

SOCIALIZATION, LEARNING AND BASIC EDUCATION IN KORANIC SCHOOLS

ABDEL-JALIL AKKARI

Abstract – *The aim of the first section of this paper is to show how a Koranic School presence has remained constant in spite of the sudden emergence of Western-style schooling introduced by colonization. The second section of the paper revisits the problem of terminology in the study of the Koranic school. In the third section, using the perspective of situated learning, we will try to analyze the pedagogical system of Koranic Schools by describing the social and cognitive processes employed by this institution. In the final part, we hope to show how the current educational situation in several Islamic contexts could be better served through closer interactions between Koranic and Western schools. Research conducted in Africa was primarily undertaken for this text.*

Introduction

A thorough knowledge of non-Western¹ educators and educational theory remains inadequate in spite of several recent studies (Thanh Khoi, 1995; Reagan, 2000; Akkari & Dasen, 2004). A Koranic School system² represents an interesting educational model not only because of its longevity but also because of its widespread geographical diffusion throughout the world. Up until now an understanding of Koranic School systems has suffered because of the lack of a deep anthropological study treating Islam as a religion with a novel cognitive system (Colonna, 1984, IPE. 1984).

Even if comparative education has been open to including culture in its conceptual frameworks, this inclusion has not gone far enough concerning important theoretical debates on the concept of culture in any analysis of educational institutions (Hoffman, 1999, p.466). The comparison of different educational traditions poses a problem of cultural identity³ to the researcher as research undertaken within education and anthropology are like all other social and ethno-sciences:

‘... (1) Anthropologist cannot adequately describe, let alone explain, any culture different from their own. (2) For any culture to be adequately described and understood, it must be investigated by an anthropologist who himself has been acculturated in it. (3) For the latter to adequately convey the ideas and institutions of that culture, they must be reported in the native language, for there is no way of rendering the conceptual systems of one

culture by the concepts of another...All science is ethnoscience' (Spiro, 1984, p.345).

In spite of these difficulties, inherent in any comparative analysis, an approach of 'other' conceptions is necessary. As Geertz writes (1994) this necessitates 'entering into an alien turn of mind.' This is what we will try to accomplish in this text devoted to an analysis of the educational foundations of the Koranic School.

The characteristics of Koranic School

The history of Islamic teaching and research on Koranic schools have been the subject of studies in the Maghreb (Lecomte, 1954; Eickelman, 1978; El-Sayed Darwish, 1981; Colonna, 1981, 1984) as well as in sub-Saharan Africa (Delval, 1980; Santerre, 1973; Santerre et al., 1982; Désalmand, 1983; Brenner, 1993; Meunier, 1997; Lange, 2000). Taken as a whole these studies show that the pedagogical model of the Koranic School contains six basic characteristics which are more or less stable according to the historical period referred to: (1) openness (2) ritualization (3) permanence (4) flexibility (5) resistance and (6) diversity. We will consider each in turn.

(1) Openness

Admission into a Koranic School is a right for any child of a Muslim father with no restrictions connected to birth, age, intellectual level or physical integrity⁴. The normal age of entrance into a Koranic School is around five years. Once the step towards adherence to Islam has been made, opening of the Koranic School to all social groups and cultures makes this an institution of 'basic education' intended for all, and thus by definition egalitarian. The openness of the Koranic School represents an initiative of cultural integration and of full socialization, and also represents an essential characteristic that differentiates it with any other school system. This ease of access (automaticity), of course, goes with the inevitable corollary: the impossibility of using the Koranic School as a means of social differentiation (Colonna, 1984). The Koranic School embodies a horizontal distribution of basic knowledge that all Muslims are expected to possess.

(2) Ritualization⁵

The intensive demands on memory, mobilization of the body by rhythm and voice are exterior signs of the pedagogy of the Koranic School. It is

completely permeated by the respect of form and the central role of repetition, both a key category and a central practice of this learning method, which consists in ceaselessly repeating the same recitations, the same motions (Colonna, 1984). 'Learning by heart', larger and larger sections of the Koran have remained a central issue of Koranic School pedagogy in spite of a progressive abandon of this method in other educational traditions. Introduction of reading and writing during apprenticeship of the Koran, executed in Arabic characters irrespective of teachers' and pupils' primary language, is organized around an analytical and progressive approach: letter, word, sentence and meaning.

According to the terminology used by Freire (1973), the Koranic School is essentially depository since it treats students as potential 'recipients' of the Koran. They must immerse themselves in Islamic culture, conform to the established norms and values, and those who wander from these are quickly and severely brought to order. Koranic School can be considered as one in which the students gain access to the universality of the Koran by a transmission based approach. By imposing constraints (submission/*adhesion*) it puts in place conditional reflexes, habits built on repetition of a firm program: the mastery of the Koran. Thus, the traditional Islamic education is characterised by 'rigorous discipline' and a 'lack of explicit explanation of memorized material' (Eickelman, 1985). This rigid pedagogy has certain advantages: speed, low cost and rapid teacher training.

(3) Permanence

The permanence of the Koranic School through the ages should not be explained simply as an archaic cultural heritage. How then can one explain that the Koranic School has been able to survive through many centuries while being present in such a vast geographical area? One possible hypothesis regarding this permanence is the absence in Islam of a hierarchical clergy as within the Catholic Church. In fact, the opening of a Koranic School has no connection to a regulatory institution. The 'authority' to teach depends exclusively on the local community of faith. In the last section of this paper we will discuss the current vivacity of the Koranic School, most notably in Western Africa.

(4) Flexibility

The flexibility and shifting of the Koranic School back and forth from a cultural system to another one is realized on an optimal and subtle combination of oral and written language. This mixed nature allows the Koranic School to come in contact

as easily with the greater culture (the written tradition) as with the oral, traditional ones (Colonna, 1984). This ability helps explain the quick implantation of the Koranic School in Western Africa. As Santerre (1973) explained, teachers in Koranic Schools in northern Cameroon are not impeded by their lack of Arabic, as in no way does this lack keep them from playing an important role in the religious socialization of the children under their responsibility. The mode of operation at the Koranic schools is non formal and revolves around the individual operator. Progress of pupils depends on individual ability; they are allowed to progress at their own pace without hindrance. The pupils are first taught the Arabic letters and how to recite the Koran. They then study Islamic jurisprudence and other facets of Islamic education (UNICEF, 1999).

