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Qur'anic Memorisation Schools in The Gambia: An Innovation in Islamic Education

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Abstract: The “Qur’anic memorisation schools” – to translate literally from the Arabic – aim to lead their pupils to rapid mastery (typically, in about four years) of the correct oral recitation from memory of the entire Qur’an; they differ in several important respects from the traditional “Qur’anic schools.” The first Qur’anic memorisation school in The Gambia was founded in the late 1980s. However, this educational model was not widely emulated until after 2000; presently there are well over a hundred memorisation schools. Although the first school was founded with foreign assistance, growing local demand for full-time formal education has been a major factor in subsequent expansion. Most schools privilege boarding. Most pupils range in age from about 7 to about 16, but some schools admit pupils under 5 while others accept learners in their early twenties. Girls constitute a substantial minority of enrollees. Most graduates proceed to further study at “conventional” (English language) schools or madrasa (Arabic language schools that also teach secular subjects). Like nearly all institutions of formal education in The Gambia, the Qur’anic memorisation schools claim to contribute not only to the spiritual, moral, and intellectual development of their wards, but to the country’s economic and political progress.

Introduction

In the half century since independence (1965), education in The Gambia, and Islamic education in particular, has been characterised by extraordinary expansion and innovation. From four high schools and limited access to elementary education, The Gambia has progressed to over 170 English-medium high schools and majority school attendance for the 7 to 16 age

group. In addition, the country now boasts several institutions of higher education, including a national university.¹

The current educational scene in The Gambia comprises both state and private “conventional schools,” which teach in English medium (the main language in which instruction is given), the madrasa – ostensibly modernising Islamic schools that privilege Arabic medium, as well as English-medium Islamic schools and ones that have both English-medium and Arabic-medium divisions, bilingual English-Arabic schools, bilingual English-French schools, as well as numerous international schools and the traditional *karanta* and *daara* (“Qur’anic schools”). After providing an overview of Islamic education in The Gambia, this chapter will concentrate on the emergence of the Qur’anic memorisation schools, a rapidly growing sector and one of the most fascinating developments of the past thirty years.

Contrary to what their name (here literally translated from the Arabic) may suggest, these schools are not a simple perpetuation of the Qur’anic schools, but are also significantly influenced by the Western-derived or Western-influenced English-medium schools and madrasa, and – like nearly all institutions of formal education in The Gambia – explicitly position themselves as contributing not only to the spiritual and moral development of their wards, but to the country’s economic and political progress.

It should be noted from the outset that the status of religion in state-recognised Gambian curricula has been historically quite different from that in the neighbouring Francophone countries. In accordance with British tradition, which marks a less radical separation between religion and the state than the French one, and correlatively, the syllabi established by the West African Examinations Council (www.waecdirect.org, www.waecnigeria.org), religious instruction has long been an integral feature of Gambian curricula. While many of the schools founded in the Gambia in the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century were church-related, and offered Christian religious instruction to their students, or in some cases required it, and new Christian-affiliated schools continue to be founded, in recent decades

1 For a brief survey of the history of education in The Gambia, see Jammeh 2015. For current statistics, see Republic of The Gambia, *Yearbook*, 2017, available on the site of the Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education, www.edugambia.gm. Earlier years are also available on this website. In Gambian usage, “Basic” education comprises the first nine years of schooling, with a distinction between “Lower Basic” (grades 1-6) and “Upper Basic” (grades 7-9), also referred to in this paper as the “elementary” and “junior secondary” levels. “Secondary” or “senior secondary” refers to grades 10 to 12. Sanneh 1975 and 1989 [1979] include vivid depictions of “traditional” Islamic education in The Gambia. Skinner 1983 provides some first-hand information about the Mohammedan Primary and Ahmadiyya schools (see below). Janson (2014: 41-43, 54-58, 135, 225-254) mentions several forms of Islamic education.

Islamic instruction has achieved better representation in English-medium curricula. Currently all schools (state or private) applying the national curriculum (developed by the Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education) are required to offer courses in “religious knowledge” (though in accordance with the principles of religious liberty and freedom of conscience, pupils are not required to take them).

