



6-1980


## Traditional Islamic Education in Morocco: Sociohistorical and Psychological Perspectives

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### Recommended Citation

Wagner, Daniel A. and Lotfi, Abdelhamid, "Traditional Islamic Education in Morocco: Sociohistorical and Psychological Perspectives" (1980). *Journal Articles (Literacy.org)*. 10.  
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## Abstract

As in many parts of the Muslim world, traditional Islamic schooling<sup>1</sup> in Morocco predates a crucial historical role in the training of the nation's youth and continues to reach a higher percentage of school-age children than has the modern school system. Although such traditional Quranic schooling may have touched the lives of most Moroccans, its impact — relative to the modern school system — is not yet fully understood. Probably the most difficult aspect of analyzing the impact of Quranic schools, and there are a number of levels of analysis upon which such education may be observed and discussed. Any discussion of the consequences of traditional Quranic schooling will, therefore, depend on the adequate understanding of the varieties of this type of traditional education.

## Disciplines

Bilingual, Multilingual, and Multicultural Education | Curriculum and Instruction | Curriculum and Social Inquiry | Early Childhood Education | Education | Educational Administration and Supervision | Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research | Educational Methods | Educational Psychology | International and Comparative Education | Language and Literacy Education

# Traditional Islamic Education in Morocco: Sociohistorical and Psychological Perspectives

DANIEL A. WAGNER AND ABDELHAMID LOTFI

As in many parts of the Muslim world, traditional Islamic schooling<sup>1</sup> in Morocco predates modern formal schooling by almost a millennium. It has played a crucial historical role in the training of the nation's youth and continues to reach a higher percentage of school-age children than has the modern school system. Although such traditional Quranic schooling may have touched the lives of most Moroccans, its impact—relative to the modern school system—is not yet fully understood. Probably the most difficult aspect of analyzing the impact of traditional Quranic education is that there are several “types” of Quranic schools, and there are a number of levels of analysis upon which such education may be observed and discussed. Any discussion of the consequences of traditional Quranic schooling will, therefore, depend on an adequate understanding of the varieties of this type of traditional education.

This paper will discuss present forms of traditional Quranic education in Morocco in the light of modernization. More specifically, discussion will center on the potential impact of such traditional pedagogy on various cognitive abilities, whose growth is sometimes said to have been stunted by such experiences. Quranic schooling, as used in this paper, refers specifically to the elementary and intermediate levels of traditional Quranic education, which provide the learner with the basic skills of reading, writing, elementary notions of grammar, and knowledge of Islamic law. Also, Quranic schooling requires the student to memorize part or all of the Quran itself. In this paper we will not, therefore, focus attention on advanced training in both religious and secular sciences (which were often taught only at the more prestigious mosque-universities), but will instead concentrate on schooling for younger children and adolescents.

Parts of this paper were presented by Wagner in the symposium, “Traditional Factors in Modern Morocco,” at the annual meeting of the Middle East Studies Association, Ann Arbor, Michigan, November 1978. Partial funding for this research was provided by the Council for the International Exchange of Scholars and by a Faculty Grant from the University of Pennsylvania to Wagner during the summer of 1978. Research cited from earlier fieldwork in Morocco (1973–75) was supported by a fellowship from the Social Science Research Council. The author would like to thank D. Eickelman, M. M. J. Fischer, and S. Hammoud for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

<sup>1</sup> The term “Islamic” education refers to traditional education in the Muslim world over the last millennium. As described by Western and some Muslim scholars, such schooling was often given a more specific term, “Quranic” education or schooling, because many students spent a great deal or all of their time learning the Quran and other subjects.

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## Historical Overview

Historically, traditional Quranic schooling was the only type of formal education available to children in Morocco and elsewhere in the Muslim world until the advent to European influence.<sup>2</sup> Goldziher's<sup>3</sup> historical overview of Muslim education, which cites earlier commentaries on the nature of the schooling process, suggests that informal Muslim education is supposed to begin in the home as soon as the child can speak, and various simple passages (*suras*) of the Quran may be mastered subsequently. However, at 7 years<sup>4</sup> of age the child is sent to a Quranic school where systematic study of the Quran is begun. Traditionally, Quranic schooling has been limited to boys, since it was considered improper<sup>5</sup> to teach girls how to read and write. Nonetheless, many historical exceptions to this rule were apparently made.<sup>6</sup> Subjects of study were generally reading, writing, recitation, and rituals associated with religious prayer.

