



1983


Learning to Read by 'Rote'

Daniel A. Wagner

University of Pennsylvania, wagner@literacy.upenn.edu

Abdelhamid Lotfi

Follow this and additional works at: https://repository.upenn.edu/literacyorg_articles

 Part of the [Bilingual, Multilingual, and Multicultural Education Commons](#), [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#), [Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research Commons](#), [Educational Methods Commons](#), [Educational Sociology Commons](#), [International and Comparative Education Commons](#), and the [Language and Literacy Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Wagner, Daniel A. and Lotfi, Abdelhamid, "Learning to Read by 'Rote'" (1983). *Journal Articles (Literacy.org)*. 18.
https://repository.upenn.edu/literacyorg_articles/18

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. https://repository.upenn.edu/literacyorg_articles/18
For more information, please contact repository@pobox.upenn.edu.

Learning to Read by 'Rote'

Abstract

Information about traditional Islamic (or Quranic) education dates back to its inception over 1400 years ago in the Arabian Peninsula. During this millennium, Islamic religious schools have spread with Islam to more than 40 countries, spanning half the globe and teaching tens of millions of children (although exact statistics are still unavailable). Until recently, most research on Islamic schooling was historical, focused on philosophy, and was based on secondary sources (e.g., Ahmed 1968; Nakosteen 1964; Rosenthal 1947; Tales 1939; Tritton 1957; Yacoub 1890). In the last several years, a number of investigators have begun to study the various roles these Muslim schools play in countries such as Indonesia. (Jones 1980; Shaeffer 1979), Morocco (Wagner and Lofi 1980), Ghana (Bennett 1979), Liberia (Smith 1978), and the Quranic schooling (such as the primary use of the Quran as a text and of Arabic as the language of written instruction), Muslim countries around the world may vary greatly in sociocultural traditions, language, and date and degree of Islamization. The effects of these differences have resulted in a complex and varied picture of Quranic education as it adapts to societal pressures in the contemporary world.

Disciplines

Bilingual, Multilingual, and Multicultural Education | Curriculum and Instruction | Education | Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research | Educational Methods | Educational Sociology | International and Comparative Education | Language and Literacy Education

DANIEL A. WAGNER and ABDELHAMID LOTFI

I. Introduction

Information about traditional Islamic (or Quranic) education dates back to its inception over 1400 years ago in the Arabian peninsula. During this millennium, Islamic religious schools have spread with Islam to more than 40 countries, spanning half the globe and teaching tens of millions of children (although exact statistics are still unavailable). Until recently, most research on Islamic schooling was historical, focused on philosophy, and was based on secondary sources (e.g., Ahmed 1968; Nakosteen 1964; Rosenthal 1947; Tales 1939; Tritton 1957; Yacoub 1890). In the last several years, a number of investigators have begun to study the various roles these Muslim schools play in countries such as Indonesia. (Jones 1980; Shaeffer 1979), Morocco (Wagner and Lotfi 1980), Ghana (Bennett 1979), Liberia (Smith 1978), and the Cameroons (Santerre 1973). Although there are important commonalities in Quranic schooling (such as the primary use of the Quran as a text and of Arabic as the language of written instruction), Muslim countries around the world may vary greatly in sociocultural traditions, language, and date and degree of Islamization. The effects of these differences have resulted in a complex and varied picture of Quranic education as it adapts to societal pressures in the contemporary world.

The present paper focuses on Islamic education in two countries, the Yemen Arab Republic (North Yemen) and Senegal, which have contrasting histories of Quranic education. Four general themes are addressed in the paper: (1) a description of Quranic schooling in each country; (2) the socio-political role of the Quranic schoolteacher; (3) 'rote' learning and traditional vs. modern pedagogy; and (4) some conclusions and prognoses on the future role of Islamic education in each society.

