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Styles of Islamic Education: Perspectives from Mali, Guinea, and The Gambia

This chapter seeks to summarize my field observations on Islamic education, made primarily in Mali but also in Guinea and The Gambia. Whereas in earlier publications, I stressed features common to several, primarily Manding-speaking areas in Mali, in this presentation, based on research within a wider geographical region, I would also like to recognize diversity.

Research in Mali was conducted in Segou and nearby villages, San and nearby villages (1998), Touba (Cercle de Banamba; 2005), Dia and several villages of the Masina region (2004-2008), Diakhaba (2010), Djenné (2007, 2011) and Timbuktu (2006) as well as Bamako. It has thus involved areas with Bamana-, Maninka-, Dyula-, Soninke-, Bozo-, Fulfulde-, Songhay-, Moorish-, and Tamachek-speaking majorities. Briefer inquiries took place in Mandenka-speaking areas of The Gambia (2004, one month) and the Kankan (Maninka-speaking) area of Guinea (2005, 2011, five months).¹ This, then, is an updated – but still interim – report on ongoing fieldwork.

My recent observations, as well as an analysis of the literature, strongly suggest that two traits of the educational process, identified in my earlier publications, are very widespread in West Africa (and beyond). As first shown by Renaud Santerre (1973), there is a distinction between two educational levels or cycles: the elementary one, consecrated to the recitation, reading, copying, and memorization of the Qur'an; and the complementary or advanced level, consecrated to the study, with comprehension, of Arabic books. However, certain types of Qur'an memorization and recitation are constitutive of advanced rather than elementary study.

The second common trait is the use of local languages – rather than classical Arabic – for oral communication in the instructional context. Thus, nearly all reading and writing take place in Arabic, while nearly all oral explanation and discussion are conducted in a local language (or, in some situations, several local languages). Oral translation into local languages appears to be the basic pedagogical tool of advanced-level Islamic education in West Africa: in the course of oral reading, the Arabic text is parsed into syntactical units, each unit being followed by one of equivalent meaning in a local language. Thus, brief strings of Arabic words alternate with ones in the African language. Translation is based neither on the isolated word (except when – infrequently – it constitutes a syntagm unto itself) nor the whole sentence, but on the syntactical unit.

Analysis of several sources suggests that a distinction between two levels of study may have been characteristic of much of the Islamic world until recently, while a dichotomy between the use of classical Arabic in writing and local languages in oral communication may be characteristic of many non-Arabic speaking areas.²

A third common trait of traditional Islamic education in West Africa, stressed by both Renaud Santerre (1973) and Louis Brenner (e.g., 1993, 2001) is the highly individualized nature of instruction: although pupils may meet collectively, each receives his or her individual lesson. While individual instruction in Qur'an recitation and memorization may be the general rule in the Islamic world, its extension to advanced education could be regionally more restricted. Lectures and seminars also may have been more characteristic of advanced education in West Africa at certain times in the past (see Diakit  1991; Ham s 1997) and are an important feature of the transmission of religious knowledge to adults, in non-scholastic contexts, today.

On the other hand, some aspects of the educational process reveal considerable diversity. This diversity, which is correlated to linguistic, regional and/or "ethnic" identities, concerns such matters as: school schedules; the pedagogy of reading and writing; memorization requirements; the books and disciplines studied and the order in which they are studied; Qur'an recitation and poetry chanting styles; diplomas and other procedures for certifying competence; and the social and economic contexts of education.

For reasons of space, this chapter will concentrate on the more conservative forms of Islamic education for children and youth, though it will evoke their multifaceted relationships to the madrasa, or "modern" Islamic schools, and the state school systems (which operate primarily in European languages). But "traditional" education itself has been undergoing a kind of modernization – with the replacement of most manuscripts by printed books, and the introduction of new books, new subjects, and new pedagogical methods, together with associated scholastic accessories such as blackboards. These changes, which until now have been undertaken largely at the initiative of individual teachers, may be expected to accelerate as government departments and NGOs attempt to "improve", "reform", and control.³

Traditional schools still provide the only form of Islamic education available in many rural areas, and in some cities and large villages, including Dia and Djenn , all children attend for

some time. The number of schools has increased in some localities, though it has decreased in others⁴. Children and young people from regions and populations where local religions were until recently dominant are now attending in large numbers, whether in their home areas or ones where Islam has been established longer.⁵ The educational practices and curricula of these more conservative forms of education have also had, as I have shown elsewhere (2009), a determining impact on the madrasa and other newer forms of Islamic education.

TYPES OF SCHOOLS, RECRUITMENT OF PUPILS AND TEACHERS

Elementary Qur'anic instruction and the advanced study of books are designated by distinct terms in the several languages of the region. For clarity's sake, in this chapter, I shall refer to establishments offering the first level (or, in some instances, both levels) of study as Qur'anic schools, and those offering the second level as *majlis* (from an Arabic term connoting a learned assembly, widely used in the region to refer to the upper level of study).⁶

In addition, one must distinguish at least two types of schools: sedentary ones, and ones in which both teachers and pupils may change places of residence several times a year, every year. All the cities and villages visited have sedentary schools, run by resident teachers. These teachers may also accept pupils from out-of-town (or out of the village), who reside with them year-round, often for several years. On the other hand, the Fulbe (whether or not they are still nomadic) and the Bella (former dependents of the Tuareg) have some schools in which pupils, most of whom are recruited within a given geographical area, follow their teachers on a circuit. Every year, they return to some of the same places, staying in each place for a few days to a few months. Relatively large and prosperous settlements with a tradition of learning, such as the cities of Djenné, Timbuktu, Segou and San, are considered especially appropriate for longer stays, since teachers and pupils rely on local populations to donate food. These school groups may either camp on the periphery of towns and villages, or seek accommodation within them. For the past several decades, Mossi teachers and pupils from Burkina have also been itinerant in Mali; at present, they are particularly numerous in the Segou and San areas.

In Djenné, a further distinction between teachers who have studied and settled in the city but cater exclusively to out-of-town pupils, often from their own home areas, and autochthonous (or fully assimilated) teachers, who cater to both in- and out-of-town pupils, is also pertinent.

Some normally sedentary teachers may go on pupil recruitment trips, especially in recently Islamized areas; they may also accept new pupils while traveling for other purposes. On any trip, they may take their regular pupils with them; alternatively, they may leave them in the care of their associates or assistants, or of another teacher.

In the places visited, most sedentary teachers are native to the villages or cities in which they teach, or to nearby areas. Furthermore, most have received much or all of their religious education in their current teaching locality – sometimes primarily or exclusively within their own families; Touba is the most extreme example. However, nearly all have had more than one teacher. On the other hand, in Diakhaba (perhaps because local traditions of learning were interrupted), it is considered preferable to also study elsewhere; Jaabikundaa, a village of the Diakhanke of Guinea Bissau, is the most usual destination.⁷ Nevertheless, some students and scholars travel extensively in search of teachers who can instruct them in particular books. Certain towns and villages – including Djenné, Segou, and Dia – attract large numbers of out-of-town students. Many may be from the immediate periphery of these towns, but others come from distant places in Mali and from neighboring countries – most frequently Guinea, Guinea Bissau, or Burkina. Diakhaba, though it sends many of its own students abroad to Guinea Bissau, receives students from Senegal. I have encountered two scholars, one in Djenné and one in Timbuktu, who spent several years studying Maliki *fiqh* (law and cultic obligations) in Sudan.

Certain schools regularly receive pupils from a particular village, and fathers who have studied in a particular school often send their children there – to study with their own teacher, his son or grandson (or even his granddaughter; see below). In some areas, including Djenné and Dia, one may speak of teaching lineages and lineages that supply them with students – whose members may or may not, as a matter of family custom, go on to teach themselves. Younger out-of-town pupils usually lodge with their teachers; older ones (unless there is a particular link between the two families) often seek another host.

All teachers in the traditional sector have been trained in it. However, some have, additionally, attended state schools or the madrasa – sometimes to a high level. For example, I encountered a Djenné teacher who had been through the seventh grade, and another who had successfully completed secondary school. A University of Bamako sociology student helps teach the Qur'an and some beginner-level books at his uncle's school in Dia. The director of one of Kankan's largest Qur'anic schools (offering both levels of study) had attended the local state schools, returning from many years living and working in New York City to assume this responsibility at his family's request. Some madrasa directors, including several who have engaged in lengthy study in Arab countries, also run Qur'anic schools and/or *majlis*. A fair number of younger Qur'anic teachers have studied at madrasa, leading them to introduce aspects of their methods and curricula into their own schools (see below).