(5) Resistance

The sudden development of the colonial educational system created a situation in which the Koranic School found itself, for the first time in its history, in a position of being dominated. Thus developed a duality, with Western School in charge of educating the children of European settlers and the urban elites and the Koranic School being reserved for the indigenous population and the rural poor. This duality could be seen throughout the colonial period in Northern Africa (Colonna, 1984; Sraeïb, 1974). Even in this inferior position, however, the Koranic School was mobilized in the fight against colonization. While colonial schools (either public or controlled by foreign religious missions) were essentially mobilized for domestication⁶, the Koranic Schools were engaged in a process of cultural resistance against colonization (Khayar, 1976; Coulon, 1993; Brenner, 1993). Richard-Molard (1954) found that even if the colonization was able to diminish the influence of Allah, too often this only created people deprived of their cultural roots.

The resistance-transformation of Koranic Schools continued into the post-colonial period where the expansion of modern schooling had become the 'priority of all priorities' of those Western educated elites newly in power. We can note that it took different forms according to the situation:

- devalued against a strong and generalized state system (Tunisia, Turkey)
- incorporated into the state system or at least tolerated within (Iran, Pakistan, Egypt, Morocco)
- complementary with the state system and responding to the needs of marginalized socio-cultural groups (Mali, Senegal, Gambia, Nigeria, Kenya)
- replacing a deficient or totally absent state system (Somalia, Afghanistan).

(6) *Diversity of the curriculum, goals, space and time*

To show the curricular diversity of Koranic Schools, Colonna (1984) contrasted different types of schools:

- ‘Classical’ Koranic School where only the Koran is taught/ modernized with a varying degree of secular subjects,
- ‘Independent’ Koranic School under the control of the community/ Koranic School under the control of the state and of village powers (religious confraternities)
- ‘Spiritual supplement’ Koranic School (similar to Christian catechism)/ ‘Single class Koranic School’ which, in certain contexts, remains the only educational institution.

After the development and spread of Western-style schooling throughout the 20th century, the Koranic School lost its central role in a majority of Islamic regions. It retains, however, a certain influence in the socialization process. This influence differs in intensity and degree according to the region, the degree of urbanization, and the strength of what is officially offered as basic education. In the cities in Northern Africa it offers preschool, before children enter public school, and later weekly catechism classes. Its influence declines when going up the social scale. In rural zones, to the north as well as to the south of the Sahara, the Koranic School remains a central institution in education, sometimes the sole actor because of the deterioration of government services.

In Western Africa, the Islamic educational system has a many-leveled structure, less rigid than Western-style schooling. Currently there exists a traditional branch (Koranic studies only), a formal branch or its ‘modern’ equivalent (Franco-Arabic schools, often called *madrassa*) and intermediate or hybrid forms often called ‘improved Koranic instruction.’ While professional training is not an explicit part of the goals of Koranic education, most of the students who continue their studies beyond the elementary level end up working in the community as apprentices with a *marabout*, a craftsman or a shopkeeper (Easton, 1999).

The diversity of the Koranic School can also be seen at the level of:

- The management of class space: Koranic Schooling can take place in a mosque, in a single-family home, under a tent, in a shed or under a tree in the open air.
- The management of class time: the temporal organization of the school does not interrupt the economic and social activities of the community.

The problem of terminology in the study of the Koranic school

The diversity of Koranic Schools discussed in the last section can be also analyzed on the linguistic level. We observe a enormous multiplicity of denominations: *Kuttab* (Tunisia, Algeria, Egypt), *Katatib* (Koweit), *Msid* (Morocco), *mahadara* (Mauritania) *Dox* (Somalia), *Khalwa Zawia* (Libya, Sudan), *Madrasa* (Pakistan, West Africa), *Pesantrens* (Indonesia) etc... Thus, a terminological clarification is required even if it is difficult to simplify the complexity of a long standing institution.

Let us notice initially that the translation of the term 'Koranic school' in Arabic (language of reference in Islamic education) does not make sense. Indeed, nobody speaks about *madrasa kuraniya*. Eickelman (1985) used the expression 'Koranic education'. The common use of Koranic school is probably the consequence of an Eurocentric portrayal of the most stable local, non-formal education providing basic religious and morale instruction to a large number children in Islamic context.

As stated in Table 1, we distinguish three major terms used in different Islamic settings in Africa to refer to the so called 'Koranic school': (a) *Kuttab* (b) *Madrasa* and (c) *Zawia (Khalwa)*

(a) *Kuttab*

In Arabic root *k-t-b* is expressed as a verbal infinitive as *kataba*, meaning 'to write'. From that basic root we can then get the words *kuttab*, *kitab* 'book' (with a metaphorical meaning of *Koran*), *katib* 'writer', *maktub* 'written' (with a metaphorical meaning of 'predestined') and *maktaba* 'library'. The use of term *Kuttab* is clearly linked to the development of a culture of literacy. *Kuttab* usually used to name a small learning unit (single classroom) for relatively young children. It is the basic education in Islamic contexts before the intrusion of Western style schooling.

(b) *Madrasa*

The word *madrasa*⁷ generally has two meanings in Arabic. In a common literal and colloquial usage, it means 'school'. This term indicates the current modern schools in Arab countries. In addition, a *madrasa* is an educational institution offering instruction in Islamic subjects including, but not limited to the Koran. Within this religious school, students learn Islamic theology and others philosophical or profane subjects. Generally, the students receive a purse and are placed in the school. *Madrasa* is an institution of education which is bigger, better organized and more structured than the *kuttab*. It offers secondary as well as tertiary education.

Historically, the term *madrasa* is an institution intended for religious elites. It is a 'school of spiritual thinking'. Well known *madrasas* such as Al Azhar in Egypt or A-Zeitouna in Tunisia have been a major instrument for imparting interest in and fostering acquisition of scholarly knowledge and skills in Muslim societies for centuries. As a key element of the social fabric, they also played a major role in shaping the moral and spiritual development of the students in these societies. Eickelman (1985) analyzed specifically the *madarasa Yusufia* (the Mosque-University in Marrakech) and traces the transformation of this type of traditional school into what he terms the Religious Institute.

