

IK Notes

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Education and Koranic Literacy in West Africa

What are the “practical” and literate skills that students acquire at different levels of West African Koranic schooling? What are the various daily uses to which such knowledge is put and the networks through which it is developed and applied? Koranic schooling in its many forms constitutes a long-standing parallel system of education throughout much of the African continent — one that has operated for centuries, yet remains relatively unknown to development planners and is therefore seldom taken into explicit account in their policies and strategies.

Islam has an extended history in West Africa and Islamic educational systems have in fact operated there for much longer than have Western ones. The Islamic faith first spread across North Africa in the 7th century. By the 10th century, communities of Muslim merchants and scholars had been established in several commercial centers of the Western Sahara and the Sahel. By the 11th or 12th century, the rulers of kingdoms such as Takrur, Ancient Ghana and Gao had converted to Islam and had appointed Muslims who were literate in Arabic as advisors.

Trans-Saharan trade flourished in pre-colonial times and carried most of the considerable merchandise exchanged between Africa and Europe from the 11th to the 16th centuries — until, that is, the arrival of Euro-

pean vessels on the West African coast and the institution of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the triangular commerce among Africa, Europe and the New World that it fueled. The backbone of trans-Saharan commerce initially consisted of networks of towns established along trade routes by itinerant merchants from North Africa, gradually sedentarized and/or replaced by local groups. The proceeds of this trade furnished much of the revenue needed for State-building.

The structure of a submerged system

The system of Islamic learning across West Africa is several-tiered though less rigidly structured than its Western counterpart. In addition, it now includes a traditional track (the Koranic sequence *per se*), a formal school or “modern” equivalent (Franco-Arab schools, sometimes called *médersa*), and intermediate or

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hybrid forms often referred to as “improved Koranic schooling.” At the base of the traditional network are the maktab or Koranic schools, the primary level of the system, where children begin, starting somewhere between the ages of 3 and 10, to learn the Koran and the basic duties of Islamic life. Next come the madris or secondary schools where those who have essentially memorized and transcribed large portions (at least) of the Koran progress to a study of what is referred to as “Islamic science” (ilm), including the written traditions of the religion and a variable amount of other didactic material. A few select students proceed beyond this level to advanced study either with famed imams and marabouts of the region or at Islamic universities in North Africa and other Muslim countries.

At least in its elementary forms — represented by local Koranic schools — Islamic learning is widespread throughout West Africa. An estimate of the number of such schools in Niger alone in 1990 put them at 40,000. This form of education constitutes in reality an alternate and (to official

and Western ideas) largely hidden knowledge culture rivaling — and frequently intersecting or hybridizing with — the official one, even though in most African countries the basic institutions of the system — the maktab — have not been considered as schools at all. Yet Koranic students, teachers and believers in general throughout the region are highly aware of the long history of the faith in West Africa and of many of its greatest scholars and teachers, some of whom exercise major political and economic power, particularly in Sahelian regions. Those involved for years in the cash crop trade in Niger, Mali and Senegal, for example, have developed well-capitalized commercial networks with ramifications in urban real estate and industry, and increasingly abroad. All this considerably strengthens the attraction of different forms of Koranic education as gateways to an alternate and sometimes thriving economic and political system. In short, there is a strong trans-national culture at work.

Variable quality, extensive coverage

Despite these tendencies toward uniformity in underlying religious culture and basic orientation, the nature and quality of instruction in Koranic schools and the Islamic system as a whole vary noticeably from one region to another. In areas of Islamic allegiance, the vast majority of children attend Koranic school. They learn principally through memorization of the sacred text. Boys predominate in the student body, but frequently in ratios of no more than 3/2 or 2/1 in the early grades. In a few regions, like Guinean Futa Jalon, enrollment rates are virtually the same by gender.

The “depth” of Islamic instruction in these regions is quite variable, but in general a significant proportion of male students who remain beyond the initial Koranic lessons do continue to some level of higher study. Since understanding of either modern or classical Arabic over and beyond the Koranic texts themselves is quite rare, (except among those having pursued studies in Arabic-speaking countries), the highest levels of practical literacy — that is, ability to read and write correspondence, keep records and generally communicate in writing — are most frequently

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found in those areas like upland Guinea, the Sine Saloum of Senegal, and the Hausa-speaking regions of Niger, where there is a developed system for transcribing African language with Arabic characters (called *ajami* in the Hausa and Fulani cases). In Guinea, 93 percent of a sample of 77 male Koranic “alumni” interviewed claimed reading and writing capacity in *ajami*. In Senegal, between 25 and 75 percent of male adults in villages contacted, and between 10 and 25 percent of women claimed the same level of learning. In all cases, the proportions were well — if not multiples — above the literacy rate in French for the same predominantly rural communities.

On the other hand, only 26 percent of the Guinean sample of former Koranic students considered themselves “numerate” as compared to 93 percent who considered themselves able to write texts in *ajami*. A majority of marabouts and imams seem nonetheless to have acquired numerical skills in one way or another, which helps in understanding the frequency with which they are found to be handling accounting responsibilities in community affairs.

While vocational initiation is not an explicit curricular component of Koranic schooling, most students who continue beyond the most elementary level do end up working in some apprenticed position either to the marabout or to an affiliated craftsman or merchant, if only to help pay for his or her upkeep and tuition. Koranic schooling tends to include a practical element integrated into the community, though only systematized as real vocational instruction in exceptional cases; and Koranic students are imbued with the notion that they will need to fend for themselves or find appropriate sponsorship beyond a certain age. This prompts one Senegalese researcher to remark, “L’école coranique forme des créateurs d’activités, alors que le système formel forme des demandeurs d’emploi” (“Koranic schools train employment-creators, while the formal system trains employment-seekers.”)

Applications of Koranic training

The most frequent secular application of Koranic learning at the individual level is writing and correspondence, and the most prominent career destination of accomplished Koranic students is to become themselves marabouts or imams because there is considerable demand for teachers and dispensers of religious and incantatory services, given the rapid expansion of West African Islam in recent years. Over a quarter of the Guinean respondents, however, cited the exercise of local public functions as a practical outcome of their training, and similar trends are evident across the region.

However, collective and communal applications are no less frequent. Islamic morality, jurisprudence and authority have been used as the backbone of traditional governance for centuries throughout the Sahel. In fact, most of the vocabulary in major Sahelian languages having to do not just with religion, but with laws, local administration, diplomacy and higher learning as well is derived or directly borrowed from Arabic.

Conclusion: Alternate avenues to knowledge

The consequence of these factors is that basic Islamic instruction — of the kind dispensed in local Koranic schools — has three essential dimensions of practical application and impact in West Africa today:

- It constitutes an introduction to the technology of writing — and, to a lesser extent, that of numeracy — for a sizable proportion of the population, both men and women, many of whom would otherwise have little or no schooling. Those who proceed far enough to gain fluency in reading, writing and calculating for daily practical purposes (generally in some African language, as functional knowledge of Arabic itself is even more restricted) constitute overall a minority, though a sizable one in some areas. Moreover, literacy in Arabic script has become a point of reference in many rural and small town settings thought of as largely “illiterate” in Western terms.

- It is a training as well for local leadership, since solid Islamic instruction is generally accepted to be an indicator of morality, honesty and discipline and therefore a primary qualification for assuming positions of responsibility.
- In addition, it has always been — and, given recent disaffection with formal schooling, has increasingly become — an avenue for social and economic advancement because of the close relationship between Islamic networks and traditional commercial ones throughout the region. Koranic school graduates are more likely to find employment or apprenticeship with traditional merchants and in informal sector marketing operations.

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