II. Quranic Schooling in Yemen and Senegal

The traditional Quranic school is designed primarily to maintain and propagate Islam in society, as in Bourdieu and Passeron's (1977) notion of cultural reproduction through education. In this sense, Islamic education has much in common with other religious schools around the world, such as traditional Jewish (*yeshiva*, *heder*; see Drazin 1940; Gollancz 1924; Swift 1919), and monastic Christian schools (e.g., Kalewold 1970). Three important similarities exist between pedagogical instruction in these diverse traditional schools: (1) the emphasis on verbatim oral mastery of a body of essential written teachings and ritual; (2) self-paced learning with no fixed grades or ages for completion and often, at the postelementary level, individualized instruction in a master-apprentice relationship; and (3) the learning of literacy skills to supplement and guide oral mastery, as well as for self-study and (eventually) the acquisition of new knowledge. In each of these three areas, Islamic education is at variance with the typical demands of modern Western education. First, however, it is necessary to consider the sociohistorical background of Quranic schooling in the countries studied.

A. Yemen

As one of the first areas of the world to embrace Islam, Yemen has an ancient and continuing tradition of Quranic education, going back 14 centuries. Until the overthrow of the monarchy in 1962, the Quranic school was the only educational institution in the country (for a general background, see Wenner 1967). While not 'universal' in the contemporary sense of the word, the Quranic school (*mi'lama*) did reach a large number of young boys and some girls, even in very rural and mountainous regions of the country. Children normally spent about three to five years in the *mi'lama* where they learned to recite and read (with varying skill) the Quran. In addition, proper recitation (*tajwid*) and pronunciation were central activities of the schools, and of special significance in the maintenance of oral tradition and expert or 'craft' literacy (after Havelock 1974). A small number of these students would then go on to pursue four to six years of advanced studies – such as the *hadith* [historical traditions], *fiqh* [law], and *tafsir* [commentaries] – in the *madrasah*, whereupon some of the boys might become Quranic schoolteachers (*fqihs*).

In contemporary Yemen, this pattern still persists, though to a lesser degree than in the past. Following the fall of the monarchy, modern secular schools were introduced, primarily in urban centers. Until about ten years ago, the *mi'lama* seemed destined to disappear slowly from the Yemeni countryside

while being replaced by the modern public school. This did not happen, however, due to the timely intervention of the Council of Islamic Studies Institutes, a semipublic Yemeni agency, with funding from external sources, including Saudi Arabia. In present-day Yemen, we find an increasing number of modernized *mi'lama* (renamed Quranic memorization schools or Islamic Studies Institutes) for young children of both sexes, with primary and secondary school levels and a mixed curriculum of religious and secular subjects. By contrast, the traditional *mi'lama* seems to be declining even in the most rural areas, where the old-time teachers are not being replaced by like-minded and like-skilled younger teachers.

Pedagogically, we found (in 1980) a concomitant decline in monotonous oral recitation and rote memorization, and a decrease in the use of wooden slates for the memorization of the Quran, both of which were associated with traditional Islamic schools. While still commonly used by younger children, these slates (or *luhs*) have been replaced by textbooks and notebooks in the modern Islamic schools. These changes have had important implications for the learning of literacy among traditional students. In our fieldwork, although we were able to find functional illiterates among both students and teachers in the traditional *mi'lama*, we observed that most children in the modernized *mi'lama* seem to learn the Arabic alphabet and functional reading skills by the age of six or seven, or after two or three years in this school. In other words, for perhaps the first time, oral recitation and memorization were supplemented by skilled reading for the average student. It should be noted that, unlike the case of Senegal, Yemeni children are already fluent speakers of colloquial Arabic by the time they learn to read.

Our research in Yemen indicates a resurgence of Islamic education as a real, though somewhat changed, competitor to the modern public school. This has resulted from an increased input of material and human resources at both primary and secondary levels of schooling, and is at least partly a function of a changed perception of the utility of Quranic schooling.

B. Senegal

While Islamic education in parts of West Africa dates back to the 10th century, large numbers of Senegalese schools came into existence only in the 18th and 19th centuries, with the growth of the Sufi brotherhoods (see Behrman 1970; O'Brien 1971). Islamic schools were the only formal schools in precolonial Senegal until the French conquest and the subsequent introduction of French colonial schools. In the last two decades or so, Islamic schools have undergone considerable change and have increased in both number and apparent quality.