With the interplay of internal and external forces, the role and prerogatives of *madrasas* have changed in many Muslim societies, blurring somewhat the common sense perception of these institutions. An analysis of *madrasa* could have different implications within various cultural, political, and geographic contexts.

(c) *Zawia (Khalwa)*

These expressions usually indicate a small room connected to a mosque used especially for meditation and to learn the Koran. A *Zawya* is usually founded by a Sufi mystic of sufficient piety. His presence attracts followers forming an informal Islamic study group. In the case of a Sufi saint, his students often confine themselves to the monastic enclave and retreat devoting themselves to prayers, education and charitable works.

TABLE 1: *Koranic schools*

	Geographical area	Age scope	Size localization
Kuttab	North Africa Middle East	Young children-basic education	Small units Rural and Urban areas
Madrasa	North Africa West Africa South Asia	Life span	Big structures Urban areas
Zawiya	North Africa	Life span	Small and isolated units Rural and Urban areas

Grandin & Gaborieau (1997) show that beyond local and regional specificities, Islamic teaching obeys everywhere and from immemorial time to the same logic. It never seems an autonomous system, but it is included in the general education system. Before the European colonial domination, the knowledge (religious or profane) is an art whose transmission follows a single track, founded on apprenticeship or *suhba* where written teaching and oral teaching are narrowly overlapping. In other words, the process of learning is based on a personal relationship between a master and his disciple. The Master initiates the disciple at the same time with contents of the knowledge and the chain of the guarantors of the knowledge. The itinerancy is the second characteristic of this traditional Islamic education, the disciple moving in the Islamic space in the search of new Masters with the aim of perfecting its initiation.

After the colonial domination of Islamic countries and regions, the Islamic educational system falls under a strategy of survival in the context of cultural and political domination. The adoption of some aspects of Western schooling (system of organization, formalization of the master-pupil ratios, establishment of levels of qualification sanctioned by examinations and diplomas, introduction of new subjects, teaching of foreign languages, edition of religious works in vernacular languages, development of the education of the women).

The definition of the ‘ideal type’ of Koranic school is not possible without taking in account the context in which one wants to explain it. This context is determined by three main factors:

- colonial and post-colonial educational policies
- space left by the current formal education system
- the degree of strength of local religious communities

In most Islamic contexts, the State manages to control the recent revival of Islamic schools by tracking the *wakf* funds and fixing the curriculum of Islamic schools. The recent creation in Morocco of a Department of traditional education within the Ministry of Habous and Islamic Affairs aims at extending State control to the network of Islamic schools. El Ayadi (2004) observes that teachers in the public sector play a major role in these new centers of religious training. Today, in the framework of a policy implementation following the development of radical Islamism and the appearance of religious terrorism in the country, the Moroccan authorities are determined to extend the State’s control to this private sector.

Luckens-Bull (2001) explores one way in which the Classical Islamic community in Java (Indonesia) seeks to negotiate modernization and globalization through the interface of an Islamic boarding school (*pesantren*) and higher education. This negotiation requires imagining and (re)inventing both modernity and tradition.

The two first sections of this paper show that the Koranic School is a paradoxical educational model that is difficult to analyze. On one hand, we find an archaic and depository cognitive system distinguished by extreme ritualization, rigid discipline and the exclusive focus on rote and decontextualized learning of the Koran, a sacred work, the mastery of which is difficult even for Arabic-speaking children (who represent a decided minority in Koranic Schools). On the other hand, one finds a great diversity in its organizational methods, a flexible arrangement between the written and the oral and a largely successful socio-cultural embeddedness in the local community.

The Koranic School: a case of situated learning?

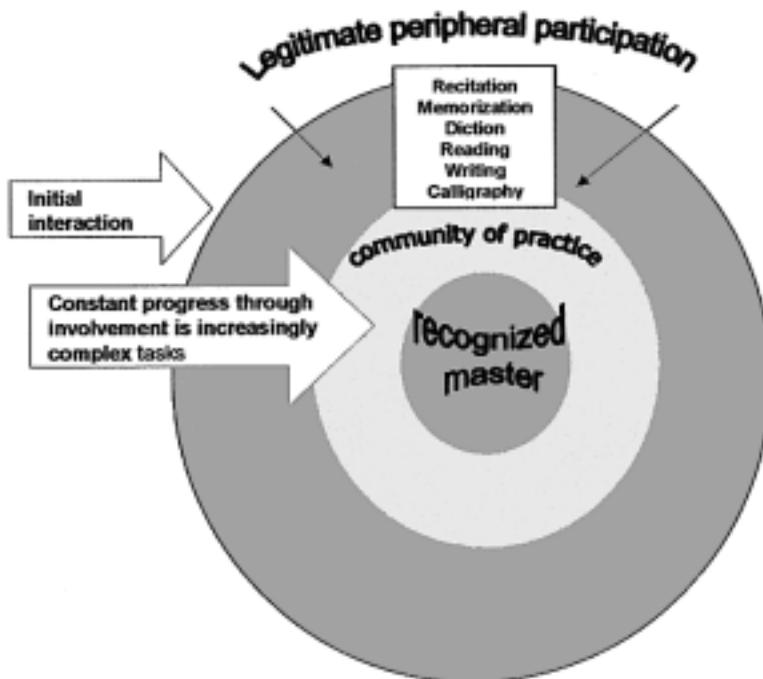
It would seem that situated learning theory⁸ is a pertinent educational model with which to analyze and explain the socio-cultural rootedness and lasting quality of Koranic School. Instead of considering learning as the acquisition of a specific knowledge, Lave & Wenger (1991) place learning in the center of *social relations and co-participatory situations*. In other terms, instead of wondering about which *cognitive processes* are mobilized in any learning activity, they tried to identify which type of social engagement provides the best learning context. Learning automatically implies a commitment in a community of practice. Lave & Wenger's model suggest the predominance of the social over the psychological in any act of learning:

'The central grounds on which forms of education that differ from schooling are condemned [in conventional educational argument/ policy/ discourse] are that changing the person is not the central motive of the enterprise in which learning takes place [...]. The effectiveness of the circulation of information among peers suggests, to the contrary, that engaging in practice, rather than being its object, may well be the condition for the effectiveness of learning.' (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 93)

The legitimate peripheral participation and the community of practice (or learning community) are at the center of the model initiated by Lave and Wenger. The *practices* constitute the whole of social and individual conduct in relation with the norms, content and context of a field of expertise. We are then dealing with the enculturation of novices which easily exceeds the objective of the instilling of a specific knowledge. Figure 1 attempts to apply the situated learning model to the Koranic School, where the field of expertise covers the mastery and comprehension of the written Koran. Master and students sat together on the floor in a semi-circle; no desks or other barriers between them; the best

regarded seats are those closest to the teacher. Books and writing utensils were viewed as sacred and distinguished tools of knowledge due to the fact that God swears by them in the Koran. Anything that God swears by is regarded in high esteem (Makdisi, 1981). Is learning in Koranic school a legitimate peripheral participation?