The main goal of traditional Quranic education was, and remains, the complete mastery or memorization of the Quran. This was typically achieved by the motivated student in about 6–8 years, although many students did not achieve this goal either because they were apprenticed in one of the many trades of their towns or villages, or because no *faqih* (traditional Quranic teacher) was available for intermediate studies. Finally, as in most school systems, one's peers or study-mates may play a crucial role; if the study-mates are neither serious nor good learners, then the chances for individual and group success are greatly diminished.

Reading, writing, and mastery of the Quran could be achieved in any Quranic school, both in the city and the countryside; but advanced schol-

<sup>2</sup> For further information on variation in traditional Islamic education, refer to: Ahmed Fouad al-Ahwani, *Attarbiyya Fil-Islam* [Muslim education] (Cairo: Dar-al-Maarif, 1967); Ibrahim Salama, "L'Enseignement islamique en Egypte" (Thèse de doctorat, Faculté des Lettres de Paris-Caire, 1938); Renaud Santerre, *Pédagogie musulmane d'Afrique noire: L'École coranique Peule du Cameroun* (Montreal: Presses de l'Université de Montreal, 1975); I. Wilks, "The Transmission of Islamic Learning in a Nomadic Society," in *Literacy in Traditional Societies*, ed. J. Goody (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968); Michael M. J. Fischer, *Iran: From Religious Debate to Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, in press).

<sup>3</sup> Ignaz Goldziher, "Muslim Education," in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1912), 5:198–207.

<sup>4</sup> Entrance to the Quranic school may occur much earlier in many parts of the Muslim world. For children 7 years and above, admission to Quranic schools often depended on the ability of the family to "spare" a child's labor. Also, the availability of such a school within daily walking distance was sometimes a crucial factor.

<sup>5</sup> Goldziher (p. 205) suggests that the "impropriety" of Quranic training for girls varies greatly from region to region in the Muslim world. While religious learning was universally accepted, the traditional argument against Quranic training for girls was related to literacy skills which were thought to lead women into nonreputable or immoral areas. An alternative view is that women were seldom trained in the *msids* because such training was of little economic utility. Also, women were excluded from traditional Islamic occupations (e.g., judge and notary). Thus, since there was little socioeconomic need for Quranic training, women were rarely provided with such schooling.

<sup>6</sup> M. A. Péretié ("Les Medrasas de Fès," *Archives Marocaines* 18 [1912]: 312) lists 15 schools for girls in Fès for 1912; L. Mercier ("Les Mosquées et la vie religieuse à Rabat," *ibid.*, 8 [1906]: 99–195) lists a school for girls in Rabat under the supervision of a female teacher.

arship in such areas as literature, law, theology, and the like, which prepares the *taleb* (student) for such traditional Islamic positions as *cadi* (judge) or *adel* (notary), had to be sought in advanced centers of learning situated either in the larger towns or in the *zawias* (religious centers). Training at this level goes beyond memorization of the Quran and includes Islamic law, *hadiths* (prophetic traditions), *riwaya* (the science of correct Quranic pronunciation), grammar, rhetoric, literature, logic, arithmetics, astronomy, and poetry. Some of the better-known centers of learning were located in Fes, Salé, Tetouan, Marrakech, Taroudant, and Zawia Dila'iyah.<sup>7</sup> *Tolba* (students) with training from these centers could aspire for positions in the upper echelons of the government (*makhzen*) or as teachers in various religious centers.<sup>8</sup>

### Quranic Schooling Today

In contemporary Morocco, traditional Quranic schooling begins in the *msid*, as the school is generally known in the cities; elsewhere it is referred to as the *mahdar*, *jama'a*, *m'ammra*, or *kuttab*.<sup>9</sup> The *msid* may be an annex to the local mosque or a small- or medium-sized room provided for the *fqih* by the community. In contrast to historical description, the present-day *msid* enrolls primarily young boys and girls beginning at about age 4 or 5. There appear to be no current statistics on the number of *msids* in Morocco, but an informal survey indicates that nearly all rural and urban communities have *msids*, although these appear to be in greater numbers in areas with a greater concentration of population. In his description of childhood in Morocco, Radi<sup>10</sup> assumes that all Moroccan children go to the *msid* for 1 or more years. However, it should be noted that Wagner,<sup>11</sup> in completing an earlier study of childhood in Morocco, found a number of small, primarily Berber-speaking communities in the Middle Atlas Mountains where Quranic schooling did not exist. There were also similar villages that maintained (by donation) a *fqih* (usually an "outsider" from another region), who was engaged to teach only a handful of children (usually boys) of the wealthier village families.

<sup>7</sup> M. Hajji, *Al-zawiyah al-Dila'iyah* [The zawia of Dila] (Rabat: Université Mohamed V., 1964). Hajji states that the zawia Dila'iyah was a thriving cultural center at the turn of the seventeenth century, whose importance overshadowed even the famous Qaraouiyyine University in Fès.