While both “Christian” and “Muslim” options exist, in practice all or virtually all schools are required to offer Islamic studies, since – with Muslims estimated to constitute over 95% of the Gambian population² – all establishments enrol Muslim pupils; furthermore, Muslims are often in the majority, even in Christian-affiliated schools. All schools are furthermore required to allow their Muslim pupils to perform their daily prayers on school grounds. Thus, in the Gambian context, “Islamic schools” are those founded with the specific purpose of furthering Islamic religious ideals. “Christian” schools, founded with the aim of furthering Christian ideals, at present also offer courses in “Islamic religious knowledge.” The state schools, which have no religious affiliation, offer courses in “Islamic religious knowledge” and, if pupil enrolment numbers warrant it, also in “Christian religious knowledge.”

The information presented here was obtained in the course of three one-month field trips, consecrated to various aspects of Islamic scholarship, conducted in July-August 2004, December 2015-January 2016, and March-April 2017. During this time, I visited each of the establishments cited by name below (including eight memorisation schools³), as well as several additional Qur’anic schools and madrasa. This is evidently a very small fraction of the Islamic schools in The Gambia, but may nevertheless suffice to identify some commonalities while underscoring their diversity.

Overview of Islamic Education

The Gambia includes both social and cultural groups that have been Muslim for centuries, and others that have converted to Islam (or in some cases Christianity) in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

A first landmark in adapting Islamic education to evolving conditions was constituted by the foundation in 1903 of the Mohammedan Primary School

2 CIA World Factbook 2017, www.cia.gov. Official Gambian statistics do not provide a breakdown by religions (see Gambia Bureau of Statistics, www.gbos.gov.gm). For historical statistics, see Hughes and Perfect 2006: 24-26.

3 As developed below, these are: in the capital area – the Ebo Town school established c. 1987, Dar al-Arqam est. 1995, Imam Malick Islamic Institute est. 2000, Aisha Umm al-Mu’minin and Bilal schools est. 2001, Soumayah est. 2013; near the capital area, in a semi-rural setting – Al-Rahman est. 2016; and a rural school in the Kerewan area.

(renamed Mohammedan Lower Basic School in 1993), which together with a full programme in English, also offered religious instruction (initially taught in the local languages) by eminent local scholars. Established by the Banjul Muslim Elders association, it now operates as a Local Agreement School, applying the national curriculum, under the joint responsibility of the Ministry of Education and the association.⁴

A second landmark was the establishment in 1975, also in Banjul, of the Muslim High School (renamed Muslim Senior Secondary School in 1996), with distinct English- and Arabic-medium divisions. The English division, which enrolls the greater number of pupils, applies the national curriculum. The Arabic division includes grades 1-9, in addition to the senior (10-12) grades.

The madrasa movement, which aims to provide instruction in both general and religious subjects in Arabic medium, had a late start in The Gambia, compared for example to Mali, where madrasa were inaugurated in the 1940s. The first school was founded in 1963 in Tallinding (also in the capital area), under the aegis of the Gambian Islamic Union. The madrasa movement has greatly expanded since then, and it is estimated that there may now be about 400 schools, including over 160 under the Gambian Islamic Union. While most madrasa operate at the Lower Basic level (offering grades 1 to 6, or in some cases, just the first few grades), others also offer Upper Basic (grades 7 to 9), while there are about 25 senior secondary schools (grades 10 to 12). Nursery and kindergarten classes have also been created, especially at larger urban schools. Curricula have progressively evolved, placing ever-increasing emphasis and classroom time on English and general subjects (such as maths, natural and social sciences). The relative roles of Arabic and English have been a major subject of negotiation between the Ministry of Education and the Islamic educational associations, with the larger madrasa progressively implementing English medium for the general subjects. All or virtually all madrasa are coeducational, though girls and boys may sit in separate classrooms.

The Ahmadiyya religious movement also runs several schools in The Gambia, including three senior secondary schools of very high academic repute, applying the national, English-medium curriculum. These schools

4 Information presented in this section is based on interviews conducted at the Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education, especially the Division of Curriculum Development, the Gambian Islamic Union, and Amana (the “General Secretariat for Islamic and Arabic Education,” an association of Islamic schools), as well as with the principals, vice-principals, and other officials of each of the establishments cited. Statistical information about the madrasa is confirmed by the Ministry of Education’s yearbooks (see, e.g., Republic of The Gambia, 2017). Interviews at schools and institutions of higher education were accompanied by on-site observation.

are open to all, but are free for those who declare an Ahmadi affiliation and attend Ahmadi religion classes.⁵