FIGURE 1: The koranic school from the perspective of situated learning



Legitimate: because all participants (students, teachers, parents, local community) accept the position of the children-novices as potential members of the community of Koranic experts (community of believers).

Peripheral: the learners settle in around the teacher by tirelessly repeating the required tasks. In the beginning these tasks are peripheral: preparing the tools (reeds, wooden board, ink...), repeating the words of the teacher. The tasks progressively become more important: reading, writing, reciting longer and longer verses of the Koran, comprehension-commentary of the Koran and the application of its precepts in everyday life.

Participation: it is through action that the knowledge is acquired. The knowledge is situated in the praxis of the community of practice and not in a curriculum to be found outside of the community. The dynamics of knowledge acquisition in early Muslim civilization provided for a concept of Islamic education that placed no barrier between ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ learning (Douglass & Shaikh, 2004).

Moreover, Koranic School teaching is fundamentally a form of differentiated teaching since the learner goes at his own speed and is only in competition with himself. The pedagogical division of the group/class is based mainly on the degree of expertise of the student and not on the basis of age or degree. The organization into the large group/class clearly recalls the single-room, rural classroom. The teacher divides the classroom into several levels, which are led by an advanced student. The habitual division consists of two or three groups: *novices, less experienced and experienced*, which curiously happens to correspond to the learning cycles which are in vogue in many current school reforms in Europe. Novice students should not be overburdened, but progress should be systematic. Experienced students should not be stuck with easy material. The masters attend to whole needs of students, assisting all students not just the outstanding ones (Makdisi, 1981).

In relation to the Koranic School we can state that:

- Knowledge is defined through doing: ‘recite, read, write and understand the Koran’, and to behave outside of the school in a way respectful of the precepts of Islam.
- The Koranic School model rejects the separation into social and religious training, religious learning and exercise of the Koran,
- The evaluation and accreditation work towards the command and consolidation of competences.

More precisely, the procedures of accreditation involve the whole community. Mastery of a part of the Koran (subdivided in sixty sections called *hizb*) is subjected to oral notification by the parents to recompense the student and the teacher. If the student is able to read and write a substantial segment of the Koran, a ceremony of ratification of his competences is organized. If the student becomes an expert and is thus able to recite, read and write the Koran in its entirety, the family offers the teacher a remuneration in relation to their economic standing and in relation to the importance of the event for the community. Understanding and higher-order thinking was gradually introduced as the student advanced. Because of the level of mastery required, teachers adjusted the level of instruction to meet the individual abilities of the students. Students varied in ages and rates of instruction. Students ‘graduated’ when they were able to demonstrate complete mastery over the subject

matter to the satisfaction of the teacher. Obviously this made education a highly personalized experience where every teacher and student became acquainted with one another at an intimate level (Makdisi, 1981).

One need also keep in mind that the knowledge gained at the Koranic School is theoretically used daily for the five prayers and for other religious ceremonies. It is thus not knowledge for 'professional life' but for 'daily life.' The focus is on the ways in which learning is an evolving, continuously renewed set of relations. In other words, this is a relational view of the person and learning.

Bernstein (1996) uses the metaphor of a mirror and a resonance chamber in which many positive and negative images are projected. The central questions are:

- Who sees oneself as having a *value* in these images?
- In the same vein, one must also ask whose voices are being listened to at school.
- Who speaks?

According to Bernstein, Western school clearly reflects a hierarchy of social class values and a specific distribution of knowledge, which is reflected in the resources, access and acquisition of school culture.

The characteristics of the Koranic School do not enter into Bernstein's analysis as it consists of a non-extractive method of schooling (Serpell, 1999). Thus when, after many years of Koranic study, a student returns to his village, he will be respected since he will be capable of reading and reciting the holy book of the Muslims. This person will then be able to share his knowledge with younger children and thus continue the Koranic tradition.

Nor does the Koranic School model fit with the distinction proposed by Resnick (1978). This author contrasts, on the one hand, individual cognition in school versus shared cognition outside of school, and on the other hand pure mentation in school versus tool manipulation outside of it.

Briefly, despite the seemingly archaic cognitive system (rote memorization and recitation of the Koran), what is at stake in the Koranic School is the entry into a 'community of Islamic believers.' The knowledge of the Koran is of interest only if the individual is recognized as being worthy of the confidence of the local community.

Coming back to the situated learning model it should be noted that this model postulates the examination of a type of social engagement favorable for the learning context rather than for cognitive processes. In other words, everything happens as if, in the Koranic School, *the archaism of the cognitive process* is compensated by *the strength of the social engagement*. Looked at in this way, the understanding of literacy mechanisms in the Koranic tradition should be connected to the general debate on the variety of ways to learn to read and write (Goody, 1979; Serpell &

Hatano, 1997). According to Gough & Juel (1989), the act of understanding the written word necessitates the mobilization of two essential components. The first being the recognition of written words and the second the ability to give meaning to language, both written and oral. To put it in Freire's words 'to read the word *and* the world.' Koranic learning, as identified in many studies, is very far from using this pedagogical productive paradigm advocated by Freire.

The most important weakness of the Koranic school is its inability to put meaning and critical thinking in the center of learning. Fiske (1997) observed in Koranic schools in Burkina Faso, boys learning the Koran by rote memorization in Arabic. Sometimes memorizing major segments of the text without any exegesis or discussion of its meaning—and, it appears, often without much understanding of the Arabic language. So while certain kinds of schooling may entail a dramatic shift from imitation toward explicit conceptual transmission of declarative knowledge and certain formal skills, the shift may be limited within schools, and may not transform the mimetic transmission of more fundamental cultural practices outside of school.