Very few schools, even the smallest, are entirely taught and run by one person. The director (i.e. the person who has ultimate responsibility for the welfare and progress of the pupils)⁸ nearly always has one or more associates and/or assistants; these are usually pupils, former pupils, and/or members of his immediate or extended family. Some teachers and schools offer both elementary Qur'anic instruction and the advanced study of books, whereas others specialize in one level only. Many Qur'an instructors do not possess the knowledge to teach books, but some persons who are fully competent in both fields may choose to teach only one. In establishments that offer both courses, the director usually concentrates on "books", while his assistants or associates teach beginning Qur'an pupils. However, a director may also (for example) concentrate on Qur'an pronunciation or recitation, and leave book instruction to his associates.

As noted in the literature, school enrollments are highly variable: pupil numbers may vary from a handful to several hundred. Nowadays, many directors keep lists of their pupils' names. Teachers and pupils typically meet in the director's (permanent or temporary) home, in a vestibule or an inner room. However, in some larger establishments, several rooms, or even a house, may be reserved for this purpose. According to oral traditions, certain structures have been reserved exclusively for scholarly purposes for over a century; these are usually, though not always, located within the compounds of scholarly lineages.

The itinerant schools accept only boys. In contrast, all other schools visited are currently coeducational. In Touba, this is said to be a recent development: both Malikis and Wahhabis

state that they began teaching girls as a result of Wahhabi emphasis on female education. Elsewhere, this seems to have been the case for at least some generations. Nevertheless, girls are nearly always in a minority, because they typically spend fewer years in school than boys. Yet, several schools in Dia and Diakhaba have some older girls, who have completed the recitation of the Qur'an and are studying books, in attendance. One Dia teacher has several advanced adult woman students. Girls, even older ones, are not usually spatially separated from boys.

Although the overwhelming majority of Qur'an and *majlis* teachers are men, there are a few women scholars. Thus, in Dia, one woman runs a Qur'anic school – she has a male assistant, and teenage boys and as well as young children, among her out-of-town lodgers. A second woman, who is currently studying books, provides most Qur'anic instruction at her brother's school. A third woman (who has since left to join her husband in another village) used to have her own school there – she now runs a school in the second village. Another Dia woman, who died in the 1980s and was likely born in the 1920s or earlier, used to teach with her husband. A woman scholar from Djenné, who died in 2007 and was probably born in the 1930s, used to teach both Qur'anic school and *majlis* with her husband; after his death, she continued on her own. All but the last-mentioned woman came from scholarly families and studied primarily within their extended families. All were married to scholars; the last-mentioned woman studied primarily with her husband. The first- and third-mentioned Dia women are admitted to read the Qur'an and devotional poems on ceremonial occasions, on a par with men; they are also well known for their ability to do esoteric work, and one travels extensively, and internationally, for this purpose. The now-deceased Dia woman commented the Qur'an publicly, to mixed audiences, in Ramadan, as did the woman from Djenné. All the above women (with the exception of the second-mentioned) teach *majlis* subjects to youths and men. The Djenné woman also organized and taught religious knowledge classes specifically for women. Several women from scholarly families in Segou are reputed for their Islamic knowledge, though they do not teach.⁹

STUDY PROGRAMS

School Schedules and Holidays

School schedules vary greatly. A common scheme, characteristic of Dia, Djenné, San, and Kankan, is to hold instruction in the morning, from shortly after sunrise until about noon, then

again from just after the *zuhr* prayer (early afternoon; about 1:30 – 2 P.M.) until the *‘asr* prayer (mid-afternoon; about 4:00 P.M.); in many schools, the teacher or an older pupil leads the *‘asr* prayer. This is the scheme currently found in Dia, Djenné, and San. However, in Timbuktu and Touba, as well as at some schools in The Gambia, study begins before sunrise, about 4:00 A.M.; pupils break for the dawn prayer and breakfast, then resume study. In Touba and Timbuktu, they may return for an afternoon session. In Touba, Timbuktu and The Gambia, as well as at Fulbe schools in the Masina, there is a night session after the *‘isha*’ (nightfall) prayer (8:30 or 9:00 until 10:00 to 10:30 P.M.). In Djenné, students from scholarly families (but few others) add an evening study session: older members of the family may help the younger ones understand and review their lessons in a relaxed, congenial atmosphere. In the historic village of Diakhaba, most schools have an early morning session, just after sunrise, ending at about 8:00-8:30 A.M., when children return to their homes for breakfast, and an evening study session, after the *‘isha*’ prayer. However, some Diakhaba schools have an evening session only. At the itinerant (especially Fulbe and Bella) schools, there is no afternoon session, since this is one of the times at which pupils are going from door to door, begging for food. Nowadays, Qur’anic schools in Segou, where a significant percentage of children have been attending state schools and/or madrasa for decades, meet only in the morning; in the past, they also met in the afternoon.

In all establishments and localities visited, no classes take place on Thursday; as several teachers explained, the day is considered inappropriate – “unblessed” – for study. In the great majority of schools, classes are also in recess on Wednesday afternoon and Friday morning. However, in some Fulfulde-medium schools in Djenné, pupils study Wednesday afternoon, but have both Thursday and Friday off.

Book students are not usually required to be in attendance at all hours; in most instances, they make an appointment with their teacher for their individual lesson within the framework of the above schedules. However, a few *majlis* may opt for a schedule (for example, only in the morning or only at night) that does not correspond to that of the local Qur’anic schools. Each lesson may last from about five to thirty minutes (five to fifteen is most usual). Depending on his other occupations, a student may stay on school premises in order to revise his lessons or listen in on lessons destined primarily for other students.

Agricultural activities have a considerable impact on school schedules. In large villages such as Dia and Djenné, younger pupils attend both morning and afternoon sessions all year round. However, in rural schools in The Gambia as well as in the village of Diakhaba, the morning session may be curtailed or cancelled, for all pupils or all but the youngest pupils, during the planting and especially the harvest seasons. In Diakhaba, Djenné, Dia, and in the Masina, young men may completely suspend their study at these times – bringing many *majlis* to a standstill.

For about a century and increasingly over the past few decades, Qur’anic school schedules have also been influenced by the constraints of school attendance. Thus, in urban areas, the afternoon session may be cancelled, and both morning and afternoon sessions abridged for school attendees. In Dia, where majority school attendance is more recent, there is a constant tension between the teachers of the state and Qur’anic schools, who mutually remonstrate with each other for keeping the children overlong. In Mali generally, many older pupils attend early-morning sessions or on weekends only. In Timbuktu and Kankan, where many families are not involved in agriculture, many Qur’anic schools have hugely expanded enrollments during the state school holidays, especially the long vacation from early July through the end of September. These seasonal pupils often concentrate full-time on their religious studies at these times.

Religious holidays also impact school schedules. In general, every effort is made to keep younger pupils in near-continual attendance. Younger pupils usually have three days off for *‘Id al-adha*, also called *al-‘Id al-kabir*, the Sacrificial or Great Festival, and for *‘Id al-fitr* or *al-‘Id as-saghir*, the Festival of the Breaking of the Fast or Lesser Festival, marking the end of Ramadan, and one to three days – exceptionally a whole week — for *Mawlud* (the Prophet’s birthday). For older or advanced pupils, regular instruction is suspended during Ramadan (or at least the afternoon and evening study sessions). These pupils attend the Qur’an commentaries and other ceremonial readings that are organized for scholars and the wider public at this time. Older or more advanced pupils may also have up to about two weeks’ off after the Sacrificial Festival. In the month leading up to the Prophet’s birthday, their evening study sessions may be given over, or alternatively evening study sessions may be added, to practice the reading and chanting of compositions commemorating this event. All pupils may have one or two days off for *‘Ashura*’ (10th Muharram, often described as an Islamic New Year). In Djenné and the Fulbe villages of the Masina, all study is suspended for

two weeks beginning on Laylat al-Qadr (the Night of Destiny, 27 Ramadan, commemorating the inauguration of the revelation of the Qur'an to the Prophet), on which school closing ceremonies may be held.¹⁰

The total amount of time a pupil may devote to his studies thus varies according to locality, his age and social background. Pupils from well-off scholarly families in Touba may spend nearly all their waking time studying, revising even during the daily breaks or on off days, and seeking advice from their teachers as necessary. On the other hand, a poor, out-of-town student may have to work full-time during the agricultural season and for much of the day the rest of the year – studying at best a few hours per day, for a few months of the year.

Elementary Qur'anic Study

All children in Dia, Djenné and Diakhaba, and all the children from Maliki families in Touba, currently attend Qur'anic school for several years, as do most children in Timbuktu. Many children in Segou also attend. Both boys and girls attend, though boys typically stay on for longer than girls, and in at least one instance (Touba), Qur'anic school attendance for girls appears to be recent.