An “American” school, located in Brikama, provides a challenging educational experience, teaching both the full government curriculum in English, and the full Arabic curriculum developed by Amana (the “General Secretariat for Islamic and Arabic Education,” which represents the majority of Islamic schools, and is responsible for accrediting them in collaboration with the Ministry of Education).⁶

Gambia College was founded in 1978 through the merger of several earlier institutions; its School of Education, which trains the nation’s teachers, has had an Arabic and Islamic Studies Unit since 2007. The University of The Gambia opened a Department of Islamic Studies shortly after its founding in 1999. Both departments now cater primarily to graduates of the Arabic-medium schools.

Three specifically Islamic institutions of higher education have been created in the present decade. An Islamic University, founded in 2011, provides a three-year Bachelor of Arts curriculum, teaching Islamic subjects in Arabic medium. The Islamic Online University, also founded in 2011, provides both online and offline courses, taught in English, in a variety of disciplines, through the Bachelor or Master levels, as well as intensive instruction in the Arabic and English languages. Dar al-Hikma College for women, founded in 2014, provides a three-year Bachelor of Arts curriculum in Islamic subjects, taught in Arabic. The Islamic University admitted women as well as men until the creation of the women’s college; since then, it has been enrolling men only. A senior secondary (twelfth grade) diploma from a madrasa is a prerequisite for admission to both the Islamic University and Dar al-Hikma.⁷

In addition, as many as several hundred Gambian students, mostly men but also some women, every year obtain scholarships to pursue their studies in Arabic-speaking or Islamic countries.

5 Concerning the Ahmadiyya movement and Ahmadiyya religious schools in West Africa, see Fisher 1963, 1975.

6 Registered in 2010 as the Al-Madinah School. This school was initially created for the children of an African-American Muslim community that also operates an Islamic religious school in Los Angeles (see “Al Madinah School,” www.youtube.com, accessed 5 November 2017, and references in listings of U.S. private schools). However, the great majority of pupils are from local Gambian families.

7 For further information concerning Gambia College, the University of The Gambia, and the Islamic Online University, see their websites: www.gambiacollege.edu.gm, www.utg.edu.gm, and gambia.iou.edu.gm.

The so-called Qur'anic schools, providing elementary instruction in the reading, recitation and copying of the Holy Book, but also advanced instruction in the different Islamic disciplines (a second phase of study, which Gambian Muslim scholars often designate by the Arabic term *majlis*), continue to play an important role in the countryside and even in the capital area.⁸ They are formally under the supervision of the Gambian Supreme Islamic Council.

Amana develops both a substantial curriculum in Islamic studies and Arabic language (and corresponding textbooks and teaching manuals in Arabic) for the madrasa, and (in collaboration with the Ministry of Education) the "Islamic Religious Knowledge" syllabi and teachers' guides for the conventional, English-medium schools (corresponding to just a few hours of instruction per week). Although many different religious tendencies are represented in The Gambia, the member schools have decided to emphasise the Maliki tradition, historically predominant in West Africa and in The Gambia in particular.

The English- and Arabic-medium schools are characterised by considerable interchange of teachers and pupils. Thus, many pupils who have completed their junior secondary or senior secondary studies at a madrasa go on to English-medium schools (usually stepping down one or more grades). However, with expanded English-language instruction in the madrasa, some graduates are being admitted directly to English-medium institutions of higher education. Increasingly too, government teachers are being posted to madrasa to teach English and English-medium subjects.

Although there have been attempts to introduce them since colonial times, until recently the study of Gambian languages has received relatively little attention in the conventional schools. There are now plans to include these languages (written in Latin characters), as an aid in learning how to read, in the first three years of Lower Basic, English-medium schools. Materials have been prepared for Mandinka, Soninke, Fula, Jola, and Wolof, and are now being readied for Manjaku and Serer. In contrast, local languages maintain the important roles they have traditionally held at the Qur'anic

⁸ As I have argued elsewhere (for example Tamari 2016: 31, 54-55), the term "Qur'anic school" is somewhat of a misnomer, among other reasons, because the second phase of study is not essentially consecrated to the Qur'an. Santerre (1973) was the first to note the culturally and pedagogically very significant distinction between "elementary" Qur'anic and advanced "complementary" studies.

schools, as the media of oral explanation, in the memorisation schools and to a considerable extent in the madrasa.⁹

Teachers at the Qur'anic schools are designated by an array of African-language terms, such as *karamoko* (Mandinka) and *kan* (Mandinka, Fulfulde, and Wolof), whereas those at the madrasa, memorisation and other modernising schools are designated by the Arabic term *ustadh*.