<sup>8</sup> For a detailed description of such traditional schools, see the following sources: E. Michaux-Bellaire, "L'Enseignement indigène au Maroc," *Revue du Monde Musulman* 15 (1911): 422–52; and L. Paye, "Enseignement et société musulmane: Introduction et évolution de l'enseignement moderne au Maroc" (Thèse de doctorat, Université de Paris [Sorbonne], 1957).

<sup>9</sup> See Paye, p. 75, n. 3. Also note that the Islamic school is also known by the name *medrasa* in many parts of the Middle East.

<sup>10</sup> Abdelwahed Radi, "Processus de socialization de l'enfant marocain," *Annales de Sociologie* (Rabat) (1969), pp. 33–47.

<sup>11</sup> Based on Daniel A. Wagner's unpublished notes from fieldwork in Morocco in 1973–75. Paye (p. 69) points to the overabundance of *msids* in one tribe and their limited numbers in a neighboring tribe.

There are essentially two kinds of *msids* in present-day Morocco: the traditional *msid*, run by a *fqih* on public property attached either to a mosque, a *zawia*, or in a locale provided by the community, his income drawn largely from the direct support of public donations;<sup>12</sup> and the modern *msid*, which is run by the *fqih*-“entrepreneur” whose *msid* is located in rented quarters and whose income is drawn from tuition fees paid by his students.

Training in the modern *msid* is restricted to writing, reading, arithmetic, and the memorization of a few *suras* from the Quran. Schooling in the traditional *msid*, on the other hand, provides similar training for those children who plan to enroll in the modern school system, and may provide training for those few who choose to devote their energies to more advanced Quranic learning (often involving the complete mastery of the Quran). Often the few students who want to complete their Quranic studies find it necessary to move to other *msids* in search of suitable *fqih*s and advanced study-mates. These *msids*, which we refer to as “intermediate” (see later discussion), are much fewer in number than the *msids* for younger children. Although their number has shrunk dramatically, the absolute number of all *msids* has actually increased.<sup>13</sup>

Interestingly, the present-day *msid* appears to function primarily as a preschool setting for Moroccan children. A 1974 survey<sup>14</sup> of two sectors of urban Marrakech and several rural Middle Atlas communities found that the average number of years spent in the *msid* varied from a high of 1.92 years in Marrakech to a low of 0.33 years in rural mountain villages (*douars*). As may be seen in table 1, however, the range of years spent in the *msid* varied dramatically by age and region. Many children surveyed had never attended the *msid* or had done so for only a few months. Some children, particularly in the rural non-public-schooled sample, attended a *msid* for as long as 6 or 7 years, probably as a substitute for modern formal schooling. It is interesting to note that few modern schoolchildren (whether urban or rural) attended more than 2 years of *msid* and yet these children had the highest average years of attendance. These statistics confirm the observation that the *msid* is increasingly viewed by parents as a preschool setting, and that children who go on to modern public schooling should (according to parents) obtain the rudiments of learning skills, as well as religious skills, before entering primary school. Those students who spend more than a couple of years in a *msid* often do not go on to enter modern public schools, but are more likely to attempt to become *fqih*s.

<sup>12</sup> Paye, pp. 77–78.

<sup>13</sup> This observation, though not based on current statistics, is our estimate as based on informal research. Santerre makes similar remarks concerning the demography of Quranic schools in the Cameroons.

<sup>14</sup> Undertaken by D. A. Wagner during fieldwork (see n. 11 above).

TABLE 1  
A 1974 SELECTED SURVEY OF QURANIC SCHOOLING IN MOROCCO

Sample Groups and Age Group (Yr)	Years of Quranic School		Proportion Arabic Speakers
	Mean	Range	
Marrakech, nonschooled:			
7.5	.45	0-3	.96
10.8	.58	0-2	1.00
14.5	.67	0-3	1.00
18.9	.62	0-4	.96
Marrakech, schooled:			
7.0	.96	0-2	.96
10.1	1.08	0-3	.96
13.4	.75	0-3	1.00
18.4	1.92	0-7	.96
Middle Atlas, nonschooled:			
7.1	.33	0-3	.12
10.7	.54	0-4	.04
14.3	.79	0-5	.00
19.8	.71	0-7	.00
Middle Atlas, schooled:			
8.1	.58	0-2	.29
10.5	.75	0-3	.17
13.6	.58	0-2	.21
19.0	.92	0-4	.25
Sidi Zouine:			
19.4	10.96	6-17	.88

NOTE.—All individuals sampled were boys; there were 24 individuals in each age group. Individuals who did not speak Arabic as a first language spoke Berber (generally Tamazight) as their first language.