Pupils are said to have been traditionally inducted into school at about age seven; bright pupils from scholarly families may be inducted at about age six. Younger children may, however, sometimes accompany elder siblings to school. In Segou, many three- to five-year-olds attend prior to entering a state school or a madrasa – but this appears to be a development of the past few decades.

Pupils usually begin their Qur'anic studies on an auspicious day, as determined by astrological calculations. For this reason, several children may be inducted at the same time – though with the exception of holidays and inauspicious times, admission may be continuous throughout the year. Almost invariably, the teacher begins by writing blessings on the pupil's hand, which the pupil then absorbs by licking.¹¹

In nearly all schools, the pupil begins by learning how to read the *basmala* – the words *bi-smi llahi*, “In the name of God”, which introduce all the suras of the Qur'an (except Sura 9) and must be pronounced before undertaking any important activity. The teacher may have the pupil repeat these words after him and explain how the letters are read. Then the pupil starts

to read the Qur'an, beginning with the *Fatiha* (first sura), then proceeding to the last sura (Sura 114), then working his way forward in the Qur'an. Learning to read involves three distinct phases. First, the pupil is taught the names of the letters of the Arabic alphabet, learning them in the order in which they appear in the Qur'an. After the pupil has learned to recognize and say aloud the name of each letter, he then goes back over the same suras, this time learning to read and recognize the different syllables. In the third phase, the pupil learns to read and pronounce whole words and verses. Again, he or she begins with Sura 1 (the *Fatiha*), proceeds to Sura 114, and then, preferably, at least until Sura 78 (the first sura of the last *juz'* [thirtieth division] of the Qur'an). Pupils with time and ability will then proceed to the beginning of the Qur'an (Sura 1). This first reading may be followed by one or more additional readings. Priority, then, is given to the Qur'anic text, rather than the alphabet, in learning how to read.

In and around Timbuktu, pupils first learn the letters of the alphabet and the various syllable combinations before acceding to the Qur'anic text. This pedagogical method is called *abatasha*, with reference to the newer ordering of the Arabic alphabet, in which letters are grouped according to their shape (as distinct from the *abajada* alphabet, the same letters but in an order inherited from earlier Semitic alphabets that determines their numerical values). At each lesson, the teacher will first trace one or more very large letters in the sand; he will require the pupil to remember their names. To ensure that the pupil has indeed understood the relationship between the form and the name of each letter, the teacher will, after some days or weeks of practice, modify the order in which he presents the letters to his pupil. When he feels that the latter has fully mastered the individual letters, the teacher introduces the signs denoting the short vowels, vowellessness, and nunation as well as the consonant-vowel combinations corresponding to the long vowels. The pupil will be tested with all possible combinations, presented in different orders, before being allowed to proceed to the next phase – the Qur'anic text. In the interval, the teacher will have progressively reduced the size of the characters he traces in the sand. It is only in the next phase that the teacher will write on the writing board – beginning with the first sura of the Qur'an, then proceeding to Sura 114 and forward to the beginning of the Qur'an (as in the pedagogical method summarized above). Even the oldest persons interviewed in Timbuktu (about age 75) could remember no other method for learning how to read, which suggests that it must date from at least the 1930s. Teachers state that, with this method, which they claim is traditional in Timbuktu, even the dullest child will learn to read within a few months.

A somewhat similar method in which the letters are learned in the order of the *abajada* alphabet has been reported of some schools in Senegal, where it was considered an exceptional and innovative pedagogy (Ndiaye 1985, 42). A Diakhaba Qur'anic teacher, who had studied in a madrasa for some time, has introduced collective reading exercises, taken from madrasa booklets, for his beginning and intermediate Qur'anic school pupils (in their first four years of study). One Dia teacher (though he had not studied in a madrasa) introduced madrasa-style reading and grammar exercises, written on a blackboard, for some of his pupils.

Manding, Soninke, Fulbe, Bozo and other linguistic groups each have their own names for the letters of the Arabic alphabet.¹² These names are similar, though rarely identical, to the classical Arabic ones (employed in the madrasa and in Western textbooks). Qur'anic schools nearly always refer to the older, *abajada* order of the alphabet; except in Timbuktu, the *abatasha* order is associated with the madrasa. Qur'anic schools always teach the Maghrebi form of the Arabic characters; this is now rare in the madrasa.

Children begin learning how to write only after they have achieved a certain proficiency in reading. Most teachers say they evaluate each child's readiness individually; but one complete reading of Suras 1 and 114 - 78 appears to be a minimal requirement. The instructor may outline the letters on the writing board, using the blunt end of his reed pen or an empty ballpoint pen, and have the pupil go over these traces (known in Bamana as *tiiri*) with ink. Alternatively, the instructor may write a short text (initially, in large letters) and ask the pupil to copy it. Often, an initiation involving tracing may be followed by practice in freehand copying. At some schools, the instructor may guide the beginner's hand. Only very advanced students and full-fledged scholars write on paper – a skill particularly important for the preparation of charms.

Only very advanced students and full-fledged scholars write on paper – a skill particularly important for the preparation of charms.

In schools offering two or more study sessions per day, each session has a specific content. In most establishments, the pupil begins the morning session by revising his lesson. He then reads aloud from his writing board to the instructor. If his reading is correct, the latter will

write out a new text (or read out loud to the pupil the next portion of the text, if it is already on the writing board). The pupil will repeat these words or syllables once or twice to the instructor, who will, if necessary, read the text aloud again. The beginning pupil will then spend the rest of the morning session, and usually the afternoon and /or evening sessions, repeating the text out loud to himself as he gazes upon his writing board. If the pupil is confused, he may ask the instructor to read it to him yet again. Except when the teacher has not had time to listen to all his pupils in the morning, or for unusually bright pupils at some schools, writing is done only in the morning session. Pupils generally wash off their writing boards –usually into jars where the precious run-off is kept – in the morning only. Beginners may initially study only one or a few syllables. More experienced pupils may study several words, then one or more verses, per day.

External observers often consider that this kind of reading is a form of memorization. Indeed, the pupil does his best to remember his teacher's pronunciation. But he or she is also expected to understand the relationship between the graphs on the board and articulated sounds (though in fact some children do not). Furthermore, the pupil is not expected to be able to reproduce the syllables or words without the graphic support, even a few days later. This, then, is not memorization (except perhaps of a very short-term kind), nor is it necessarily reading, as commonly understood; the process is perhaps best described as recitation, aided by both aural memory and graphic recognition.

Transition to Advanced Study: Qur'an Memorization Requirements

Qur'an reading, recitation and memorization requirements (and ideals) vary considerably as a function of geographical area and of cultural, linguistic, and ethnic affiliations. The most familiar paradigm, characteristic of many Manding (Malinke, Bamana, Dyula-speaking) and Fulbe-speaking areas, is the requirement that the Qur'an be read three times; the third reading involves long-term memorization of the oral form of the Qur'an – that is. the expectation that one will be able to recite it without a graphic support, and remember this recitation indefinitely.

Among the Soninke, the Mandenka of The Gambia, and some Fulfulde-speakers, students may go through the Qur'an three, four, five or even six times, so as to achieve flawless verbal recall. In addition, the ability to write out the Qur'an from memory is highly regarded. It is only after the Qur'an has been read and recited at least three times that a student will attempt

to learn to write it from memory. His achievement may result in the production of a full manuscript of the Qur'an, written on fine paper.¹³

According to several Soninke scholars in Touba, there are two curricular options: one may aim for total memorization of the Qur'an, plus basic study of a few books; or one may opt for in-depth study of a large number of books, but a lesser knowledge of the Qur'an. Different lineages may specialize in one or the other of these two curricula. Qur'an memorization techniques in Touba are highly formalized, with the most advanced students revising one *thumn* (one-eighth part of a *juz'*; locally pronounced *sumunu*) at a time.

In contrast, in Dia, pupils are only required to read and recite the Qur'an twice before going on to other studies. At this stage, they are not always able to read the Qur'anic text fluently. Many Dia scholars do in fact know the Qur'an by heart, but this is a knowledge that comes from repeated practice in reading and teaching. In Kankan, memorization of certain suras only – including the *Fatiha*, the short suras at the end of the Qur'an, *S. Maryam* (19, “Mary”) and *S. Ya Sin* (36) – is required. *S. Ya Sin* is considered especially protective throughout the Islamic world. In Kankan, *S. Maryam* is considered particularly significant, in part because it describes how in her childhood, Mary, the mother of Jesus, was miraculously provided with food. Among the Moorish-speakers of Timbuktu, apt pupils are encouraged to memorize the entire Qur'an. However, it is recognized that for others, the memorization of the longer suras is a nearly impossible task.