History of the Memorisation Schools

The term “Qur'anic memorisation school” is the literal translation (used in The Gambia) of the Arabic expression *madrasa* (or *ma^had*) *li-tahfiz al-qur'an*. The first such school in The Gambia is said to have been founded in the late 1980s, and the second one in 1995. Beginning about 2000, these schools have undergone rapid expansion, with new establishments opening every year. According to Amana, since it decided (in 2016) to admit the memorisation schools to the organisation, it has received and accepted about a hundred applications.

According to all Islamic educationists interviewed, the school at Ebo Town (a lower-income neighbourhood adjoining Serekunda, in the capital area) was the first establishment specialising in Qur'an memorisation to be opened in The Gambia. This school was founded by Imam Bahram Jobe of Serekunda, the widely known religious leader and philanthropist, as an establishment offering free Islamic education, especially memorisation, for boys. It is, however, with the arrival of “Amadu Somali” about 1990 that more efficient, recently developed pedagogical methods were introduced. A Somali national, Amadu had just graduated from university in Medina; he came to The Gambia at the behest of Imam Jobe and Saudi religious organisations. Amadu Somali organised a full curriculum, including auxiliary study of subjects such as *fiqh*, *hadith*, and Arabic grammar. As he was unfamiliar with the Gambian languages, he insisted that his pupils communicate in Arabic only, even among themselves. Although he no longer resides continuously in The Gambia, his aura remains considerable. He is credited with training many of those who went on to teach Qur'an memorisation, and some consider that he was also the first to introduce *tajwid* (recitation of the Qur'an according

9 At the Gambian madrasa I have observed, all content is orally translated into one or more local languages, through grade six; use of the local languages is progressively phased out in the higher grades. Concerning the memorisation schools, see more below. The important role maintained by the national languages in Malian madrasa is documented in Tamari 2009. For a comprehensive study of the Malian madrasa, see Brenner 2001.

to certain rules) in The Gambia. Over the years, more than 250 young men have mastered Qur'an memorisation while studying at the Ebo Town school.

Dar al-Arqam (named for the person in whose home the first Muslims hid to pray), founded in 1995, may be the second Qur'anic memorisation school to have been established in The Gambia. The founder, Ibrahim Thiam, had studied with his father, who ran a large *majlis* in a Wolof-speaking area, memorising the Qur'an under his tutelage. He then went on to Muslim High School, completing grade 12, and from there to Sudan, obtaining a university degree (*ijaza*) in Khartoum, and thence to Saudi Arabia. In the course of his extended educational travels, he was led to re-memorise the Qur'an according to the Hafs "reading" widely accepted in the Middle East,¹⁰ and ultimately decided to open a Qur'an memorisation school. From the very first, he admitted girls as well as boys – thus setting a pattern that has been followed by most other Qur'anic memorisation schools – in his establishment situated in the somewhat peripheral neighbourhood of Sintu Alagie.

The example of Kokki in Senegal – at over 3,000 students, considered by many interlocutors as the largest Islamic school in West Africa¹¹ – is cited by some Islamic educationists as an inspiration for the introduction of Qur'anic memorisation schools in The Gambia. Kokki is said to have started teaching Qur'an memorisation, according to a particularly efficient method, no later than the 1970s. Many Gambian educationists, including teachers specialising in Qur'an memorisation, have studied this – as well as other Islamic disciplines – at Kokki. Gambians state that memorisation schools have been common in Senegal for a long time, and many Gambian families send their children to study this (as well as other religious disciplines) in Senegal. (Conversely, however, some Senegalese come to The Gambia to study memorisation, though probably in lesser numbers.¹²)

10 "Hafs" and "Nafi" (whose "Warsh" variant is mentioned below) are among the seven *qira'at* or "readings" that, since the second century AH/eighth century CE, have been widely accepted as valid throughout the Muslim world. Differences among the readings concern the pronunciation of certain letters and signs, pauses, and vowelling (which may, in some instances, induce differences of interpretation).