For most Moroccan children, the 1, 2, and 3 years of pre-public-school Quranic education is most of the formal religious education that they will obtain;<sup>15</sup> others, however, will decide not to attend modern public school immediately and will seek further training. Quranic training beyond the age of 7, as indicated above, may take place either in the student's original *msid*, or in much larger *msids* which attract a sufficiently large number of students to make up a viable group. This type of *msid* is located either in mosques (*medrasas*) or *zawias* where the *taleb* takes from 5 to 7 years to master the Quran.

There are two types of "intermediate" schools that provide training past the *msid*: the *medrasa/zawia* and the modern public school. As shown in figure 1, both the *medrasa*<sup>16</sup> and the *zawia* provided the historical route to the Islamic universities. In present-day Morocco (and even for many

<sup>15</sup> While this statement applied to full-time religious studies, many Moroccan schoolchildren continue religious studies as a part of the national primary and secondary school curriculum.

<sup>16</sup> Strictly speaking, the *medrasa* today is a hostel where Quranic students (*tolba*) reside while attending the *halakat* or lectures given by the *faqih* or *ulama* in the adjoining mosques. See Paye (p. 87) and Péretié for more information.

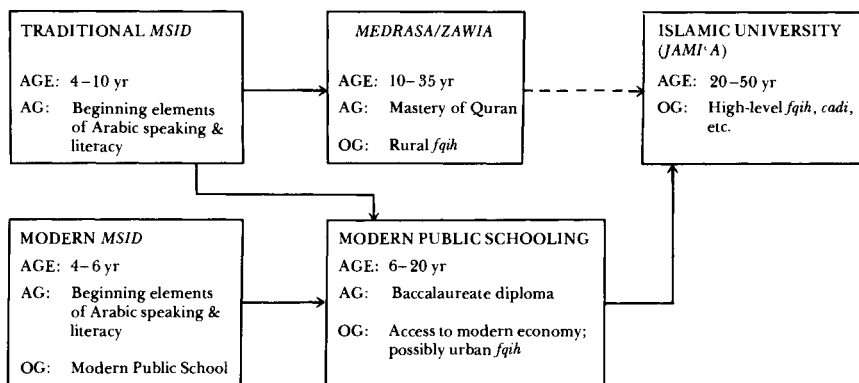


FIG. 1.—A model of traditional and modern Quranic schooling in Morocco. AG = Academic Goal; OG = Occupational Goal; dotted arrow = historical trend; solid arrows = modern trends.

*tolba* in the past), these schools function as teacher-training institutes. Satisfactory performance meant that the *taleb* was virtually guaranteed a position as *fqih* in a *msid* or *medrasa*. The economic utility of such training was great, since permanent jobs with relatively high status were and are difficult to find. *Tolba* who begin their studies in a *msid* that is attached to an important mosque are often able to continue and finish their studies in the same location. Other (usually) rural students must go to a larger village or town once they have spent 2 or 3 years learning the basics of Quranic education. Such *tolba* may choose to go to a larger town or may choose to attend a *zawia* school at an important religious center. Typical among these is Sidi Zouine near Marrakech where, in 1978, over 150 students aged 10–35 years were in attendance. A 1974 survey of this school showed that Quranic students had spent an average of almost 11 years in Islamic study, with some students studying as many as 17 years (see table 1). Students at Sidi Zouine live in hostel-like rooms near the mosque. Most have come from small villages from the *Haouz* plain or from the High Atlas Mountains, although at least one student came from across the Sahara in Mauretania. Like students in *medrasas*, “graduates” of Sidi Zouine generally expect to become *fqihs* themselves, often, though not always, returning to their region of origin.

*Tolba* who decided to seek further training and who wished to avoid the usual role of rural or low-level *fqih* in a *msid* sometimes chose to go on to the Islamic university. In contemporary Morocco, these universities have been incorporated into the national system of public education and, therefore, require a high school certificate (baccalaureate) for entry (see fig. 1).