Not only do Qur'an memorization requirements vary according to milieu, but so do Qur'an recitation styles. In most of the localities visited, most scholars in reciting the Qur'an take into account only the signs used in ordinary writing. Though they claim that they are conforming to a particular recitation system – usually Warsh, the one most widely recognized in the Maghreb – because their manuscripts or printed volumes are arranged and punctuated accordingly, in fact they are rarely familiar with all the relevant rules. However, among the Fulbe of Djenné, persons considered to be *hafiz* (memorizers of the Qur'an) have studied one or more of the recognized recitation systems.¹⁴

In addition to recitation styles deriving from the early Islamic received tradition, there are local or “ethnic” ones. Thus, the Fulbe have a very rapid recitation style, which allows them to recite the entire Qur'an in less than fifteen hours (whereas the various Near Eastern *tajwid*

rapid recitation styles require at least forty). The Songhay of Djenné may sing the shorter suras at certain ceremonies – for example, that in which former Qur’anic school mates come to greet and congratulate the bridegroom some days prior to his wedding. Qur’anic recitation in Dia, in the context of the ceremonial Qur’anic exegesis held in Ramadan, can be very melodious, with each verse being initially read, in a kind of chorus, by all three persons involved in the performance; the rhythm of this chorus and of the Bozo oral translation recalls that of the Segou epic.¹⁵ Segou and San once had similar Ramadan Qur’an recitation styles, but these have been abandoned.

Some Qur’anic schools have specific ceremonial or ritual Qur’an recitation practices. The woman teacher in Dia ended each day’s study by chanting from the Qur’an with her pupils and asking them to repeat certain verses after her – one of the very rare instances in which Qur’anic pupils are required to recite as a group; she explained that this custom went back to her grandfather. A teacher in Djenné chanted the Qur’an to his pupils every Wednesday, just before the weekly break – a practice inherited from his father. In Diakhaba, several schools close the evening or the week with Arabic songs recently introduced by a Qur’an teacher who had studied in a madrasa. All the schools in Diakhaba hold weekly or bi-weekly evening sessions, in which the recitation of Qur’an verses from memory, mostly by younger pupils, is followed by a blessing ceremony.

As a consequence of the lesser memorization requirements, pupils in Dia and Kankan may begin the study of books in their early to mid-teens. In Touba and the Masina, some advanced memorization pupils may undertake the study of shorter books, while others wait until they have terminated this process. Where full memorization (three or more recitations of the Qur’an) is required, the in-depth study of books does not begin until age 18 (for the most precocious); and more usually, between 25 and 40 years of age. Nowadays, in many localities, memorization requirements are no longer strictly observed. For example, in Djenné, many out-of-town students are admitted to the study of books after only two readings of the Qur’an.

Study of Books

Depending on the locality, pupils may begin their study of books either with *tawhid* (theology) or *fiqh* (law and cultic obligations). Starting with theology is more characteristic of rural areas. As one scholar, hailing from a small village in the Cercle de San, remarked,

tawhid is important because it teaches one “to know oneself, to know God”. Furthermore, he added, one cannot know oneself without knowing God, nor God without knowing oneself. Where *tawhid* is the first subject, it is usually studied from brief, often manuscript texts. Some of these texts consist in extracts from the Algerian Muhammad as-Sanusi’s (1435-1490) *al-‘Aqida as-sughra* (“the lesser credo”; also known as *Umm al-barahin*, “the source of decisive proofs”) – the book itself being considered a topic of advanced study. A pupil who begins with one of the smaller *fiqh* booklets may go on to a brief theological treatise, or he may immediately pursue the study of additional *fiqh* texts.

Introductory *fiqh* books studied include (often in this order): *al-Muqaddima al-qurtubiyya*, also known as the *Urjuza’ al-wildan*, by the Andalusian Yahya al-Qurtubi (1093-1172), which also includes some elements of theology; the *‘Ashmawiyya*, so named after its sixteenth-century author ‘Abd al-Bari al-‘Ashmawi; *al-Muqaddima al-‘izziyya* by the Egyptian ‘Ali al-Manufi (1453-1532); and the *Mukhtasar fi ‘l-‘ibadat*, often known simply as *Al-Akhdari*, by the Algerian ‘Abd ar-Rahman al-Akhdari (1514-1576).¹⁶ The last-mentioned book, exclusively consecrated to the ritual obligations, is considered the fullest treatment of prayer and therefore sometimes as an already advanced work.

The *Risala* [Epistle] by the Tunisian ‘Abd Allah b. Abi Zayd al-Qayrawani (922-996) is considered a comprehensive, advanced text, with chapters devoted to family, marriage and inheritance, as well as sections on prayer and the holy days and such questions as the legitimacy of amulets. The most advanced texts, studied by only a few, include the *Tuhfat al-hukkam* (Gift for judges), a versified manual for judges, also known as the *‘Asimiyya*, after its author the Andalusian Muhammad b. ‘Asim (1359-1426) and above all, at the summit of the legal curriculum, the *Mukhtasar* (Abridgment) by the Egyptian Khalil b. Ishaq al-Jundi (d. ca. 1374), studied with the aid of commentaries. The *Muwatta’*, attributed to the founder of the Maliki school, Malik b. Anas (ca. 716-795), and the *Sahih* of the Iranian Muhammad al-Bukhari (810-870), one of the largest and most authoritative collections of *hadith* (deeds and sayings of the Prophet), are widely studied in Timbuktu (and read, but rarely studied with a teacher, elsewhere).

In some places and with some teachers, *fiqh* is virtually the only subject studied. However, in others, study of several *fiqh* books (often through the *Mukhtasar fi ‘l-‘ibadat* or the *Risala*)

may be followed by that of other disciplines, such as Arabic grammar, language and literature, and advanced theology.

Grammar texts include the *Lamiyyat al-af'al* (“Poem about verbs, rhyming in *l'*”), by the Andalusian Muhammad b. Malik (1203-1273), for the study of *sarf* (morphology), and the *Alfiyya* (“Thousand verse composition”), also by Muhammad b. Malik, as well as the *Muqaddima* (“Introduction”), also known as the *Ajurrumiyya*, by the Moroccan Muhammad b. Ajurrum (1273-1323), for the study of *nahw* (syntax). These textbooks are standard throughout the Islamic world.¹⁷ The *Ajurrumiyya* is generally studied with a commentary; in Segou, some now use *at-Tuhfa as-saniyya* (“The Gleaming Gift”), an early-twentieth-century work that includes exercises and was initially introduced by the madrasa. The *Qatr an-nada wa-ball as-sada* (“Dew drops for the quenching of thirst”), written by the Egyptian ‘Abd Allah b. Hisham (1309-1360) and highly praised by Ibn Khaldun, is considered the fullest and most advanced treatment of syntax; it is studied by some erudite scholars.

Scholars who teach Arabic grammar routinely give examples in their students’ native languages to illustrate grammatical concepts (such as the parts of speech and the functions of different words and word groups in the sentence). But they also recognize that there are significant differences in the nature of Arabic morphology and that of the local languages.

However, Arabic grammar is not studied in all localities. According to still-vivid oral traditions, a knowledge of Arabic grammar was only introduced to Dia by the great nineteenth-century mystic Alfa Bokar Karabenta, who had studied it in Sibila, a then-famous village about sixty kilometers northeast of Segou.¹⁸ Many scholars in Djenné have never studied grammar, though others are expert in it. In Diakhaba, Arabic grammar is not taught or studied except by those who have attended a madrasa. Furthermore, Diakhaba scholars claim that it is a rare subject among the Diakhanke of Guinea Bissau.

Lugha (literally, language) is recognized as a distinct discipline, encompassing both religious and profane literature. Religious poems studied may include *Banat Su'ad* (“Suad has gone away”), also known as the *Burda* (“Prophet’s Mantle”), a poem in praise of the Prophet by Ka'ab b. Zuhayr, his contemporary; another and much longer *Burda* (full title : *al-Kawakib ad-durriyya fi madh khayr al-bariyya*) by the Egyptian Muhammad al-Busiri (ca. 1212-1296); the *Dala'il al-khayrat* (“Proofs of divine favor”), a collection of prayers and litanies composed or

compiled by the Moroccan Muhammad al-Jazuli (d. 1465); and the *ʿIshriniyyat* by the Andalusian ʿAbd ar-Rahman al-Fazazi (d. 1230), often studied in an amplification by the Moroccan Muhammad b. Mahib and with several recent commentaries. These texts may also be studied in preparation for the *Mawlud* festival, or – especially the *Dalaʿil* – for blessing ceremonies, where they are frequently recited.