11 See Ware 2014; Dramé 2014. There are numerous references to Kokki on the internet, for example on www.seneweb.com and www.lesoleil.sn.

12 The transnational movement of pupils is often linked to the belief that a particular school, or schools in a particular area, are better, but also to the view that children concentrate more fully on their studies, and improve their character, away from home. Furthermore, in the Islamic world generally and in West Africa in particular, advanced study has long been associated with travel.

The memorisation techniques introduced by Amadu Somali and some Gambian teachers are said to have been initially developed in Saudi Arabia, and differ, in several important respects, from those practised hitherto.

Contrary to a widespread misconception, in most localities, the traditional Qur'anic schools did not emphasise the full memorisation of the Qur'an – though this was a highly valued achievement. Generally, these schools aimed at inculcating in their pupils the ability to correctly read aloud (“recite”) portions of the written text, while retaining by heart a limited number of suras – usually the Fatiha (first sura of the Qur'an), several of the shorter suras from the back of the Qur'an, as well as certain suras that are – locally or more widely – considered of especial significance. Those who had achieved a certain level of skill in reading and recitation were encouraged or required to learn how to write by copying out the suras they were studying.¹³ In some localities, those of greater ability and motivation (or coming from scholarly families) were led to achieve the full, correct recitation of the Qur'anic text, reading aloud from an exemplar; those who became teachers themselves might then, through repeated recitation over time, gradually acquire a mnemonic knowledge of much or all of the Qur'an. In some localities and cultural and linguistic milieux only, notably among the Soninke and some Fulfulde-speaking groups, recitation of the full Qur'an from memory, followed if possible by its writing out from memory, was highly desired, and a prerequisite to further study. These feats were achieved, in every generation, by an elite of scholars, most of whom belonged to lineages with a tradition of religious learning. In all cases, recitation of the full Qur'an from memory was rarely accomplished before the age of twenty (often a decade or so later), while the reproduction of the written text from memory required one or more years of additional training. According to all persons interviewed in The Gambia, full memorisation of the Qur'an (whether in oral or written form) has traditionally been a rare – though much admired – achievement.

In contrast, the Qur'anic memorisation schools aim to lead nearly all the children they enrol to achieve correct oral recitation of the whole Qur'an, from memory, within a period of two to six years of intensive study. The exact amount of time a child will need is said to depend on her/his ability (and also appears to vary, to some extent, among schools). However, teachers insist, only a very few children are unable to complete memorisation – whether because they are generally slow, or because they cannot retain longer suras and passages. One teacher cited as extreme cases, a boy who needed eight years in order to memorise, and a twelfth-grade madrasa graduate who

13 In nearly all the Qur'anic schools that I have visited, in Mali and Guinea as well as The Gambia, reading and recitation are studied for a considerable time before writing is introduced.

needed only one year (surely because he already had a good knowledge of the Book). Children are currently being admitted to the Qur'an memorisation schools at ever-younger ages. It is claimed that some children (girls as well as boys) as young as eight have fully mastered the oral recitation from memory of the whole Qur'an, though this is more usually accomplished between the ages of twelve and eighteen.

The preceding remark points to another fundamental change: though girls as well as boys have long attended Qur'anic schools in The Gambia (at least among the Mandinka and the Jakhanke), they rarely persisted in their studies. Therefore, as far as I have been able to ascertain, all the *hafiz* ("bearers" of the Qur'an) there have traditionally been men. Now there are women and girls, as well as young boys.

Another transformation concerns the nature of the recitation itself. Whereas the Maghreb, and correlatively West Africa, have for centuries practised the Warsh "reading," the Gambian memorisation schools teach the Hafs "reading" characteristic of the Middle East, especially Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Thus, the Gambian schools partake of the worldwide trend towards decreasing diversity in recitation practices and the near monopoly of Hafs. Correlatively, local recitation styles (linked to a particular region, or to a linguistic and cultural community) are also under challenge.¹⁴ In contrast, I am told, the Senegalese memorisation schools including Kokki are more conservative, maintaining the teaching of Warsh, and sometimes, additionally offering Hafs.

It may be asked how and why children are able to learn in a few years what once took at least a decade to accomplish. The main factor has probably been correctly identified by one Qur'anic memorisation teacher, who stated that his pupils have all their time available for study, whereas under past conditions, most students had to spend the greater part of their time on farmwork and various other non-academic pursuits.

