New Days for Old Ways: Islamic Education in a Changing World

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Abstract
In 1981, Prof. Daniel A. Wagner of the University of Pennsylvania (U.S.A.) and Prof. Abdelhamid Lotfi of Mohamed V University (Morocco) undertook a comparative study of traditional Islamic education in five countries of Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. Funded by the Ford Foundation, the U.S. Social Science Research Council, and IDRC, the study aimed to provide descriptive and analytical perspectives on Quranic schools. The following article is primarily extracted from two papers prepared by Dr. Wagner as a result of the study.

Disciplines
Curriculum and Instruction | Education | Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research | Educational Methods | Elementary Education | International and Comparative Education
The scene in this Diourbel jangu is being repeated in much of the Third World. Senegal shares one key cultural element with about half the countries and half the population of the developing world — a faith in Islam. One of every five people in the world embraces Islam, and the Islamic tradition has maintained and regenerated itself across generations for over 14 centuries. Within this heritage, the Islamic religious school has been accepted and most widespread means of social and cultural reproduction. These schools began with the founding of Islam in the 7th century and spread with Islamic conquests to Spain in the West, to Asia Minor in the East and, later, deep into Africa and to the eastern reaches of Indonesia.

In North Yemen (above, left), girls now participate in Quranic schools. Wooden slates, luḥ, used for the study of the Quranic suras lie stacked outside the school in Diourbel, Senegal (above, right).

For Old Ways

DANIEL A. WAGNER

Islamic education in a changing world

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NEW DAYS

In three countries

TRADITION AND CHANGE

Indonesia is the largest and most populous Muslim country in the world. About 95 percent of Indonesia’s population of 140 million are Muslims, and almost 20 million children attend the country’s Islamic schools. Islamic education is provided both by the government and through private religious schools called pesantrens. These schools are descended in part from the earlier traditions of Hindu-Buddhist monastery schools and the head teachers (kyais) are often charismatic leaders and community organizers, as well as learned scholars.

The pesantrens are economically self-supporting institutions. Students work in the fields and occasionally engage in small commercial activities organized for communal needs. In this way, students support themselves through five to ten years of study and maintain close ties with the Islamic community in which they reside.

Religious subjects, which make up about half the curriculum, are taught using the Arabic script needed for all Quranic study. For Indonesian children, learning to read Arabic is a major and difficult task. Special small classes for young children are often organized for this purpose by volunteers. And while some children make better progress than others, it is clear that all children learn enough to feel part of the dual cultural galaxy of Islamic Indonesia and the Islamic Arabic-speaking world.

Modern teaching methods are making some inroads in Indonesia’s Quranic schools, particularly in the cities. In one school next to a Jakarta mosque, for example, a visitor could overhear each of the teenaged students chanting his particular passage loudly, helping to produce a cacophony of sounds.
The teacher had adapted foreign language learning techniques to Quranic study. Each student had headphones, a cassette recorder, and tapes of all the suras of the Quran. This year, the confidént teacher, one of his students might win the national championship for rapid and accurate Quranic recitation.

Islam arrived in Senegal in the 11th century with the slow but continuous arrival of traders and occasional military incursions from North Africa. The process of Islamization took many centuries, but was undoubtedly spurred on by the arrival of European slave traders in the 16th century. Lasting more than 200 years, the slave trade disrupted the social and economic structure of the country. The main consequences were the rise of Islam as an indigenous anticolonial force and the ascendancy of several large Islamic brotherhoods, which had each developed around a holy religious figure and his descendants.

In the 19th century, the brotherhoods made a series of accommodations with the French colonial administration to produce the important groundnut crop. This required a large, quickly mobilized, and relatively unskilled labour force for planting and harvesting. Or, the brotherhoods were capable of providing the social organization and mobilization of such a force. Thus they were given support by the French and profited greatly from the French and profited greatly from the French colonial administration.

THE FUTURE OF TRADITIONS

For many Third World governments, budgets for education are at the top of the list in terms of cost. It should not be surprising, therefore, that they are beginning to reassess the utility and productivity of educational programs.

The achievement of literacy is perhaps the most agreed upon goal of all contemporary educational systems. Interestingly, for a great number of children in the Third World, literacy skills are acquired only through indigenous schools, which have generally been ignored by development planners.

Contemporary Islamic schools are an important example of indigenous education. Like other forms of indigenous schooling, these schools continue to attract large numbers of children. Changes in recent years have also brought them into direct competition with modern secular school systems, forcing adaptations in both systems.

Many researchers agree that national literacy programs in a number of countries have achieved only limited success in recent decades and that a closer relationship between these programs and culturally indigenous forms of schooling could be beneficial. More information is needed about these schools, however, to avoid wasting financial resources while taking advantage of cultural resources. Their involvement in education policies and programs might enable development planners and policymakers to increase literacy in areas where indigenous schooling touches the lives of so many children.

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