But the study of *lugha* also encompasses two of the recognized masterpieces of earlier Arabic literature: the *Maqamat*, or rhymed prose stories incorporating some verse, by the Iraqi Abu Muhammad al-Qasim al-Hariri (1054-1122), and an anthology of pre-Islamic poetry known as the *Diwan sittaʿ ash-shuʿaraʿ* (“Anthology of six poets”), compiled by the Andalusian Yusuf al-Aʿlam (1019-1083). These were respectively the third- and next-to-last books of the curriculum. The “Six poets”, a collection of some 135 poems, includes several of the *Muʿallaqat* (“Suspended” or, in some acceptations, *Mudhahhabat* or “Golden” “Odes”) – a collection of six to ten poems (there are different medieval editions). However, except in Timbuktu and Mauritania, the *Muʿallaqat* are not studied as such.¹⁹ The “Six poets”, though known to some nineteenth-century European scholars on the basis of an early Andalusian manuscript, was only rediscovered in the Arab world in the early twentieth century, on the basis of Mauritanian and Timbuktu manuscripts. Based on manuscript catalogue citations, it appears to have been a common text throughout West Africa.²⁰ In Mali at least, the poems of this anthology are sung or chanted, rather than recited as is common in the Arab world; one can distinguish different styles, correlated to locality and scholars’ native languages.

Except in Timbuktu, the *Maqamat* of the Iranian Ahmad al-Hamadhani (968-1008), that served as a model for al-Hariri’s, are little studied. On the other hand, the *Hulal as-sundusiyya*, mystical compositions in rhymed prose and verse by the Syrian-born Ahmad b. ʿAbd al-Hayy al-Halabi, who settled in Fez (d. 1708), are studied in both Segou and Timbuktu. The book, which has yet to be printed, circulates in manuscript. A Timbuktu library owns the autograph manuscript, while the library of Ahmad b. al-Hajj ʿUmar Tal, Tukolor ruler of Segu (reigned ca. 1864-1890), contained at least three copies of this otherwise little-known work.²¹

One standard commentary of the *Maqamat* of al-Hariri, widely circulated in the Arab world and often studied in Mali, may owe something to traditions of interpretation conserved in sub-Saharan Africa. Although it has long been printed anonymously, it was in fact compiled by

Muhammad at-Tunisi, who, in the mid-nineteenth century, traveled extensively in what are now Chad and Sudan before finally settling in Egypt.²² A second work by al-Hariri, the *Mulhat al-i'rab* (“Subtleties of inflection”), an advanced work on morphology, is also widely studied in Mali.

The ultimate subject of the curriculum is *tafsir*, or Qur’anic commentary. This consists in conveying the overt meaning of the Arabic text while recalling the historical context of the Revelation and developing some of its doctrinal implications; some scholars also emphasize linguistic and stylistic analysis. Although some persons claim to have studied exegesis from a teacher who made no explicit reference to any book other than the Qur’an itself, correspondences to written Arabic commentaries are so close as to suggest that they are in fact their principal sources. In all localities visited, the *Tafsir al-Jalalayn*, composed by the Egyptians Jalal ad-Din al-Mahalli (1389-1459) and his pupil Jalal ad-Din as-Suyuti (1445-1505), was said to be the oldest and most widely studied commentary. However, for several decades now, this succinct work has been largely superseded by its much fuller meta-commentary (*Hashiyya*) by the Egyptian Ahmad as-Sawi (1761-1825).²³ Scholars in Segou explain the recognition granted this work by the author’s status as a Maliki and a member of the Shadiliyya Sufi order (which has many affinities with the more recently founded Tijaniyya). Many other works on Qur’anic exegesis, representing a great variety of doctrinal standpoints, may now be studied by individual scholars, who import them from abroad.

Thus, *tafsir* is only studied by a minority of highly erudite scholars. However, a greater number – and many members of the general public – have some knowledge of the contents of the Book, acquired mainly through attendance at Qur’an exegesis sessions held in Ramadan.

Individual scholars may study a range of other disciplines, including metrics, rhetoric, the ancillary Islamic sciences, and the large medieval dictionaries – but these subjects are not very common. Logic and medicine were probably more widely studied in the past, and they are clearly attested in some other regions of West Africa.²⁴ However, there is reason to believe that, on the whole, the scope of the curriculum has been broadening rather than contracting over the past century. The importation of printed books, which have largely replaced manuscripts, has greatly facilitated the diffusion of knowledge. Masina scholars told me that *tafsir*, now commonly taught there, was an extremely rare subject through mid-century. As noted above, Arabic grammar also used to be a rare subject.

The specialized vocabulary and specific syntactical structures developed by scholars so as to better translate Arabic into their native languages have been analyzed in other publications (Tamari 1996, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2013a, 2013b, forthcoming). Here, it may be stressed that it is considered incumbent upon the instructor to, insofar as possible, teach each student in the language the student knows best. Therefore, some instructors may teach in more than one language; this is particularly common in Dia and Djenné, where advanced-level religious instruction for in-town students takes place primarily in Bozo and in Songhay, respectively, whereas most out-of-town students receive their lessons in Bamana. Fulbe scholars in Djenné have long instructed Dogon converts in Fulfulde, but for some years now, Dogon scholars trained in Fulfulde have been teaching other Dogon in their own language. This development incidentally suggests that these Dogon are currently engaged in processes of major linguistic innovation and lexical creation. Mandenka-speaking scholars in The Gambia insisted to me that until the end of the nineteenth century, all Islamic teaching there was done through the medium of Soninke; Mandenka who had studied in Soninke, whether with Mandenka or Soninke masters, had long taught in that language.

The degree of comprehension of the Arabic language by West African scholars has been a matter of persistent controversy. Some Western and Western-trained researchers feel that West African scholars' attainments are based on memorization rather than comprehension. However, scholars who have studied several books can read, with comprehension, materials that are presented to them for the first time, and – contrary to a widely held view – can speak Arabic if necessary (to an interlocutor who has only this language in common with them, or on certain formal occasions). I have encountered several scholars who compose poems or elegant prose. Therefore, and also in view of the long history of composition in Arabic in West Africa, the view that scholars may not “really” understand the texts they study and own would appear to be a relic of long-held negative representations about Africa, reflecting on the observers rather than the observed.

It does seem probable that scholars' aural and oral Arabic skills have improved over the past decades, through access to radio and television. Many traditionally-trained scholars listen regularly to Arabic radio and television programs – which proves both that their initial training has led them to understand this language, and that their skills are honed through continued practice with the new media.

The role of memorization in traditional Islamic education has also been controversial; many Western and Western-trained researchers maintain that, in this cultural context, learning consists primarily in rote memorization. However, as described above, full memorization of the Qur'an is required in some regional traditions only. Many scholars and pupils think that it is best to memorize Arabic syntax and morphology in order to master them. One or more (or even all) of al-Hariri's *Maqamat* and the poems of the pre-Islamic anthology may also be memorized, but this is always considered a matter of personal choice.

From repeated observation of advanced students revising their lessons, I can affirm that they read the Arabic texts several times to themselves, silently or aloud, and that in oral reading, they will often also repeat out loud their teacher's oral translation into the local language, proceeding, as in the lesson, by syntactical units. Thus, strong mental associations are established between Arabic words and syntactical units and those of the local language. However, there may be variants in the precise choice of words between the teacher's and the student's renditions, and also between successive renditions. This, then, is a learning process in which memory has a significant role, but word-for-word retention of the Arabic text is not always, and of the local language translation never (in my experience), an objective. I have several times collected two or more commentaries of an Arabic text, at different times, from the same scholar; the local language commentaries were never identical. These commentaries might differ greatly not only in length and emphasis or in the points developed but even as concerns the translation properly speaking, only the keywords remaining constant.²⁵

The roles of memorization and comprehension, in elementary and advanced education, are not the same. The elementary Qur'an pupil is required to understand the general relationship between graphic forms and articulated sounds, to mentally retain his teacher's pronunciation, and (depending on locality, cultural and linguistic affiliations) to retain a variable number of suras by heart; yet in some areas, he may be told little or nothing about the meaning of the Qur'anic text. In contrast, the aim of book students, as they and their teachers stress, is to understand these works: they read for comprehension, which must precede (optional) memorization.

Recognition of Knowledge

Unlike the situation described by Ivor Wilks for certain populations of northern Ivory Coast and eastern Ghana, in the various places visited, it is not customary for the teacher to write out a diploma (*ijaza*, “license” to teach) for a student upon the completion of a book or books. However, in Dia, Djenné and Touba, it is customary to hold a ceremony for pupils who have completed several recitations of the Qur’an (two recitations in Dia, three in Djenné, two or more in Touba). A ceremony may be organized for one or more pupils; in Touba, a single ceremony may be held for pupils who have achieved different levels of study (two to six recitations). Each pupil reads out the verses on his board (written by the teacher in Dia; in other localities, often by the pupils themselves); then, the assembled scholars recite blessings. Generally, scholars from neighboring villages as well as the teacher’s village of residence attend, as do many Qur’anic pupils (from the same or other schools) and the teacher’s and pupil’s families and friends. The ceremony usually takes place in the teacher’s home. The pupils’ families cook food for all or provide the means to prepare a meal. Each pupil’s family also is expected to provide the teacher with substantial gifts and compensation. As one exception, in a ceremony I attended in Segou, the pupil’s father, a resident in a small village, was so poor that the teacher paid for food and refreshments for the guests.