The small Quranic schools for young children (known as the *jangu* in Wolof)

bear a strong resemblance to the traditional Yemeni *mi'lama*. Children are grouped in small study circles around the teachers and are taught *suras* of the Quran through memorization. Also as in Yemen, there is considerable variation in the pedagogical techniques of these schools – from an emphasis on rote memorization to a greater focus on literacy skills (in Arabic). In the past, the Quran was rote-memorized in Arabic, and only later was meaning attained through the occasional translation of the passages into Wolof or other Senegalese languages. Most traditional schools we visited have begun or have achieved modernization of their pedagogy and curriculum, and the acquisition of Arabic literacy skills (i.e., reading and writing) has now become a main component of early instruction.

It is interesting to note that Arabic literacy, after more than a century of decline due to French colonization, is now becoming a modest competitor to French literacy in Senegal, where the official language is French. Some children also acquire literacy in their native Wolof language using the Arabic script learned in the *jangu*. We expect these competing literacies to become a serious issue in the coming years, especially with the recent resignation of President Senghor, as many Senegalese continue to build ties with Muslim countries and affirm their Muslim identity (Senegal is 90% Muslim). The school for older children, known as the *madrasah* or *dara* (in Wolof) has also undergone considerable change. Agricultural production, long considered an essential feature of the *dara*, is now deemphasized; the students – known as *talibes* – were expected to provide labor for the important peanut crop. In present-day Senegal, the number of traditional *daras* has decreased dramatically. The contemporary *dara* (now usually called *ma'had* or *Institut Islamique*) often has a functional equivalence to the public high school, and its graduates can obtain a diploma if they sit for state-supervised exams, which may give them access to a variety of government teaching jobs.

We may conclude from this brief sketch that the Quranic school in Senegal is strengthening itself through adaptation to modern needs, in much the same way as in Yemen. It is important to emphasize, however, that the Senegalese Islamic schools – and, to a certain extent, their Yemeni counterparts – are direct competitors with the government school program, and that this accounts both for their vitality and for occasional friction with the central government.

III. The role of the teacher

Beyond his primary function as an instructor of the Quran, the Islamic school-teacher (*fquih*) also played (and plays) an important socioeconomic and political role in his community.

In Yemen, because he was often the only source of literacy and Islamic knowledge in a highly decentralized and generally low-literacy society, the *fquih* often came to fulfill several, often critical, societal functions: as a notary (*'adel*) or a legal adviser; as a mediator of disputes of various kinds; and as a source of medical knowledge and folk-healing for both physical and mental illness. In sum, the *fquih* was one of the few formally educated and literate individuals in Yemeni society, and especially so in the rural areas which still predominate. His current status, however, is beginning to wane, due to the increase in modern education and the central government's establishment of power in most parts of the country.

The Senegalese *fquih* (*serigne* in Wolof), in addition to being the local religious leader, acted as a culture broker who, by providing Arabic literacy to his students, introduced them to a broad trade network and cultural system that united Muslims in disparate regions of Senegal. His influence was increased by the economic and political support of his disciples, who spread Islamic teachings and Arabic literacy among their own people. *Jangus* and *daras* served as centers of economic, religious, and political activities which provided the *serigne* with devoted followers and therefore with a considerable degree of economic independence. All of this meant that the *serignes* became part of a parallel power structure to, first, the French, and then, the current secular regime in Senegal.

The pedagogical skills and style of the Quranic schoolteacher vary considerably, depending on his (the teachers are almost exclusively male) background and training. We found some highly literate and learned scholars, and others who could barely read; but most teachers were in the middle range. To the casual observer, the *fquih* appears to be simply leading group recitation of the Quran. However, the pedagogical style is one of the individualized instruction wherein the *fquih* selectively attunes to each student's recitation and calls any transgressor up front for individualized tutoring. The use of individual wooden slates for copying down lessons seems perfectly adapted to this pedagogy, in that it permits the *fquih* to structure an individual student's lessons to his or her needs.

