of racial hierarchy, discrimination, segregation, and non-accommodation (Suryo 1996; Kartodirdjo 1991, 336–340). These principles were institutionalized through a differentiated educational system based on colonial social classifications: Europeans, Foreign Orientals (primarily Chinese), and indigenous populations. Education was further stratified according to social status, distinguishing between schooling for elites and schooling for the general population. This racial and social segregation was reinforced through linguistic differentiation, whereby Dutch served as the medium of instruction for Europeans and indigenous elites, while local languages were used for schools intended for the general population (Vastenhouw 1964, 15–16; Sarkawi 1997, 78).

In practice, such differentiation based on race, social status, and language was clearly evident in Gorontalo. This is reflected in the regulation of primary education as stipulated in the Staatsblad of 1893, No. 125. The regulation divided primary education in the Dutch East Indies, including Gorontalo, into First-Class Schools (De Eerste Klasse School), designated for the children of indigenous leaders and respected elites, and Second-Class Schools (De Tweede Klasse School), intended for the indigenous population at large. Local elites perceived this differentiation as contradicting customary norms and religious principles, thereby generating resistance.

First-Class Schools were established in residency capitals, administrative centers, major trading towns, craft hubs, or other locations deemed necessary. Education in these schools was oriented toward fulfilling the needs of colonial administration, commerce, and private enterprises (*Staatsblad* 1893 No. 125; Gunawan 1986, 14). However, because these schools were formally classified within the "indigenous" education system, Gorontalo students were effectively barred from transitioning into the European education track required for higher education. In response to this limitation, First-Class Schools were transformed into *Hollandsch-Inlandsche Schools* (*HIS*) in 1914 (Ricklefs 1991, 239). The establishment of *HIS* was driven by increasing demands among Indonesians for access to Western education, particularly to meet the needs of colonial administration (Nasution 2008, 113).

The Dutch colonial government opened an *HIS* in Gorontalo in 1916. Subsequently, in 1929, Muhammadiyah in Gorontalo also established an *HIS* (Haga 1981, 21; Polontalo 1977a, 9–10). This initiative represented a form of transformative resistance, responding to colonial educational policies, socio-economic change, and local political dynamics. Graduates of *HIS* Gorontalo typically continued their education at *MULO* and *OSVIA* institutions in Tondano, Makassar, and Surabaya.

For Second-Class Schools (*De Tweede Klasse School*), the colonial government established thirteen schools in Gorontalo that did not include Dutch language instruction (Haga 1981, 21; Polontalo 1977b, 8–9). These schools were intended for the general indigenous population and aimed to provide basic education. However, they failed to develop into comprehensive public schools accessible to all. This limitation raised questions about their suitability for educating the broader population, leading to the introduction of village schools (*Volkschool*). With the establishment of *Volkschool*, the function of Second-Class Schools shifted, no longer serving the general population but only a limited segment of society (*Staatsblad* 1893 No. 125; Nasution 2008, 61–62; Gunawan 1986, 14).

The colonial government subsequently expanded formal educational infrastructure, including *Volkschool*, *Hollandsch-Inlandsche School* (*HIS*), and Schakelschool, to support the production of local bureaucratic personnel. According to the *Koloniaal Verslag* of 1910 and 1915, the number of village schools in Gorontalo increased during this period. By 1915, the region

had seventeen government schools and twelve private schools. Nevertheless, access to education remained highly restricted, largely limited to male students and children from families aligned with colonial interests (*Koloniaal Verslag* 1915, 198; ANRI).

In response to colonial educational intervention, modern Islamic madrasah schools were also established by nationalist and reformist organizations in Gorontalo. These institutions integrated Islamic education with modern scientific knowledge, combining religious instruction with general subjects. Madrasah schools served as platforms for Islamic modernist groups to disseminate reformist ideas aligned with contemporary social needs (Azizy 2002, vii). These actors recognized education as a strategic instrument with significant implications for political, social, and national struggle against Dutch colonial hegemony.

## Religious Elite Resistance and Socio-Cultural Consequences

The resistance of local elites in Gorontalo to colonial education did not emerge in a social vacuum. Rather, it was deeply rooted in an established traditional social structure in which religious scholars (*ulama*) and adat nobility occupied central positions as authorities of knowledge and community leadership. Prior to colonial intervention, education was predominantly oriented toward Islamic teachings delivered through madrasah and pesantren. Figures such as imam tua, modji, and aja'i functioned not only as spiritual leaders but also as primary educators within the community (Syahbana and Idrus 2021, 85–87).

When the Dutch colonial government introduced the Volksonderwijs (people's education) system and Europeesche Lagere School, these institutions were widely perceived as epistemic and cultural threats. The knowledge disseminated in colonial schools differed fundamentally in both values and pedagogical methods. Dutch replaced Malay and Arabic as the language of instruction, while Christian-European moral frameworks subtly displaced local norms and Islamic ethical principles (Abdullah 1971, 123–125).

Local elites responded through various forms of resistance, both formal and informal. Many adat leaders and religious figures refused to enroll their children in Dutch schools, arguing that such institutions "separated children from religion" and taught "infidel knowledge" (Kartodirdjo 1984, 217). In response, local elites initiated the establishment of madrasah as alternative educational institutions in villages that rejected colonial curricula. In 1923, for example, several ulama in Limboto and Kota Barat founded private madrasah and halaqah that emphasized Qur'anic studies, nahwu–ṣarf, and Islamic history as counter-models to Dutch schools. Some of these institutions were supported by broader networks of ulama from Minangkabau and Java, strengthening their intellectual and organizational capacity (Syahbana and Idrus 2021, 93–95, 132–134).