The best-known institutions of higher Islamic education are the two great mosque-universities: the Qarawiyyin in Fès and the Yusufia in Mar-



rakech. In the excellent review by Eickelman,<sup>17</sup> these universities are described as being concerned with learning that goes well beyond memorization of the Quran and includes poetry, history, literature, astronomy, logic, and grammar. In 1931, the student population of these schools was about 1,200.<sup>18</sup>

### Schooling Contexts

Descriptions of the traditional *msid* are available from a number of sources. In Meakin's classic work entitled *The Moors*, the *msid* is described as follows:

[They] are held in the mosques, or in rooms about the town belonging to them . . . in which all sit on the ground, the teacher facing his pupils, whose bare pates are all within reach of the switch in his hand. Instead of books or slates, each one is provided with a thin board, narrowed to the lower end, rubbed over with a sort of pipe-clay on which they write with reed pens, and ink prepared from charred horns, or wool and water. One of the bigger boys being set to teach them to write the alphabet which they have already been taught by ear, the letters are written out on the boards for them to copy. The lessons are then read aloud by all together, rocking to and fro to keep time, some delighting in a high key, others jogging in lower tones. . . .<sup>19</sup>

An early-thirteenth-century description by Ibn Jubair of the elementary schools in Damascus provides a very similar picture of the *msid* school setting.<sup>20</sup> The present-day "intermediate" schools for children about 7–14 years of age conform most to historical description: "School hours commence in winter before daylight, but in summer after it, somewhere between three and five a.m.—earlier hours being kept in the country—and continue until a quarter after twelve, a break for food having been made about nine or ten. From half-past one, again, they last till an hour before sunset, and some come again before supper. Those who do not learn their lessons in class are kept in till they do so by good *fqihs*. . . ."<sup>21</sup>

Contemporary *msids* for young children ("preschool" Quranic education) are somewhat different from "intermediate" or "advanced" schools. Since children are quite young (4–7 years), they often attend school for only a morning session. And, unlike the older *tolba*, these younger children have little knowledge of reading or writing and so spend most of the school time in following the *fqihs* in chanting verses of the Quran. Occasionally, the *fqihs* have a blackboard available to begin teaching the Arabic alphabet and simple words. In some schools the script board (*luh*) is still

<sup>17</sup> Dale F. Eickelman, "The Art of Memory: Islamic Education and Its Social Reproduction," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 20 (1978): 485–516.

<sup>18</sup> The 1975–76 enrollment was down to 745 students (527 men, 218 women).

<sup>19</sup> Budgett Meakin, *The Moors* (New York: MacMillan, 1902), p. 304.

<sup>20</sup> Discussed by Goldziher (n. 3 above), p. 200.

<sup>21</sup> Meakin, p. 305.

used, while in more urban areas a small fiberboard slate written on with chalk seems to be gaining in popularity and seems to be at least one innovation that is common to both modern and traditional schooling.

The pre-Independence (pre-1956) *medrasa* and university settings had changed very little from the historical description provided above. *Tolba* were expected to devote themselves exclusively to the study of the Quran and sometimes related materials. With the exception of holidays and harvest times, *tolba* spent as much as 16 hours each day in Quranic study. They usually lived communally in small dwellings near the mosque and often received small amounts of food and money from the community.

Post-Independence *medrasa* and university settings have changed significantly from the historical description. The reorganization of the Moroccan mosque-universities was first launched by the French in 1930 and completed after 1956 by the Moroccans. The *medrasas* were turned into state-run high schools shortly after 1956 and staffed largely by traditionalists. These schools recruited most of their students from among the *tolba* who had mastered the Quran, and thus served as a bridge between the two poles of the Moroccan educational system—the traditional and the modern. These schools, which were commonly referred to as *m<sup>o</sup>ahads*, were instrumental in the modernization of the traditional curriculum of the *medrasas* and the integration of the hitherto semiautonomous institutions into the state-run educational system. The majority of the *m<sup>o</sup>ahads*' graduates, whose training was begun in wholly traditional surroundings and completed in a modernized traditional setting, were recruited to serve as primary-school teachers. The consequences of the "intrusion" of these traditionalists into the modern sector of the national school system may eventually shed some light on the problems of pedagogical heterogeneity which permeate the Moroccan educational system.

Quranic schooling in the *zawias*, on the other hand, came under government control only early in this decade, and has maintained a great deal of the traditions of the pre-Independence period. The Ministry of Religious Affairs has organized about 60 schools (at both primary and secondary levels) in the major mosques and *zawias* for the benefit of traditional *msid* students, thus allowing them a second chance to have access to government jobs and the Islamic universities of Fes and Marrakech. Since the *m<sup>o</sup>ahads* have now become an integral part of the secondary school system, their doors are open only to primary-school graduates, and are generally closed to graduates of the *zawia* schools.