IV. Rote learning and reading in the traditional schools

Though the term 'rote' lacks a commonly accepted definition, we often think of it as invoking on the part of the learner a great deal of repetition with a lack of understanding of what is being learned. While not entirely eliminated from the pedagogy of modern schools today (Wagner 1983), rote learning has been said to be especially characteristic of traditional Islamic schools, past and present. Our observations, and those of historical observers, confirm the

fact that recitation and memorization of Islamic texts is still very much a part of the curricular diet of the Quranic school student in Yemen, Senegal, and elsewhere (Wagner and Lotfi 1981).

Descriptions of traditional Quranic schooling vary remarkably little across historical time and across societies (e.g., Ahmed 1968; Tritton 1957; Wagner and Lotfi 1980, 1981). The first and foremost task is to memorize and be able to recite as much of the Quran as possible. Children as young as four or five years of age begin by learning the rudiments of the alphabet and reading in their general effort to memorize chapters (*suras*) of the Quran. Comprehension of what is memorized is rarely a part of the learning process in traditional schools, since accurate oral recitation with proper intonation and rhythm (*tajwid*) is the central goal during the beginning years. There is no set time for finishing the memorization of the Quran, though the moderately successful student can recite most of the Quran (usually in repeated sittings) after about seven or eight years of continuous study. During this period of study some students may become fully literate (e.g., reading and writing with comprehension), but observers of the traditional school (e.g., Marty 1917) claim that such individuals were the exception rather than the rule.

Western scholars, joined more recently by their Muslim colleagues, have condemned the reliance of traditional teachers on 'rote' pedagogical techniques, and have pointed to possible negative influences on children's cognitive abilities. Memory skills of the students are said to develop at the expense of logical and creative thinking, though little evidence has been gathered to support this assumption. Scribner and Cole (1981) found, for example, that Liberians who had gone to Quranic school were more likely than other Liberians to remember information in a serial (rotelike) manner. However, Wagner (1978) found no evidence for differences in memory between Moroccan Quranic students and same-aged Moroccans on several memory tests.

Although it seems that the critics of traditional rote methods are gaining in the public forum, it should not be forgotten that the traditional pedagogy has played, and continues to play, an important sociocultural role in both Yemen and Senegal, where verbatim religious knowledge carries both cultural value and societal status. The fact is, however, that Muslim scholars were quite cognizant of the cognitive consequences of their traditional form of pedagogy. According to the 11th-century Muslim philosopher al-Ghazali (cited in Tritton 1957: 16), for example, 'a child should be taught the words of the creed in his earliest days and be taught the meaning as he grew older; corresponding to the three stages of memorizing, understanding and conviction'. It was commonly accepted, therefore, that young children should focus, with their pliable and absorbent minds, on rote learning and recitation skills. Understanding of what was learned would come later and form the basis of Islamic belief or conviction.

Islam — like its predecessors Judaism and Christianity — is a 'literate' religion in the sense of having holy texts which play a central role in the maintenance of and instruction in the faith. Literacy was in classical (or liturgical) Arabic, similar to the cases of Judaism and Christianity, where Hebrew and Latin, like Arabic, were not the native languages of most of the faithful. 'Craft' literacy predominated, where only a limited number of scholars became fully literate in the classical scripts. Thus, the large majority, in traditional Islam, were probably illiterate and had learned as much as possible by memorized oral recitations, or were partially literate in that they could decode ('read') the alphabet and pronounce words and sentences that aided in the central act of Muslim worship, competent oral recitation of the Quran.

In many of the more traditional schools visited in Yemen and Senegal, we found a continuation of this process of learning to read by rote, with the emphasis on simple decoding that aids in oral memorization and accurate recitation. In some schools, even adolescents with six or eight years of schooling did not read or write with more than elemental comprehension. This is not surprising because, as mentioned above, reading, *per se*, has not been the goal of Quranic instruction; and there is often a mismatch between the spoken language and classical Arabic (which is also true in Yemen, though the Yemeni dialect is not very distant from classical Arabic). In addition, the type and availability of written materials did not lend themselves easily to helping the student read: Not being designed for school use, the Quran itself is a difficult text to read and comprehend, and, in spite of attempts to find 'easy' passages for beginning readers, it remains much more difficult than any reading primers used in modern schools. Also, outside the classroom with its religious texts, the child had few, if any, opportunities to practice reading. Traditional Senegal and Yemen were (and still are) low-literacy environments, in that few written materials were generally available, and few literate persons were available for help outside the classroom. Through rote memorization, the traditional Quranic schools managed to preserve the textual integrity of the Quran, and, through group recitation and worship, built group cohesion. It also tended to obviate the need for skilled individual reading or for multiple and varied texts. In sum, learning to read by rote was part of, or a by-product of, worship, pedagogy, and curriculum in the traditional Quranic schools of Yemen and Senegal.