Colonial archival sources corroborate the extent of this resistance. A 1912 report by the Resident of Manado records objections raised by adat and religious leaders concerning curricula that were considered to "neglect Islamic religious instruction" and to "disregard Gorontalo customary values" (*Verslag Residentie* Manado, 1912, ANRI). Similarly, a 1914 report by the *Controleur* of Gorontalo notes that "many parents, particularly from religious circles, refuse to allow their children to attend school out of fear that they may abandon Islam" (*Controleur* Gorontalo 1914, No. 5, Manado bundel, ANRI).

Religious sermons and study gatherings (pengajian) also became important arenas of ideological resistance. Religious elites framed Western education as part of ghazwul fikri (intellectual warfare), a concept that gained traction among Islamic reformists during this period (Noer 1980, 101). An article in Sinar Gorontalo dated 7 April 1932 reported a sermon in Limboto in which a preacher criticized government schools as "instruments designed to distance children from Islam and turn them into tools of the colonizer." Drawing on James C. Scott's framework, such practices can be understood as forms of symbolic and cultural resistance, or hidden transcripts, manifested in everyday discourse—for instance, labeling children who

attended Dutch schools as "alienated" or "detached from adat" (Scott 1990, 22–24). Overall, this resistance was not a rejection of modernity per se, but an effort to preserve the moral and symbolic authority of local elites in the face of colonial modernization. From a Gramscian perspective, it constituted a struggle for hegemony between colonial power and local religious elites.

Colonial educational transformation produced complex social consequences in Gorontalo. One major impact was the emergence of both horizontal and vertical social fragmentation. A new social class emerged, consisting of graduates of colonial schools who gained access to positions as inlandse ambtenaren or clerks, roles previously occupied by adat elites. This shift generated social tensions between the newly educated colonial elite and the traditional elite (Bachtiar 1985, 142–145). Over time, traditional elites experienced marginalization as their roles in policymaking diminished due to a lack of "formal educational capital." Their authority became increasingly confined to religious and customary affairs, excluding them from colonial administrative structures (Onghokham 1983, 190–191).

Cultural identity shifts also occurred among children educated within the colonial system, who increasingly internalized values of individualism, rationality, and loyalty to the colonial state. These values contrasted sharply with the collectivist ethos and adat-based authority that characterized traditional Gorontalo society, resulting in intra-community tensions (Abdullah 1971, 133). Local accounts record divisions within village communities between groups supporting colonial education and those maintaining madrasah-based systems. In some cases, these divisions extended into social practices such as marriage and religious activities (Syahbana and Idrus 2021, 105–106).

The colonial government recognized this resistance and responded with several strategies: incorporating limited religious instruction into village school curricula under strict government supervision; engaging adat leaders who had "compromised" with colonial authorities as mediators between Dutch schools and local communities; and providing scholarships for selected elite children to attend the *Opleiding School voor Inlandsche Ambtenaren* (*OSVIA*) in Makassar in order to showcase the success of colonial education (see Onderwijsrapporten Celebes, 1925, ANRI). However, these measures often intensified social fragmentation between traditional elites and the emerging colonial-educated elite. Consequently, many adat and religious leaders maintained their cultural positions by strengthening informal educational networks grounded in Islamic values and local traditions.

Educational change also produced structural transformations, including the emergence of a new middle class. Graduates of *HIS* and *OSVIA* from Gorontalo began to occupy positions as clerks, wedana, and mantri guru. Figures such as Nani Wartabone exemplify individuals shaped by early colonial education who later played significant roles in nationalist movements (see Indische Courant, 1935, ANRI). Meanwhile, traditional authorities without access to modern education experienced declining political influence. A 1931 annual report by the *Controleur* of Gorontalo noted that "the influence of elderly imams has begun to decline, particularly among youth who have attended government schools" (*Controleur* Gorontalo 1931, No. 7, ANRI). Social segregation within communities intensified, as distinctions between "Dutch-educated children" and "madrasah students" became markers of social status and ideological orientation. Village elders observed that "children who attend Dutch schools are considered intelligent but forget adat and lose their sense of belonging" (Bappeda 1997, 55–56). Ultimately, colonial schooling facilitated a shift in collective values, promoting individual discipline, Western rationality, and career-oriented aspirations that stood in tension with the communal values embedded in Gorontalo adat society.

## Conclusions

Based on the core issues formulated in this study, it can be concluded that the transformation of education from traditional systems to modern models in Gorontalo in the early twentieth century was not merely an institutional change, but a profound shift in the structure of epistemic

authority, patterns of social relations, and cultural value orientations. Modern education introduced by the Netherlands Indies government through institutions such as *Volksschool*, *HIS*, *ELS*, *MULO*, and *OSVIA* was intended to produce educated colonial subjects loyal to Western authority. At the local level, however, these policies encountered strong resistance from religious elites, particularly ulama and adat leaders, who perceived colonial education as a threat to their social position as well as to Islamic values and Gorontalo customary traditions.

This resistance manifested in diverse forms, both explicit and implicit. Explicit resistance included the rejection of Dutch schools and the establishment of *madrasah* as alternative educational institutions, while implicit forms were articulated through sermons, adat symbolism, and translocal ulama networks. These modes of opposition reflected a broader politics of knowledge, in which local elites were not merely defending the status quo but actively constructing counter-narratives to the colonial modernization project.

The consequences of this educational transformation were long-term and structural. Modern education produced a new Western-educated social class that gradually marginalized traditional elites and generated new form of social stratification based on access to schooling. It also fostered identity fragmentation between modern-educated groups and traditional communities, divisions that, in many respects, persisted into the postcolonial period. At the same time, resistance to modern education contributed to the growth of political and religious consciousness, forming part of the foundations of local nationalist awareness.

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