While the fruitfulness of literacy methods based on 'meaning' needs no more proof, it seems that certain authors push us not to forget that 'access to the meaning of a text depends on the proper functioning of certain mechanisms and especially of their automatism' (Chardon, 2000, p. 116). It is precisely on this second component that Koranic School pedagogy is based. One can thus easily understand how, in spite of the numerous criticisms that can be addressed at the Koranic School, it has shown itself to be very effective in literacy training (Wagner & Lotfi, 1983).

In this vein, in this 'post-September 11, 2001' period where everything having to do with Islam is suspicious, it would be useful to come back to the supposed links between 'Koranic School' and 'Islamic Fundamentalism.' As mentioned in the first section, the Koranic School is characterized by an extreme diversity. The hypothesis which sees the Koranic School as the assimilation of the ancestral educational system for the preparation of future generations of fundamentalists is a hypothesis that does not hold up against a sharp analysis of the political, sociological and economical contexts in which contemporary radical fundamentalism has developed (Algeria, Afghanistan...). This is not to say that certain radical groups have not taken advantage of the chaotic situation of certain Islamic countries or of the confusion of the Islamic Diaspora in the West to dispose Koranic Schools for their violent, politico-religious proselytizing.

Concerning the habitual exclusion of females from the Koranic School, it should be kept in mind that this is not original to Islam but can be found in all the principle religious traditions (Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism). Reagan (2000) pointed out that traditional Hindu education excludes not just girls but also inferior castes. Certain historical studies even go against common sense about Islamic education.

Marty (1921), thus noted that girls are quite numerous in Koranic Schools in Fouta in Guinea. They make up a third and sometimes half of the class. It is quite common for wealthy families to send girls for a year, and even for two or three, to learn the *Fatiha* and the *surats* of the end of the book, and to learn proper prayer techniques. In Northern Nigeria, a survey of UNICEF (1999) found that there are 16,648 Koranic schools with 1,145,111 pupils. Only 184,592 or 16.1% are attending primary school, out of which 38.1% are female.

Towards a mobilization of the Koranic School for basic education?

In many countries in Western and Northern Africa one can witness how the recent expansion of the Koranic School has reduced the phenomena of non-schooling delineated by official statistics and international experts. According to Easton & Kane (2000), the search for alternative solutions has taken many forms: community schools sponsored by the state or by an NGO, pilot schools sponsored by the state (generally traditional elementary schools chosen to try innovative, community-based methods), an increase in interest in Koranic instruction or in hybrid forms that combine Muslim and Western instruction and also private schools created by independent businessmen, especially in urban zones.

In Mali, for example, school attendance figures have been in continual decline since the eighties (30% in 1980, 23% in 1990). This loss of interest in public schooling has been counter-balanced by the growth of 'private' schooling. Koranic Schools, *madrassa* (schools which give both secular and religious instruction) and community schools have proliferated and have seen their attendance numbers rise (Etienne, 1994). In the rural area of Kangaré in the southwest of Mali, where Etienne (1994) did his research, the number of *madrassa* quadrupled in ten years. While attendance rates in the public sector continually went down over more than a decade, nearly half (49.6%) of all students in the area took Islamic instruction. Unlike Koranic Schools which deal only with religious instruction, the *madrassa* have the distinctive feature of presenting a syncretic and bilingual instruction: given in both Arabic and French, both religious and secular. This type of instruction conveys not only Koranic precepts but also French, reading, writing and mathematics. This combination responds to a double necessity, on the one hand placing the child 'on the road to God' and on the other on the road to 'progress and modernity.' The weakness of the formal educational system, founded exclusively on the Western model, led to the development of an original education, both religious and secular, in which tradition and modernity come together in a new pedagogical and cultural syncretism.

In Niger, the number of Koranic School is estimated at around 40,000 in 1990. This number easily surpasses the number of public schools (Easton, 1999). In reality this type of instruction constitutes an alternative to the official, Western-style schools and presents a 'hidden culture' of knowledge that goes against official school culture but which also integrates certain elements.

This reorientation of the social demand for education cannot solely be explained by a repudiation of public schooling. Considered in the past as a way towards social promotion, public schooling, founded on the extractive, Western model inherited from colonization, no longer fits the expectations of parents. Public schools seems incapable of giving their children a useful base for obtaining a job or instilling them with techniques that they can count on in the future. This observation was made by a working group on informal education, ADEA (Association for the Development of Education in Africa). The credibility granted to the Koranic School has greatly increased in the past few years. Parents choose Koranic Schooling because they consider it to be a factor of social integration because of what it teaches (the laws of the Koran and Islamic morality in particular). In a way it would appear that, by means of the educational strategies of the Koranic School, the populations of Western Africa are 'reinventing' basic education. In addition, this school adapts itself to the lifestyle of the population it serves. Thus, in Mauritania, the Koranic School is perfectly established in nomadic life. The educational situation of the country draws its novelty from the association of modern and traditional instruction (Ould Ahmadou, 1997).

Educational difficulties are often connected to the management style of Western-style school, generally centralized and unconnected to village communities. In addition, as Gatti (2001) correctly points out, the greater and more diverse the participation of the community in school management, the easier the children can access the school and the higher the quality of the education.

According to Easton (1999), the practical outcomes of Koranic instruction in Western Africa can be summarized in three points:

- (1) An introduction to writing, and to a lesser degree mathematics, to a large proportion of the population, men and women, of which a large number would otherwise have had no access to such instruction. Those who continue long enough to learn how to read, write and count well enough for practical daily use (generally in an African language, as a functional understanding of Arabic remains fairly limited) make up a minority, often a large minority in certain cases. Among other things, literacy in Arabic has become a point of reference in many small towns and rural areas, largely considered illiterate according to Western criteria.