V. Contemporary change and the future of rote

As noted earlier, there is an important modernization process taking place in Quranic schooling in both Yemen and Senegal. Several complementary factors

seem to be promoting the growth of real reading skills in Muslim students whose school duties are now often considered to include secular subjects. The *fquihis* themselves tend to be younger, better trained, and more motivated to teach reading skills that will be useful beyond the confines of the religious classrooms and the religious texts. Second, there is an influx of modern Arabic texts and primers (especially in Yemen, where Saudi Arabia and Kuwait provide financing) which enhances these teachers' efforts. And, finally, there appears to be an increasing sense of Islamic brotherhood across nations, where the Arabic language and script are acquiring more prestige as a *lingua franca*.

What of the future of traditional rote methods of learning? All indications are that they are here to stay. In Senegal and Yemen (and elsewhere in the Islamic world) there is a tendency toward the secularization of the curriculum for adolescents (that is, more modern topics such as geometry and biology); but rote recitation and memorization remain the primary feature of Quranic schools for young children. The oral tradition of Quranic recitation will no doubt continue as it has over the course of 14 centuries, and rote learning – not 'reading for new knowledge' – will remain the best way to retain verbatim and proper pronunciation.

Nonetheless, there are changes which will have repercussions on the child. For example, increasing numbers of children are now attending the traditional Quranic school as a preschool, and then going on to a modernized Islamic or government school. We know very little about the transfer of learning skills and cognitive styles across these settings, and even less about how reading skills of a text like the Quran, learned through rote recitation, transfer to the eclectic reading material and curriculum of the modern classroom.²

VI. Reflections on the future

From the evidence presented above, we may conclude that the traditional Islamic school has made an important and lasting adaptation in both the Yemeni and Senegalese societies. The Muslim school has not only continued to impart valuable cultural capital (Eickelman 1978) to its students in the form of religious instruction, oral recitation skills, and Islamic ethics, but has also adopted some of the pedagogical and administrative features of the modern public school to provide the kind of diversified training which would allow its graduates to play a variety of roles in the larger society.

The Muslim school in Senegal, unlike its Yemeni counterpart, which is becoming an integral part of the national school system, poses more of a problem for the secular state, whose values it stands more clearly against. As an alternative representative of national values, the Senegalese Muslim school is involved in the spreading of Arabic literacy even though the official language

of the state is French; it is also building ties with Arab countries while the state's strongest ties are with France and other Western nations. In Yemen, which is a Muslim republic, there is less conflict with Quranic schooling at both the administrative and the linguistic levels. Despite these differences, in both Yemen and Senegal we find an expanded role for the modernized Islamic school. In these and other Muslim countries, Islamic schools will continue to be central to the lives of children in the years to come, and the oral tradition of Islam will be maintained through time-honored rote methods of memorization and recitation.

As one contemporary scholar put it at a recent Middle East conference on Muslim education:

A Muslim should be able to read the Quran even without being able to understand the words, because the ability to read the Quran itself has been known to evoke in people a response to the teachings of Islam which sociologically has been very valuable. Beyond this most of these people will hardly go, but provided they learn in their childhood to respond to the music of Arabic consonants and vowels, and to the rhythms of the Quran, they will continue throughout their lives to have an emotional attachment to it (Husain and Ashraf 1979: 115).