In Kankan and its area, accomplished scholars who have completed advanced book as well as Qur’anic studies are recognized in a ceremony in which they are authorized to wear a certain turban, thus becoming *namutii* (literally, “turban-bearers” or “masters of the turban”). Similar forms of recognition have been noted among the Manding-speakers of northern Côte d’Ivoire (Marty 1922, 262-64, 320) and Senegambia (Sanneh 1979, 155-58).

SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CONDITIONS

Discipline

Westerners and the Western-educated tend to have a negative image of discipline in traditional Islamic education. Though it expresses admiration for the West African Islamic spiritual heritage, Cheikh Hamidou Kane’s (1961) *L’Aventure ambiguë* (*Ambiguous Adventure*) depicts the master as inflicting severe physical punishment on his pupils, especially his favorite, Samba. Amar Samb’s memoir (1973) is extremely critical of the Qur’anic school experience. On the other hand, Lamin Sanneh’s (1975) and Yakouba Diarra’s (1999) memoirs evoke moments of intellectual pleasure, fun, and enthusiasm.

In fact, circumstances vary. In Segou and Dia, children are rarely beaten, though the threat of the whip is ever present. Many persons in Dia explain that Alfa Bokar Karabenta, the great nineteenth-century saint, said that since children are future adults, they should be treated indulgently and allowed to listen to adult conversations. In some schools in Touba, where most pupils may be members of the extended family, even the threat of physical punishment is rare. In Timbuktu, perhaps because of the influence of long-established French-language state schools, which most Qur'anic pupils also attend, I have never seen children physically punished. In one school in Kankan, which I visited several times, no punitive instrument was visible, perhaps because the director – who had attended the local French-language schools and lived in New York City – subscribed to modern pedagogical preferences. In Djenné, on the other hand, I have seen children whipped severely, including on the head. In all these places, physical punishment tends to be limited to small children (up to about age eight). Where physical punishment exists, it may be meted out to girls as well as boys. Teachers explain that, because they have attained understanding, older children no longer require physical punishment.

In Dia, schoolmasters may look after small children during study sessions, often cradling babies (those of their neighbors and extended families as well as their own) in their arms as they teach.

Severe physical punishment may be applied to boys (small or adolescent) in the itinerant schools. State school and medical personnel in the Djenné and Timbuktu areas told me that severe beatings, resulting in permanent injury to pupils and even death, occur regularly. These officials, as well as outraged neighbors, report such cases to the police, who remonstrate with teachers and may cause them to leave the area, but so far, do not fine or imprison them.

Many persons who have not attended a Qur'anic school believe that it must be a grim experience, characterized by mindless rote repetition as well as harsh physical punishment. But this perception does not always correspond to pupils' or former pupils' experiences (whether actual or remembered). In Dia, where many children attend both Qur'anic and state schools, they often enjoy both. Some children prefer Qur'anic school, and spend as much time as possible revising their lessons – at the expense of homework for the French-language

state school, family chores, and even games. In Dia especially, I have seen children rushing to school with beaming faces²⁶; some children even arrange to study their boards in their teachers' vestibules beyond school hours or – very rarely – to take them home. These children apparently enjoy the cognitive activities involved, as well as personal relationships with their teachers and fellow pupils. Almamy Maliki Yattara, a Masina scholar who later collaborated with several Western and Western-trained researchers, recalls how he persisted in attending Qur'anic school, despite severe physical punishment by an older relative (Yattara and Salvaing 2000).

Many adults, especially in Timbuktu, remember their Qur'anic school experience as a happy one. Some even describe it as an extension of the family experience, with its warm, emotionally nurturing relationships. Indeed, in Timbuktu, children's age groups – to which they will adhere throughout their lives – are formed on the basis of Qur'anic school attendance. Choice of a Qur'anic school is, in turn, largely based on neighborhood of residence; and neighborhoods are mostly congruent with ethnic affiliations, family origins, and wealth. Whereas Qur'anic schools are coeducational, some age groups admit members of one sex only. Groups that admit both sexes provide a framework for friendly, egalitarian lifelong social relationships among men and women. All the age groups provide the context for at least some interethnic and status mixing, solidarity and social intermingling among rich and poor (given, especially, that individual fortunes may fluctuate considerably over a lifetime).²⁷

Advanced memorization and the study of books are nearly always, in my experience, remembered as happy experiences; often as – similar to how at one time college and university study in the West supposedly were – the best part of life. Former students emphasize the joys of intellectual discovery and academic progress as well as sincere camaraderie. Only those who endured the severest material hardships (for example, Almamy Yattara, who came from a poor family and furthermore studied against its wishes) have a more nuanced recollection.

In the Segou area, common attendance at a *majlis* – much like secondary school and university attendance in the West – is often the basis for life-long friendships. Former schoolmates often visit one another, happily reminiscing about their studies. They may also

visit their teacher, individually or collectively, organize reunions with him, or hold memorial commemorations after his death.

Economics

Westerners tend to perceive traditional Islamic education as economically exploitative. However, this is not how its teachers see the situation; many view themselves as supplying all their pupils' and students' needs.

Particularly in Dia, teachers may claim that they provide Qur'anic instruction gratuitously. They and other teachers may cite authoritative Arabic texts, according to which Qur'an instruction should not be subject to payment – though it has long been recognized throughout the Islamic world that it is a practical necessity to provide the teacher with some material compensation. In the various places I visited, in-town pupils bring their teachers some small coins every Wednesday,²⁸ but this offering is so small that it is sometimes considered symbolic. Furthermore, in Dia at least, pupils who fail to bring this amount are not turned away. In general, out-of-town pupils, especially if they are lodging with the teacher, as well as members of the teacher's extended family, do not pay. On the other hand, some pupils may give more, especially prior to the holidays; in Diakhaba, it is customary for pupils to bring their teacher 500 CFA prior to each of the two main Islamic holidays (the Sacrificial Feast and the Breaking of the Fast). In Timbuktu, teachers may charge a higher weekly fee to pupils – especially children of Timbuktu families resident elsewhere in Mali – who only study over the long vacation. Indeed, Timbuktuans so prize the city's Qur'anic schools – and are so skeptical of other forms of religious education – that they attempt to send their children back to the city to study over these vacations.

In the semirural milieu of Dia, young pupils accomplish numerous chores for their teacher and his extended family: collecting firewood, fetching water, sweeping courtyards, pounding millet. Throughout the region, older pupils, especially ones studying books, are expected to accomplish substantial (usually agricultural) work for their teacher, or alternatively, supply him with cash or foodstuffs²⁹. Pupils in Diakhaba, rural Gambia, and Touba may work full-time or almost full-time on their instructor's fields at peak times of the agricultural year, and provide substantial labor at other times; they may also care for his herds. Older students in Djenné, Dia and the Masina are often away in the rainy and harvest seasons, working on the fields of others. Itinerant pupils may work, sometimes along with their teachers, in the fields

of farmers who will later compensate them with a portion of the crop. In Diakhaba and Touba, out-of-town students generally accomplish more physical, particularly agricultural, labor than the teacher's sons or relatives, who may also be studying with him. In Touba, advanced memorization and book pupils, studying within their families, may be excused from physical labor altogether – and thus devote all their time to their studies.

A teacher in Djenné explained that, in earlier times, there was “no problem” in that city. Students worked on their master's fields, and the rice harvest was sufficient to satisfy the needs of all – masters and pupils; a master could even organize a favorite student's marriage. But in recent years, both the rain and the flood have failed. Once a rice-exporting zone, Djenné is obliged to import this basic foodstuff. Students have to engage in odd jobs, not always compatible with their dignity, or make long trips to earn grain or money elsewhere – taking precious time away from study. Approved jobs include working as porters at the large, weekly Monday market; hawking at the daily or weekly markets is not always approved. Several students sell bread in the evening in the esplanade near the mosque. Djenné's teachers have recently formed an association with the aim of bettering the living standards of both masters and pupils. They would like to establish a large, irrigated vegetable garden to be administered in common in order to provide suitable employment and income to their students.