- (2) Training for local leaders, since a solid Muslim education is generally accepted as an indication of morality, honesty and discipline; thus a basic, necessary qualification for holding functions of responsibility in the community.
- (3) Economic and social promotion, which has always been the case, but even more so recently given the lack of interest for formal instruction. This is possible because of the close connection between relational networks of Koranic Schools and traditional commercial networks of the region. Koranic School graduates are better able to find work or to find an apprenticeship with traditional businesses and in the informal commercial sector.

In Morocco, the revival of the Koranic School is connected to the inability of the state to extend basic education. Thus, Koranic Schools make up the most widespread form of preschool in the country. They provide instruction of a 'renovated traditional' style. Koranic Schools serve 67% of all preschool children. However, the percentage of girls is only 27.1% against 44.6% in modern preschool (Ministry of Education, 2000). Numerous studies on Moroccan village communities and the relationships between teachers and villagers shows that in this rural area the modern school is viewed with distrust and with skepticism regarding its usefulness. Schools and teachers are not chosen by the local community and are clearly seen as culturally outsiders. They are placed by the state and then proceed to impose their lifestyle and their way of thinking, which can be very different from that of the local way (Zouggar, 1991). In Tunisia, rural farmers show the same mistrust towards agricultural technicians who are supposed to be helping them (Akkari, 1993). In a recent study in the North of Morocco, Tawil (1996, 2000) shows that the Koranic School plays an essential role in the education of the rural poor. It alleviates the absence of official schooling more than it expresses a cultural refusal against this school.

All the signs of a revival of the Koranic School should push states with large Muslim populations, and which are having difficulty at developing basic education, to make attempts to integrate Koranic Schools into their educational structures or to gain inspiration from the pedagogical and social experience, often secular, accumulated by such institutions (Colonna, 1984). Such a position in no way rules out an attentive and critical examination of this form of education, and of how it relates to the local culture and the larger society, in such a way as to create the possibility for 'another school,' one which would be socio-culturally appropriate (Wagner, 1988).

Looking at forms of modern schooling introduced in non-Western parts of the world, with very few exceptions, the model is similar to the one that has already been in place since the nineteenth century in Europe. This model exhibits centralizing and urban hegemony, specifically designed to do away with differences, not just on a linguistic level, but more importantly at the level of representations

(representations of the world, or time and space and of social relations), thus constituting a form of violence against villagers and also against the developing urban proletariat (Colonna, 1984). Taken outside of the West⁹, these models, while new national powers and the local elite endorsed them, were no less distant from the cultures upon which they were imposed. The Western style schooling is an extractive model, particularly in Africa, where children who succeed go away from their local communities (Serpell, 1999).

By comparison, a Koranic School and the village in which it is located would appear to have a symbiotic relationship, with its temporal rhythm and spatial structure, much more so than the best intentioned modern school could hope. Tawil (2004) pointed out, on the basis of field research in Northern Morocco, that local communities are resisting the supply of 'secular' basic education from the state and, when asked, declare that they would send their children to public schools if the curriculum took more account of Islamic values and if teachers were hired from within their own communities. The strength of Koranic schools rests on its community support and the high level of commitment of both parents and teachers. The *Wakf* provides resources to sustain and develop and adapt Islamic schools to modernity. *Waqf* is a social, legal and religious institution which played an important role in the social, cultural and economic way of life of the Islamic world, especially the period, from middle of the 8th century until the end of the 19th. The Islamic *waqf* (called *habous* in North Africa) can be defined as an action of a member of a Muslim society motivated by an element of the Islamic culture to transform some or all of his personal assets into pious foundations which will serve the public.

To address the problem of basic education in Northern Nigeria, UNICEF (1999) recommends a state policy deliberately and directly addressing the problems of Koranic schools in terms of integrating elements of basic education, funding and management. Adequate learning materials and equipment should be provided for both Koranic literacy as well as for basic education program.

Conclusion

The Koranic school is a traditional mode of schooling and an introduction into the culture of literacy, an aspect which is usually not taken into account by public education policy. It also represents an original form of learning.

It can be regarded as an alternative to public schooling in some Islamic areas, in particular when the State does not have the human and financial capacities of mass schooling. In some Islamic contexts, Koranic schools offer formal education which either replaces or complements state-run education. Beyond the apparent pedagogical archaism of Koranic schools (memorization, fixed curriculum...), this

TABLE 2: *The Koranic School: an original form of learning*

	Representation of the learner	Methods of learning	Age-space-time of learning	Social reproduction
Society without schooling	Ethnotheories	Empiric participation in the learning process	Everywhere in the social settings	Limited social reproduction through education
Koranic School	Potential believer	Teaching content coming from divine will	Koranic School and social settings	Limited social reproduction through Koranic School
Society with schooling	Representation of the child, the adolescent and the adult	– Imposition of goals and teaching methods – Teaching content coming from scientific rationality	Age-space-time of education are centered in schools	– Strong social reproduction through the school – Social changes through the school

form of education is making schooling more accessible to local communities. It is a highly personalized experience wherein every teacher and student is acquainted with one another at an intimate level. It is certainly possible that the phenomenon of Koranic School revival, in multiple Islamic contexts, is linked to the efficiency of this institution in the development of literacy skills in the least educated layers of society. For researchers in comparative education, schools linked to the Islamic tradition in many parts of the world may represent a new more rooted form of learning in and through revitalized community, a kind of ‘no man’s land’ neither narrowly ‘Westerner’ nor ‘traditional’ (Morah, 2000 ; Luckens-Bull, 2001). Emerging here is a ‘pedagogy of place,’ a theoretical framework that emphasizes the necessary interpenetration of culture, school, community, and environment, whether it’s urban, suburban, or rural (Sobel, 2004; Akkari & Dasen, 2004). As an original form of learning, the Koranic School thus deserves to be the subject of future studies in comparative education and anthropology.

Notes

¹ It should be noted that the opposition between Western and Koranic schools has been contested by Lecomte (1954), who underscored the continuity from the Byzantine School to the Koranic one. Reagan (2000), for his part, considers that the Western and Koranic educational traditions draw from the same religious sources. It is also necessary to add that the Koranic School undertook profound transformations towards the end of the 19th century, such as during the introduction of secular subjects. These changes were halted by colonization. Makdisi (1981) has argued convincingly

for a major Islamic contribution to the emergence of the first universities in the medieval West, showing how terms such as having ‘fellows’ holding a ‘chair,’ or students ‘reading’ a subject and obtaining ‘degrees,’ as well as practices such as inaugural lectures and academic robes, can all be traced back to Islamic concepts and practices. Indeed the idea of a university in the modern sense—a place of learning where students congregate to study a wide variety of subjects under a number of teachers—is generally regarded as an Arabic innovation, developed at the al-Azhar university in Cairo. Makdisi has demonstrated that cities bordering the Islamic world (Salerno, Naples, Bologna, Montpellier) developed the first European universities.