### Psychological Perspectives

Pedagogical style is one of the best-known and most criticized characteristics of Quranic schooling, past and present. According to Hodgson,

“ . . . Education was commonly conceived as the teaching of fixed and memorizable statements and formulas which could be adequately learned without any process of thinking as such. A statement was either true or false, and the sum of all true statements was knowledge. . . . Education meant inculcating as many of these statements in as sound a form as possible.”<sup>22</sup> McDonald provides a cognitive description of higher Muslim education as follows: “It trains the memory and the power of reasoning—always in formal methods—and then gives to neither any adequate material on which to work. The memory is burdened with verbatim knowledge of the Quran and some outlines of theology and law, and the reason is exhausted in elaborate argumentations therefrom deduced.”<sup>23</sup> Meakin adds: “The whole of the first school course is the Quran, which has to be learned by heart before anything else can be done though little of it may be understood.”<sup>24</sup> Hardy and Brunot, in their early study of Moroccan children, suggest that memory is the only “mental faculty” that is well developed in the Moroccan child. They claim that “the Moroccan child is capable of retaining, without excessive effort, sentences and even entire chapters [of the Quran], without understanding the meaning.”<sup>25</sup>

Such historical description rather accurately captures the context of present-day Quranic education. Moroccan children at the younger ages usually have little understanding of reading or writing and appear to do most of their learning by rote imitation of the *fqih*. Children who speak Moroccan dialectal Arabic apparently have some, though far from complete, understanding of what they are saying in classical Arabic. Berber-speaking children, in contrast, apparently have little or no way of making more than elemental sense of what is being said in the classroom. It should be noted here that many of these Berber children will have a similar problem when they enter modern public schooling, where classes are taught in Arabic or French.

In contemporary as well as historical Quranic pedagogy, there are essentially four major steps through which *tolba* pass in order to complete at least the intermediate level of Quranic training. In the *msid*, *tolba* learn the Arabic alphabet by chanting the letters, and the letters' characteristics (e.g., whether a given letter has a diacritical dot and where it is placed). The next step introduces the learner to writing. The student is asked to blacken or trace over the marks of letters and words written on the *luh* by a more advanced student or *fqih*. This step is usually accompanied by

<sup>22</sup> M. G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 2:438.

<sup>23</sup> D. B. MacDonald, *Aspects of Islam* (New York: MacMillan, 1911), pp. 288–89.

<sup>24</sup> Meakin, p. 306.

<sup>25</sup> G. Hardy and L. Brunot, *L'Enfant Marocain*, Editions du bulletin de l'enseignement du Maroc, no. 63 (Rabat, Morocco, and Paris: Direction de l'Instruction Publique, 1925), p. 8.

memorization of a few short *suras* or chapters of the Quran. The next step is to have students copy whole words from a model text. At this stage, at the end of 1 year in the *msid*, the student is referred to as a *hanaach* — those who memorize what is written but cannot read for comprehension. The third step takes place at the intermediate level and involves the habit of passing the morning (with the *fqih*) writing and reciting, while spending the afternoon in solitary or group study. At this point a new *sura* (or part of one—usually 1/240 of the Quran) must be mastered before continuing to the next portion of the Quran. The fourth stage comes when the student is able to write from dictation. A *fqih* may still continue to write the student's assignment but may dictate with more frequency. Even with dictation, the *fqih* will usually proofread the student's writing in order to avoid error. Since only a small portion of the *msid* student population goes on to the intermediate schools, most students receive a rather elementary Quranic training, usually involving only steps one and two. Furthermore, even achievement of all four steps does not imply mastery of the Quran but merely the requisite skills considered necessary to memorize the Quran.

Much has been written by Muslim and European observers alike about the effects of Quranic schooling on memory abilities of the *tolba* or Quranic students. Many observers claim that there are later cognitive consequences of years spent in the *msid*. Hardy and Brunot believe that the Moroccan child who goes on to modern public school is so "exuberant with his memory that his imagination is smothered."<sup>26</sup> Zerdoumi has further suggested that the ". . . Quranic school imposes on [the child] a purely mechanical, monotonous form of study in which nothing is likely to arouse his interest. The school thus tends to curb his intellectual and moral activity at the precise moment when it should be developing rapidly."<sup>27</sup> Finally, Miller<sup>28</sup> suggests that many of the contemporary problems in modern Moroccan schooling arise out of the "reflective" and unenlightened nature of traditional Quranic schools. In sum, most historical and contemporary observers focus on memory or rote learning that inhibits modern school learning and what has sometimes been called "critical thinking."

It is interesting to note that none of the above observations had the benefit of actually looking at the memory ability of Quranic and non-Quranic scholars. Are we certain that memory displaces critical thinking?

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>27</sup> N. Zerdoumi, *Enfants d'hier: L'Éducation de l'enfant de milieu traditionnel Algerien* (Paris: Maspero, 1970), p. 196.

<sup>28</sup> Gerald D. Miller, "Classroom 19: A Study of Behavior in a Classroom of a Moroccan Primary School," in *Psychological Dimensions of Near Eastern Studies*, ed. L. C. Brown and N. Itzkowitz (Princeton, N.J.: Darwin, 1977).