A Fulbe student from a rural area who spent many years studying in Segou obtained income from his herds, whose active care he had entrusted to others, and he initiated and ran a bookshop. Almamy Yattara has described the different kinds of jobs that might be accomplished by students in his youth in the Masina (ca. 1930s-1950s) – including, for many, collecting and selling firewood or performing agricultural work, and for himself, looking after a shop in Mopti.³⁰

Students may also obtain employment more closely connected to their studies: for example, acting as an assistant to their teacher (or, more rarely, another, teacher); reading or reciting the Qur'an at funerals or on other ceremonial occasions; copying manuscripts for their teacher, other scholars, or the general public. *Majlis* students often run their own Qur'anic schools. Some persons with a full-fledged school study with a yet more advanced teacher. A state primary school teacher assigned to a village near Dia pursued *majlis* studies there – his state school salary in effect serving to further his Islamic education. Some atypical, older students

may live on their savings – for example, the truck driver from the Sikasso area who had been studying the Qur’an in Timbuktu for six months at the time I met him.

Numerous teachers, especially in Dia and Djenné, stress that they are responsible for their live-in pupils’ upkeep. Since parents may or may not send money, grain or other foods, or even clothes, teachers must rely on gifts, or on activities not directly related to their teaching function, to cover costs.

Many teachers, especially at the *majlis* level, engage in esoteric work (French: *maraboutages*; Bamana *moriya*) for clients. If satisfied, these may provide substantial compensation and renew their gifts regularly.

Many teachers, especially in Dia, go on tours of the countryside in the harvest season, with the expectation of receiving gifts. In any locality, a well-known scholar may receive a gift as a mark of respect. Such gifts also procure blessings to the givers.

Some Dia teachers benefit from the help of prosperous parents who may, for example, send a large quantity of rice or fish every year, sometimes enough to cover the whole school’s needs for several months, or donate clothes for all the pupils. These parents – or their son – may continue making annual gifts to the teacher well after the son has completed his education. Children from poorer families, who achieve prosperity after completing their studies, may also make large gifts to their teacher. Wealthy individuals not directly connected to a school may also contribute to it.

Whereas many Westerners and Western-educated Africans criticize begging by Qur’anic school pupils, they and their teachers insist on its advantages and moral value. Mendicancy is a practice largely restricted to pupils from itinerant schools, which are characteristic of certain ethnic groups only (Fulbe, Bella, Mossi). Furthermore, begging is primarily characteristic of younger children (through early adolescence). Fulbe explain that begging allows small children to procure needed resources rapidly – thus freeing time for study. Furthermore, Fulbe teachers, scholars and former pupils add, it trains children in humility and endurance, promotes detachment from worldly goods, and thus leads them to value learning. Each mendicant pupil is expected to obtain food and cash daily, which the teacher will share out among all the pupils, reserving a part for himself (and his family, if traveling with him).³¹

Older pupils may be entrusted with the supervision of younger children or required to engage in pastoral or agricultural labor.

Itinerant and, more generally, out-of-town pupils and students may benefit from lodging provided by benefactors. Wealthy families – or, more simply, ones who just have some extra space – may provide living quarters such as a house, room(s) or a courtyard to itinerant teachers and pupils, and also to out-of-town pupils studying with sedentary teachers. Such families may furthermore contribute to the upkeep of their guests or assist with emergency (e.g., medical) expenses. Hambarke, a major trader in Dia and Mopti in the 1950s and early 1960s, hosted scores of pupils every year. Not only are his beneficence and piety still vividly remembered, but they are the subject of at least one Arabic poem. Former beneficiaries still come to greet his descendants, most of whom are not particularly wealthy. The Ndiaye family of Segou has hosted out-of-town religion pupils, Qur’anic and later also madrasa, since its first establishment in Segou in the early to mid-nineteenth century (preceding al-Hajj ‘Umar). Some former guests, now scholars in their own right, remember being treated as members of the family, with whom they have maintained close ties.

Out-of-town pupils studying with sedentary teachers may also find hosts on an individual basis. Increasingly, however, those who come to Segou, Djenné and especially Bamako for advanced education may be obliged to pay rent.

Nevertheless, most out-of-town, especially itinerant, pupils and students suffer from inadequate lodging; many itinerant pupils sleep outside (in principle, in courtyards, but sometimes on the streets or in fields or gardens) most of the year, especially in northern Mali. However, one itinerant teacher, who spends several months of every year in Timbuktu, proudly showed me the makeshift wood and synthetic fabric structure that he had his pupils build for themselves and the knapsacks in which each kept his personal belongings. One of the few itinerant teachers to eschew physical punishment, he explained that he also paid for medical care for his wards.

In contrast, in Touba and Djenné, scholarly families attempt to provide their children with the best possible material conditions during their studies.

It is customary for a pupil's family to provide a teacher with substantial material compensation when their son has completed two or more readings of the Qur'an, another significant phase of his education, or is withdrawn from school (and thus deemed to have completed his education). Two head of cattle, or their equivalent in cash, is quite frequent; some families may add gold or clothes for the teacher. However, only teachers with large schools and many long-term pupils can benefit from this on a regular basis. Furthermore, the compensation cannot be forced, though a pupil whose parents are unable to pay will attempt to provide it himself, through his own endeavors, as soon as possible. This is not only a matter of honor and respect but considered necessary for the disciple to fully benefit from his teacher's blessing. An itinerant teacher should also receive substantial compensation (often provided in the form of grain) upon returning a pupil to his parents at the end of his studies.

Methods of teaching in the Qur'anic schools are evolving through the emulation, voluntary or imposed, of madrasa and state school models. Thus, governments and some NGOs are pushing to introduce new methods for the study of reading, as well as arithmetic and elements of geography and hygiene, into Qur'anic school curricula. They also aim to provide better food and lodging, vaccinations and medical care to Qur'anic school pupils. Especially in Mali, reading and arithmetic exercises, together with blackboards, are being introduced into spaces that sometimes are beginning to look like Western classrooms. The world-traveled Qur'anic school director in Kankan has introduced physical education and games for his pupils (up to about age thirteen). Moreover, these exercises are coed.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the Qur'anic schools and *majlis* of Mali and the Manding-speaking populations of The Gambia and northern Guinea are characterized by a complex pattern of shared and variable traits. Whereas in some areas the Qur'anic school experience can be a joyous one, marked by a sense of discovery and warm social relations, in others, it can be a time of physical and perhaps also emotional deprivation. In some areas, certain pupils may be able to devote nearly all their time to study, progressing rapidly through Qur'an recitation or memorization and the reading with comprehension of numerous books, whereas others may require decades to acquire a smattering of knowledge. Recognized scholars often have a thorough knowledge of written Arabic. At least in Mali, elementary Qur'anic instruction may

undergo significant transformations in the near future as an increasing number of teachers introduce new subjects and pedagogical methods.

As remarked at the outset of this chapter, many of the West African educational practices surveyed here – including the recourse to the oral use of local languages – may have more in common with those of the “central” regions of the Islamic world than has been generally realized. Some other, apparently more specific, features, such as the emphases on individualized instruction and student labor at the advanced level, may be responses to adverse economic conditions. These traits allow individuals with no resources, in societies with a limited surplus, some opportunity for pursuing their studies: interrupting then resuming them, progressing each time at their own pace. As a scholar who ran a reputed *majlis* in Segou once commented to me: “We are not accustomed to villas or fine clothes. As long as the rains have come, as long as we have obtained a good crop, we can study”.

NOTES

¹ Earlier publications (Tamari 2002, 2008) summarize research conducted in Mali through 2000 and 2003 respectively. Research specifically about Islamic culture and education in Mali now amounts to about three years, conducted primarily since 1992. In the process, well over a hundred scholars have been interviewed and their schools visited. Extensive recordings of oral commentaries on Arabic texts have been obtained from some fifteen scholars (10 to 150 hours each) and briefer recordings from many more. My first trip to Mali dates back to 1979; other research topics pursued there include social hierarchies, traditional religions and oral literatures. Major studies of Islamic education in Mali include Sanankoua (1985), Sanankoua and Brenner (1991), Mommersteeg (1996), and (mainly concerning the madrasa), Kaba (1974), Brenner (2001), Kavas (2003), and Bouwman (2005). Sanneh (1989 [1979], chapter 7) is the fullest study of Islamic education in a Gambian society. Condé (1992) is a fine historical study, based mostly on oral traditions, of the development of Islamic learning in Kankan, Guinea. For reasons of space, in this essay, bibliographical references have been kept to a minimum; please consult the documents thus cited for additional references.

² See, for example, the Egyptian scholar Taha Husayn’s autobiography (1929–1939) and the biography of a Moroccan scholar reported by Dale Eickelman (1985); concerning the interaction of Arabic and other languages, see, for example, Eickelman (1985, 54, 68–69) and Prabowo and Guillot (1997).

³ Attempts to modernize the Qur’anic schools are well discussed by Roman Loimeier (2001, 364-374, 2002) in the context of neighboring Senegal, where government and other externally imposed initiatives date back to the early 1990s.