- 2 Unless otherwise noted in this paper, the term ‘Koranic school’ refers to Islamic schools at the primary and secondary levels.
- 3 Being an Arabic speaker and a former Koranic School student I purposely did not use any ‘autobiographical’ elements in the writing of this text. It is however likely that the tone of this text has been influenced by the researcher’s personal experience.
- 4 One finds a large presence of partially sighted or blind persons among the best ‘readers’ of the Koran.
- 5 It should be noted that this ritual dimension is present in other religious educations, for example Gurugé (1982) in Buddhist pedagogy.
- 6 It should be noted that this domestication did not always give the desired results for the colonizers. While the first generation of resistance fighters, against the colonization in Algeria and Tunisia, were taught in Islamic schools, the second generation, which gained independence in Tunisia and which started the war for independence in Algeria, was the product of a double education, ‘Arab’ and ‘French’. A typical example is Bourguiba, who completed his secondary studies in a traditional high school in Tunisia and then went on to obtain a law degree in Paris.
- 7 See ‘Madrasah,’ in the Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1995).
- 8 Situated learning depends on two claims difficult to find in Koranic schools:
 - It makes no sense to talk of knowledge that is decontextualized, abstract or general.
 - New knowledge and learning are properly conceived as being located in communities of practice.
- 9 Many scholars pointed out that modern schooling in the West contributes to separating children from adults and to make instruction a meaningless activity (Vincent, 1994; Charlot, Bautier & Rochex, 1992).

Abdel-Jalil Akkari is director of research at the Higher Pedagogical Institute of Berne-Jura-Neuchâtel, Switzerland, e-mail address: akkari.abdeljalil@hep-bejune.ch

References

- Akkari, A. (1993) *Modernisation des Petits Paysans. Une Mission Impossible?* Tunis: Éditions Éducation & Cultures.
- Akkari, A. & Dasen, P. (eds)(2004) *Pédagogues et Pédagogies du Sud*. Paris: L’Harmattan.
- Bernstein, B. (1996) *Pedagogy, Symbolic Control and Identity. Theory, Research, Critique*. London : Taylor & Francis Ltd.
- Brenner, L. (1993) *Muslim Identity and Social Change in Sub-Saharan Africa*. London: Hurst & Company.

- Chardon, S.C. (2000) 'Expérience de soutien en lecture auprès des élèves faibles lecteurs de fin de cycle 3.' *Revue Française de Pédagogie*, 130, pp.107-119.
- Charlot, B., Bautier, E. & Rochex, Y. (1992) *École et Savoir dans les Banlieues et Ailleurs*. Paris: Armand Colin.
- Coulon, C. (ed.) (1993) *Da'wa, Arabisation et Critique de l'Occident*. Paris: Karthala.
- Colonna, F. (1981) 'La répétition. Les Tolba dans une commune rurale de l'Aurès.' In Ch. Souriau (ed.) *Le Maghreb Musulman en 1979*. Paris : CNRS Editions.
- Colonna, F. (1984) *Le Kuttab 'École Coranique'. Prime Éducation Islamique et Diversification du Champ Éducatif*. Paris. Institut International de planification de l'éducation.
- Delval, R. (1980) *Les musulmans au Togo*. Paris: Publications orientalistes de France (CHEAM).
- Désalmand, P. (1983) *L'Histoire de l'Éducation en Côte-d'Ivoire. 1. Des origines à la conférence de Brazzaville*. Abidjan: CEDA.
- Douglass S. L. & Shaikh, M.A. (2004) 'Defining Islamic education: differentiation and applications.' *Current Issues in Comparative Education* [Online], volume(issue). Available at: <http://www.tc.columbia.edu/CICE/articles/sdms171.htm> [January 2004].
- Easton, P. (1999) 'Education et alphabétisation en Afrique de l'ouest grâce à l'enseignement coranique.' *Notes sur les Connaissances Autochtones*, 11, pp.1-4.
- Easton, P. & Kane, L. (2000) 'Les savoirs locaux et l'école. Le potentiel et les dangers de l'enseignement communautaire dans les régions de l'Ouest du Sahel.' *Notes sur les Connaissances Autochtones*, 22, pp.1-3.
- Eickelman, D. F. (1985) *Knowledge and Power in Morocco: The Education of a Twentieth-Century Noble*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Eickelman, D.F. (1978) 'The art of memory. Islamic Education and its social reproduction.' *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol.20(4), pp.485-516.
- El Ayadi, M. (2004) 'Entre l'islam et l'islamisme. La religion dans l'école publique marocaine.' *Revue Internationale d'Éducation*, Vol.36, pp.111-122.
- Fiske., A. P. (1997) *Learning a Culture the Way Informants do: Observing, Imitating, and Participating*. American Anthropological Association Panel, Washington, DC, November.
- Freire, P. (1993) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum.
- El-Sayed Darwish, K. (1981) 'Developing Koranic schools to meet the educational needs of the young child.' In Notes, Comments. UNESCO-UNICEF, WFP, NS-86, August 1981.
- Etienne, G. (1997) *La Tentation du Savoir en Afrique: Politiques, Mythes et Stratégies d'Éducation au Mali*. Paris: Karthala-IRD.
- Gatti, C. (2001) 'Écoles Coraniques au Sud du Sahara face à la 'patrimonialisation' de l'UNESCO : Problème ou ressource? L'exemple de Djenné (Mali).' *Actes du VIIIème Congrès de l'Association pour la Recherche InterCulturelle (ARIC) Université de Genève* – 24-28 septembre 2001. Retrieved 08/20/2003, <http://www.unige.ch/fapse/SSE/groups/aric>.
- Geertz, C. (1994) 'The uses of diversity.' In R. Borofesky (ed.) *Assessing Cultural Anthropology*, pp. 454-476. New York: McGraw.
- Goody, J. (1979) *La raison Graphique. La Domestication de la Pensée Sauvage*. Paris: Minuit.