University of Pennsylvania
Mohamed V University

Notes

1. This paper is a somewhat expanded version of a paper presented in the symposium (D. A. Wagner, Chair), 'Education, literacy and ethnicity: Traditional and contemporary interfaces', at the Annual Meetings of the American Anthropological Association, Washington, D.C., December, 1980. The authors gratefully acknowledge the support for this research provided by the Ford Foundation, Social Science Research Council, and the International Development Research Center. Wagner also received support from NIMH in writing this paper while he was a NRSA Fellow at Harvard University, as well as from NIE (#80-0182) and NIH (#HD-14898).
2. We are now engaged in a three-year study of reading acquisition in the traditional and modern primary schools of Morocco to address these very questions.

References

- Ahmed, M. (1968). *Muslim Education and the Scholar's Social Status upon the Fifth Century Muslim Era in the Light of Ta'rikh Baghdad*. Zurich: Verlag.
- Behrman, L. C. (1970). *Muslim Brotherhoods and Politics in Senegal*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

- Bennett, J. A. H. (1979). *Schooldays: an ethnography of education*. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Cambridge University.
- Bourdieu, P. and Passeron, J.-C. (1977). *Reproduction: In Education, Society and Culture*. Beverly Hills: Sage.
- Drazin, N. (1940). *History of Jewish Education from 515 B.C.E. to 220 C.E.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press.
- Eickelman, D. (1978). The art of memory: Islamic education and its social reproduction. *Comparative Studies of Society and History* 20: 485-516.
- Gollancz, Hermann (1924). *Pedagogics of the Talmud and that of Modern Times: A Comparative Study*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Havelock, E. A. (1974). *Origins of Western Literacy*. Toronto: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.
- Husain, S. S. and Ashraf, S. A. (1979). *Crisis in Muslim Education*. London: Hodder and Stoughton.
- Jones, S. (1980). Arabic instruction and literacy in Javanese Muslim schools. Paper presented at the Annual Meetings of the American Anthropological Association, Washington, D.C., December.
- Kalewold, A. I. (1970). *Traditional Ethiopian Church Education*. New York: Teacher's College Press.
- Marty, Paul (1917). *Etude sur l'Islam au Sénégal*, vol. II: *Les doctrines et les institutions*. Paris: Leroux.
- Nakosteen, M. (1964). *History of Islamic Origins of Western Education: A.D. 800-1350*. Boulder: University of Colorado Press.
- O'Brien, D. C. (1971). *The Mourides of Sénégal: The Political and Economic Organization of an Islamic Brotherhood*. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Rosenthal, F. (1947). *The Technique and Approach of Muslim Scholarship*. Rome: Pontificium Institutum Biblicum.
- Santerre, R. (1973). *Pédagogie Musulmane d'Afrique noire*. Montreal: University Press of Montreal.
- Scribner, S. and Cole, M. (1981). *The Psychology of Literacy: A Case Study among the Vai*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Shaeffer, S. F. (1979). Schooling in a developing society: A case study of Indonesian primary education. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Stanford University.
- Smith, Michael (1978). *An Ethnography of Literacy in a Vai Town*. Working Paper No. 1, Vai Literacy Project. Rockefeller University.
- Swift, F. H. (1919). *Education in Ancient Israel from Earliest Times to 70 A.D.* Chicago: Open Court.
- Tales, Asad (1939). *La madrasa Nizamiyya et son histoire* (Thèse de doctorat, Université de Bordeaux, 1939). Paris: Librairie Orientaliste Paul Geuthner.
- Tritton, A. S. (1957). *Materials on Muslim Education in the Middle Ages*. London: Luzac.
- Wagner, D. A. (1978). Memories of Morocco: the influence of age, schooling and environment on memory. *Cognitive Psychology* 10: 1-28.
- (1983). Rediscovering rote: some cognitive and pedagogical preliminaries. In *Human Assessment and Cultural Factors*, S. Irvine and J. W. Berry (eds.). New York: Plenum.
- and Lotfi, A. (1980). Traditional Islamic education in Morocco: sociohistorical and psychological perspectives. *Comparative Education Review* 24: 238-251.
- and — (1981). Traditional Islamic education and literacy in five Islamic countries. Project report to the Ford Foundation, January.

Wenner, M. (1967) *Modern Yemen, 1918-1966*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Yacoub, A. P. (1890). *L'instruction publique en Egypte*. Paris: Leroux.