⁴ For example, Charles Monteil (1903, 106-11) and Paul Marty (1920, 2:252) mention that Djenné had about twenty-five schools, whereas currently the city counts over a hundred, as reported by Roberto-Christian Gatti (1999) and confirmed by my observations in 2007 and 2011. Dia currently has forty-five schools, enrolling just under ten to more than three hundred pupils.

⁵ For example, a significant proportion of the *majlis* students in Touba and Djenné come from outlying (and until recently non-Muslim) Bamana villages. It seems likely that with growing Islamization, the percentage of children attending Qur’anic schools as well as, of course, such pupils’ absolute numbers have increased over the twentieth century; compare the statistical information reported, for example, in Bouche (1974, 1: 279-320, 2: 703-54) and Sanankoua (1985).

⁶ Thus, in Bamana, *morikalan* and *bulonkònòkalan* are general terms for traditional Islamic study, *kuranakalan* (literally, “study of the Qur’an”) refers to all aspects of Qur’anic study except exegesis, and *kitabukalan*

(literally, “the study of books”) refers to all other fields of study (including Qur’anic exegesis). *Kalan* (“to read or study”) is derived from the Arabic *qara’a* (“to read or recite”); *mori*, from Arabic *murabit* (“marabout”; plural *al-murabitun*, sometimes with the specialized meaning “the Almoravids,” referring to the eleventh- and twelfth-century political and religious movement), signifies “Muslim” or “Muslim scholar”; *kitab*, from Arabic *kitab*, signifies “book” while *bulon* signifies “vestibule,” and *kòno* signifies “in” (with reference to the area in which study typically takes place). Phonetically and etymologically similar terms are used to refer to the two levels of study in other Manding languages as well as in the Soninke of Touba and the Bozo of Dia and Djenné. The Maninka of Mali and Guinea as well as the Mandenka of The Gambia use the word *kalanta*, which may be translated as “school,” to refer to the locale where instruction is dispensed as well as the social unit formed by a teacher (or set of associated teachers) and their pupils. Bamana did not possess until recently a term that could be translated as “school”; furthermore, *lakòli*, borrowed from the French *l’école*, is not applied to Muslim establishments, whether conservative or modernizing. Songhay employs the word *tirahu*, from *tira*, “talisman,” “writing,” and *hu*, “house,” to designate both Islamic schools and the education that is dispensed there; establishments providing advanced study may be referred to as *kitab* *tirahu*. In Timbuktu, the term *hadith* refers to the study and devotional meetings of adult men; this term probably reflects the prominence accorded this domain in Timbuktu curricula and culture (though it should be noted that in Arabic, *hadith* means “saying” or “conversation” as well as “Prophetic tradition”). The Fulbe of Mali distinguish between *taalibaabe alkuraan* (“Qur’anic pupils”) and *taalibaabe dewte* (“book students”), from Arabic *talib* (“student”) and *daftar* (“copybook”); they furthermore distinguish several stages of scholastic progress, taking into account pupils’ ages as well as educational achievements. The Fulfulde word *dudal* (probably deriving from its homophone, which designates a large fire, around which study may take place) may be translated as “school.” In all the languages and regions considered, the Arabic word *majlis* (“assembly” or “study group”) is used, in addition to local terms, to refer to the advanced level of study and the establishment in which it is dispensed.

⁷ Some information about Islamic intellectual traditions and educational practices in Guinea Bissau may be gleaned from, for example, Carreira (1966) and Giesing and Vydrine (2007).

⁸ One could also speak of the “senior teacher”.

⁹ The Djenné woman scholar is also mentioned by Geert Mommersteeg (1996, chapter 1 ; 1998, chapter 4). Amber Gemmeke (2008) discusses female esoteric practitioners in Senegal. Important recent publications about women’s learning and educational activities include Dorothea Schulz (2012) with respect to Mali, and Ousseina Alidou (2005) and Adeline Masquelier (2009) with respect to Niger

¹⁰ For further illustration of the wide variation in school schedules and holidays, one may refer, for example, to Ware (2004, 524–30) and the works of Paul Marty (1920, 1921, and 1922) for the regions under consideration here.

¹¹ As already noted, for example, by Mommersteeg (1991, 1996, 1998) and Ware (2004), who stress the ritual, initiatory character of this induction.

¹² In the same vein, Ndiaye (1985, 38–57) has noted that the Wolof, Fulfulde, and Manding speakers of Senegal each have their own set of appellations for the letters of the Arabic alphabet. Ndiaye’s book, which focuses on the Wolof of Senegal, provides by far the most detailed description of the processes of learning to read, recite, copy, and memorize the Qur’an in a West African society. Mommersteeg (1991, 1996, chapter 3) provides excellent descriptions of the process of learning to read in the Songhay milieu of Djenné.

¹³ I thank Peter Weil of the University of Delaware for providing me with a photocopy of such a Qur’an, which was given to him in The Gambia in 1967 by Fodee Suleemaan Demeba, the Mandenka scholar who wrote it out ca. 1942. (Peter Weil, personal letter, April 5, 1995.)

¹⁴ Most commonly, Warsh and Qalun, the two variants of Nafi^c, the recitation system predominant in North Africa. Each of these systems is named for one of its key transmitters, Warsh (d. 812) and Qalun (d. 835) having been disciples of Nafi^c (d. 785). Concerning the recited text of the Qur’an, see, for example, Gade (2004) and Leemhuis (2004). It is generally thought that Bornu is the region, within western sub-Saharan Africa, where recitation rules were granted the greatest attention; but compare, for example, Bobboyi (1992, 48–49, concerning Bornu) and Sanankoua (1985, 361) and Cissé (1999 [1941], 114–15, concerning the Fulbe of Mali).

¹⁵ According to noted ethnomusicologist Lucy Duran. (Comment made at the Mande Studies Association conference, Lisbon, June 2008.)

¹⁶ West Africans nearly always adhere to the Maliki school.

¹⁷ For example, they are studied as far afield as Egypt (see Husayn 1929–1939), Morocco (Eickelman 1985), and Bali (Prabowo and Guillot 1997).

¹⁸ This saint is mentioned in Amadou Hampaté Bâ’s and Jacques Daget’s study of the history of the Masina (1962, 177, 185). Robert Pageard (1961), Maria Grosz-Ngaté (1986), and Jean Bazin (1988) provide some information about the history and social structures of Sibila and its area.

¹⁹ The references to the *Mu'allaqat* in the catalogue of the Segou royal library (conserved in Paris) are erroneous; the texts in question are, in fact, excerpts from the « Six poets ». (Catalog compiled by Ghali, Mahibou, and Brenner 1985.)

²⁰ The European and Arab rediscoveries of this anthology are analyzed by Tamari (2013a).

²¹ I am preparing a critical edition and translation of portions of the autograph manuscript, including comments on its diffusion in North and West Africa and its interpretation in Mali.

²² As I have shown (Tamari 2005) through comparison of the successive editions of this commentary, first printed in 1850 in Cairo.

²³ The *Tafsir al-Jalalayn* is one of several works fundamental to many Manding (especially Diakhanke and Dyula) curricula and that, according to oral and written traditions analyzed by Ivor Wilks (1968), may have been introduced by al-Hajj Salim Suware, the putative founder of the Diakhanke group of scholarly lineages, who probably hailed from Dia in the Masina and lived in the fifteenth century. Nevertheless, according to the oral traditions I collected from scholarly lineages in Djenné, this work was only introduced to the city in the first decade of the twentieth century, while as-Sawi's metacommentary was introduced in the 1940s.

²⁴ See, for example, Rebstock and Mayer (2001) on Mauritania, and Hiskett (1957, 1975) concerning the Sokoto caliphate.

²⁵ See the example of two commentaries on a pre-Islamic poem collected from the same scholar at two years' interval (Tamari 2013a).

²⁶ Not at all John Greenleaf Whittier's « The feet that, creeping slow to school, / Went storming out to playing ! » (« In School-Days », first published 1870; collected in Whittier 1894, 407-8).

²⁷ For descriptions of Timbuktu age groups in earlier times, see Dupuis-Yakouba (1910) and Miner (1953, esp. 164-74). However, Miner's ethnography, based on just seven months' fieldwork in 1940, may not be entirely accurate.

²⁸ For the past twenty years in Mali, this amount has been twenty-five to fifty CFA, depending on locality (equivalent to about five to ten U.S. cents at current rates of exchange). It is said that in earlier times, it was just five francs (the smallest denomination coin).

²⁹ Often 500 to 2000 CFA per week, or a lump sum or some bags of grain after a season spent away working.

³⁰ Yattara and Salvaing (2000, esp. 201-8). I have also personally collected his reminiscences about these and many other topics.

³¹ For a (nearly) inside view of the moral value of mendicancy, see Cissé (1999 [1941], esp. 40-46, 110-13), in which he describes the experience of a younger brother.

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