- Grandin & Gaborieau (eds)(1997) *Madrassa. La Transmission du Savoir dans le Monde Musulman*. Paris: Arguments.
- Gurugé, A.W.P. (1982) *The Miracle of Instruction*. Colombo: Lake House.
- Hoffman, D.M. (1999) 'Culture and comparative education: toward decentering and recentering the discourse.' *Comparative Education Review*, Vol.43(4), pp.464-488.
- IPE (1984) *Les Formes Traditionnelles d'Éducation et la Diversification du Champ Éducatif: le Cas des Écoles Coraniques*. Paris: Institut International de planification de l'éducation.
- Khayar, I. (1976) *Le Refus de l'École. Contribution à l'Étude des Problèmes d'Éducation chez les Musulmans du Ouaddai (Tchad)*. Paris : Maisonneuve.
- Lange, M-F. (2000) 'Naissance de l'école en Afrique Subsaharienne.' *Pour*, 165, pp.51-59.
- Launay, R. (1982) *Traders without Trade. Responses to Change in two Dyula Communities*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lave, J. & Wenger, E. (1991) *Situated Learning. Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press.
- Lecomte, G. (1954) 'La vie scolaire à Byzance et dans l'Islam.' In *Arabica*, T.X., pp.225-242.
- Luckens-Bull, R. A. (2001) 'Two sides of the same coin: modernity and tradition in Islamic Education in Indonesia.' *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, Vol.32(3), pp.350-372.
- Ould Ahmadou, E.G. (1997) *Enseignement Traditionnel en Mauritanie: la Mahdara ou l'école 'à dos de chameau'*. Paris: L'Harmattan.
- Makdisi, G. (1981) *The Rise of Colleges: Institutions of Learning in Islam and the West*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Ministère de l'éducation (2000) *Statistique Scolaires*. Rabat: Ministère de l'éducation.
- Marty, P. (1921) *L'Islam en Guinée: Fouta-Djallon*. Paris: Editions Ernest Leroux.
- Meunier, O. (1997) *Dynamique de l'Enseignement Islamique au Niger. Le cas de la ville de Maradi*. Paris: L'Harmattan.
- Morah, E. U. (2000) 'Old institutions, new opportunities: the emerging nature of Koranic Schools in Somaliland in the 1990s.' *International Journal of Educational Development*, Vol.20(4), pp.305-22.
- Plancke, M. (1971) 'Le kuttab en 'Ifriqiya du VIIe au XIIe siècle. Contribution à l'histoire de l'enseignement élémentaire en Tunisie.' *Paedagogica Historica*, Vol.10, pp.225-242.
- Sanneh, L. (ed.)(1997) *Crown and the Turban. Muslims and West African Pluralism*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Santerre, R. (1973) *Pédagogie Musulmane d'Afrique Noire. L'école coranique peule du Cameroun*. Montréal : Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal.
- Santerre, R. & Mercier-Tremblay, C. (eds) (1982) *La Quête du Savoir. Essais pour une Anthropologie de l'Éducation Camerounaise*. Montréal: Presses de l'université de Montréal.
- Reagan, T. (2000) *Non-Western Educational Traditions: Alternative Approaches to educational Thought and Practice*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Richard-Molard, J. (1954) *Islam ou Colonisation au Fouta-Djallon*. Paris: Présence Africaine.
- Sraieb, N. (1974) *Colonisation, Décolonisation et Enseignement : l'Exemple Tunisien*. Tunis : Publications de l'Institut National des Sciences de l'Éducation.

- Serpell, R. & Hatano, G. (1997) 'Education, schooling, and literacy.' In J.W.Berry, P.R. Dasen & T.S. Saraswathi (eds) *Handbook of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, second edition, Volume 2 (pp. 345-382). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Serpell, R. (1999) 'Local accountability to rural communities: a challenge for educational planning in Africa.' In F. E. Leach & A. W. Little (eds) *Education, Cultures, and Economics: Dilemmas for Development* (pp. 111-139). New York & London: Falmer Press.
- Sobel, D. (2004) *Place-Based Education: Connecting Classrooms and Communities*. Barrington/MA : Orion.
- Spiro, M. (1994) 'Some reflections on cultural relativism and relativism with special reference to emotion and reason.' In R.A. Shweder & R. A. Levine (eds) *Culture Theory: Essays on Mind, Self, and Emotion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tawil, S. (1996) 'Poverty and demand for primary education: Evidence from Morocco'. Norrag news, May 1996.
- Tawil, S. (2000) 'Household demand, basis education and exclusion: Focusing on out-of-school children in Morocco.' In Malmberg, Hansén & Heino (eds) *Basic Education for All: A Global Concern for Quality*. Vasa: Faculty of Education, Abo Akademi University.
- Tawil, S. (2004) *Basic Education, Exclusion and Development: Change, crisis and reform in Moroccan school education*. Doctoral Dissertation, Graduate Institute of Development Studies, University of Geneva.
- Thành Khôi (1995) *Education et Civilisations*. Paris: Nathan.
- Turin, Y. (1971) *Affrontements Culturels dans l'Algérie Coloniale: École, Médecines, Religion*. Paris: Maspéro.
- UNICEF (1999) *Baseline Survey of Qur'anic Schools in Katsina, Kebbi, Sokoto and Zamfara States*. New York : UNICEF.
- Vincent (ed.)(1994) *L'Éducation Prisonnière de la Forme Scolaire*. Lyon: Presses Universitaires de Lyon.
- Wagner, D. (1988) "'Appropriate education' and literacy in the third world.' In P. R. Dasen, J. W. Berry, & N. Sartorius (eds) *Health and Cross-Cultural Psychology: Towards Applications* (pp. 93-111). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Wagner, D. & Lotfi, A. (1983) 'Learning to read by "rote"'. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 42, pp.191-203.
- Wenger, E. (1999) *Communities of Practice. Learning, Meaning and Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Zougari, A. (1991) *Stratégies des Agriculteurs en Matière d'Éducation. Jbala-Histoire et Société: Etudes sur le Maroc du Nord-Ouest*. Paris: CNRS.