Psychologists and anthropologists have been trying to answer this question at least since the publication of *How Natives Think* by L. Levy-Bruhl in 1910. In a study of over 400 Moroccan children from schooled and nonschooled backgrounds, and including a sample of Quranic *tolba* from *Sidi Zouine*, Wagner<sup>29</sup> found that, on a variety of memory tasks, the *tolba* remembered no better than other nonschooled children and considerably less well than modern public school children. Care was taken so that all children understood the memory tests, and this was evidenced by significant above-chance-level performance for all groups of children. Results from the study of recall and recognition memory showed that schoolchildren learn a variety of memory skills that are apparently not readily available to the *tolba*.

Such experimental evidence does not, of course, preclude the possibility that the *tolba* have other special memory skills that were not "tapped" in this earlier investigation. In fact, a later ethnographic and film study of the *tolba* in study situations found that they used a variety of mnemonic techniques that were not used by typical public school children. Some of these were noted by Meakin<sup>30</sup> in his description (cited earlier) of the chanting, rocking, and tonal variation in the verbal production of the *tolba*. It seems clear that the *tolba* have developed mnemonic techniques that enable them to ingest large amounts of sometimes little-understood material. One problem in the experimental study of Quranic memory is, of course, the difficulty of measuring how much a given student knows and understands the Quran—that is, the extent of his Quranic knowledge. That the knowledge factor would affect measured memory ability greatly has been demonstrated in several recent experiments.<sup>31</sup> In a study of literacy in Liberia, Scribner and Cole<sup>32</sup> have found that Muslim literates (i.e., who studied in a Quranic school) appear to learn more by "rote" (i.e., in stringing items together) than by categorizing or clustering items to be remembered in a standard memory experiment. The latter mnemonic techniques were used more by public school students and graduates. While these differences are small, they do point in the direction that cognitive skills develop from particular sorts of practice.

One implication of such memory research is that we actually know very little about the real overall memory faculties of Quranic students. The assertion that Quranic memorizers become "rote" learners in school is difficult, at present, to ascertain since other socialization experiences

<sup>29</sup> Daniel A. Wagner, "Memories of Morocco: The Influence of Age, Schooling, and Environment on Memory," *Cognitive Psychology* 10 (1978): 1–28.

<sup>30</sup> Meakin, p. 304.

<sup>31</sup> See M. T. H. Chi, "Knowledge Structures and Memory Development," in *Children's Thinking: What Develops?* ed. R. Siegler (Hillsdale, N.J.: Erlbaum, 1978).

<sup>32</sup> Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole, "Unpacking Literacy," *Social Science Information* 17 (1978): 19–40.

take place in the context of Quranic education. Some of these factors would include rigid and conservative discipline by *fqih*s, long hours of study under difficult conditions, disdain for “modern ‘ways of thinking’ and ‘new ideas,’” and so on. That is, the transfer from Quranic education to modern public education may be due both to social and cognitive factors. Also, it may be that the modern French pedagogical emphasis on designated material to be learned has reinforced the Quranic “rote” tradition more than many modern educators would like to believe. Although it is far from clear that Quranic memorization is responsible for poor learning habits in public school children, the study by Scribner and Cole demonstrated the transfer of Quranic learning to other memory tasks.

### The Whither and the Whether of Quranic Schooling

One review of colonial writing about Quranic schooling found that most observers were highly critical of *msid* education, describing them as “stultifying, of the student as a robot, of parents and teachers as willing collaborators in an endeavor to render education a completely mechanical process.”<sup>33</sup> Such criticism is also echoed in modern Morocco, with public school teachers occasionally decrying the old-time methods still used in the *msid*. And yet there remain many supporters of Quranic education. Parents consider Quranic schooling, and *fqih*s’ rigid and disciplinary manner, as a way of training children to “respect” authority and “behave.” Others have discussed advanced Quranic training as providing (at least historically) the successful student with “cultural capital” that could be applied to obtaining a high-status job as a learned gentleman (as a *cadi*, *adel*, *fqih*, etc.).<sup>34</sup> It has also been pointed out by Michaux-Bellaire<sup>35</sup> that Quranic scholarship was more valuable where it was most scarce. Thus, in rural areas, *tolba* were sometimes able to become *cadis*, whereas in the city this was impossible.

Present-day Quranic schooling in urban Morocco is increasingly viewed by parents as an important preschool religious opportunity for their children. The rudiments of classroom learning, attention behaviors, literacy skills, and obedience are all taught in the *msid*. It is important to consider again the origin of the children who attend the *msid*. Roughly half these children are Berber speaking, with little prior knowledge of Arabic. It may be the case that this preschool experience facilitates school entry for these children by providing Arabic language and literacy skills

<sup>33</sup> Thomas W. Dichter, “The Problem of How to Act on an Undefined Stage: An Exploration of Culture, Change and Individual Consciousness in the Moroccan Town of Sefrou—with a Focus on Three Modern Schools” (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1976).

<sup>34</sup> For an interesting discussion of the notion of Islamic religious “cultural capital,” see Eickelman (n. 17 above).

<sup>35</sup> Michaux-Bellaire (n. 8 above).

prior to formal public schooling. A research question that needs an answer is how, when, and under what conditions Berber children learn these skills. In the earliest stage imitation is clear, but it is not known whether Berber children are ultimately helped or hindered by this early experience that puts them at a relative disadvantage with respect to Arab children. Santerre<sup>36</sup> notes a similar problem among the Fulbe and Peuls in Cameroon, where decoding and recitation of the Quran is often not accompanied by comprehension of what is written. The problem of learning to read in an unfamiliar language is, of course, not new. In the United States and in many other countries, minority children often are taught and must learn to read in a language that they can barely speak. One major distinction between such cases and the Moroccan situation is that for both Arab and Berber children the Quran is sacred and therefore not a recent imposition transplanted from a dominant outside power. Nevertheless, important questions remain about how children acquire Arabic literacy and how they make the transition from Quranic preschools to the public school system.

The future of the preschool *msid* seems assured by the government's decree that all children should attend it for at least 2 years prior to entering the public schools. But what of the future of the intermediate *medrasa*, *zawia*, and traditional university? The *medrasas* and some of the *zawia* schools have, as we have seen, been integrated into the national educational system. Those *zawia* and mosque schools which remain outside the scope of the government's control are likely to persist until their clientele is served by the modern school system (at present, only 40 percent of school-age children attend primary school), an unlikely result in the near future. These *zawia* and mosque centers of learning will therefore continue to function for the foreseeable future; their numbers may diminish, however, as the national educational system expands to cover the whole country. For the moment, these centers, whose constituencies continue to shrink in size and importance, provide an independent source of literacy and an avenue to social promotion for those who are denied access to (or choose not to enter) the modern school system. Furthermore, since demand for new *fqih*s has risen dramatically with the increased institutionalization of the *msid*, *zawias* continue to provide crucial teacher-training services. Finally, traditional universities have also been reinforced by the creation of Dar Al-Hadith Al-Hassania, an institute of advanced religious studies.

Despite the continued interest in and even growth of *msid* schooling, *tolba*, *fqih*s, and public school teachers all seem to have various misgivings about the continuation of Quranic training. The *tolba* and *fqih*s still see

<sup>36</sup> Santerre (n. 2 above).

their roles as having status, but their level of financial compensation has decreased dramatically relative to other professions. The exception to this role is the new “entrepreneurial” *fqih* who is sometimes a high school dropout with some Quranic background and who opens up a private *msid* to meet the governmental decree. Some of these *fqih*s do well financially.

It is sometimes claimed that traditional forms of schooling are inevitably replaced by modern-style schools. This trend seems to be particularly true where a dominant group, class, or subculture imposes a new institution on another group. In Morocco, as in much of the Muslim world, there is no class-based distinction in Quranic schooling. All children, whether rich or poor, urban or rural, are expected—and now virtually required—to attend Quranic schools. However, the persistence of Quranic schooling is not due entirely to governmental decree, or even to a universal faith in Islam—though both these factors are quite important. The fact is that Moroccan Quranic schooling at the preschool level has undergone some significant changes over time; it has adapted or been made to adapt to a modern reality. This reality includes the necessity for universal Arabic literacy for which the *msid* has first responsibility. Also, the *msid* provides the beginning elements of appropriate social and cognitive classroom skills. The present-day *msid* resembles, in many ways, the modern conception of a preschool, though the materials and sometimes the strict pedagogical style seem different. Rather than supplanting the traditional schools, it would seem that modern Moroccan educational institutions have succeeded in adapting and integrating this once archaic pedagogy into a functioning and significant part of the overall educational system. The *msid*, which had remained the last segment of traditional education outside the sphere of influence of the central government, has finally become a part of the national educational system.

In conclusion, it may be said that Quranic education, as a traditional institution, continues to play a central role in terms of its influence on the social and cognitive life of children and on beliefs and values that affect social and political life at the societal level. And yet, the consequences of this early and stereotypical experience are not well understood in Morocco or elsewhere in the Islamic world. Given the importance of Quranic schooling and the increase in interest in the Middle East, further research on this topic would be desirable.