Furthermore, it is my impression that memorisation pupils are rapidly urged to learn relatively long passages from the Qur'an – longer, at any given level, than those studied by their counterparts in the Qur'anic schools, though the latter are not required to retain them by heart. The memorisation schools insist on frequent – and during the later phases of study, continual – revision of previously studied passages, grouped in progressively longer units. While the Qur'anic schools also place considerable emphasis on revision, their pupils are unlikely to find the time for such extended recitation.

Additional factors may also contribute to the memorisation pupils' success, such as the very regular schedules, and (in most cases) ample food.

14 Such recitation styles, briefly discussed in Tamari 2016: 40, deserve systematic study.

Social Contexts

All or nearly all memorisation schools have been founded by Islamic scholars, or by philanthropists working in association with Islamic scholars. Of those I personally visited, six were established by persons with expertise in memorisation. On the other hand, the Aisha Umm al-Mu'minin school for girls – the first to be specifically dedicated to them – was founded by a former woman teacher and principal in the conventional (English-medium) schools. She felt that better religious education is essential for girls, and has dedicated her retirement to helping them. An eighth, rural school had long existed as a family-run *karanta* (Qur'anic school), to which a madrasa had been associated for some decades. When the family became unable to maintain the madrasa, due to lack of adequate resources and personnel, it entrusted instruction to two young men, both expert in Qur'anic memorisation, who additionally taught other religious subjects.

The founders and directors of the first, urban schools all had significant international experience, having studied abroad (in Egypt, Libya, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Mauritania, Senegal, and less frequently, in Mali, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Niger, and/or Chad). The lady director of the above-mentioned school for girls is also well travelled. The women directors, both expert in memorisation, of two small schools (one urban, one semi-rural) have studied exclusively in The Gambia, but one is assisted (in running the school) by her well-travelled husband, while the other is assisted (in teaching as well as running the school) by her husband and co-wife, both of whom had studied in the Sudan (respectively, in Khartoum and Omdurman).

The teachers I met report having accomplished their memorisation studies in Ebo Town, Dar al-Arqam, and other Gambian memorisation schools, but also at Kokki and elsewhere in Senegal, as well as (perhaps according to more traditional techniques) in Mauritania. In addition, many have attended Qur'anic schools (most usually "upcountry") and/or madrasa. Most have studied exclusively in Arabic-medium, though some speak English as well (whether acquired in madrasa classes, or informally). One young man was studying at an English-medium, conventional school when he felt a strong need to deepen his Islamic learning. He began memorising at a suburban school while continuing his English studies, obtained his English-medium senior secondary diploma, then completed Qur'an memorisation while studying full-time at the suburban school. Nearly all the men teachers I have personally met are young (aged about 22 to about 30), and several expressed the desire to pursue their studies; one had just obtained a scholarship to an Arab country. During my school visits, I met just four women experts in memorisation; one appeared to be in her twenties and the other three, in their thirties.

While memorisation teachers may also provide instruction in other Islamic subjects and in the Arabic language, schools often hire additional (usually part-time) instructors for this purpose. They also hire (again, usually part-time) instructors for the English language and general subjects (such as maths). Whether teaching Islamic or general subjects, nearly all these instructors had received most of their education in Arabic-medium schools. Exceptionally, an instructor in English or general studies may have received most or all of her/his education in English-medium schools. Most have received their training in The Gambia; a few have, additionally, studied in Senegal.¹⁵ Many part-time teachers give lessons at several schools.

In our sample of eight, four schools are co-educational, two are restricted to boys, and two are dedicated to girls. Ebo Town, as already mentioned, admits only boys. Having started out with about 20 pupils, it now has about 150. For logistical reasons, the Imam Malick Islamic Institute accepts only boys in its memorisation sections; it has 290 pupils on its main campus (which also houses a madrasa that admits girls) situated in the affluent Kanifing neighbourhood, almost 80 pupils in a unit exclusively dedicated to memorisation in Banjul, and has recently opened an upcountry memorisation unit that is expected to receive 60 pupils.¹⁶ Dar al-Arqam school started out, in 1995, with 20 boys and girls; it now has a total enrolment of approximately 340, including 135 girls. The Bilal school, founded in 2001, which initially admitted only boys, began accepting girls c. 2007. It now has two separate campuses: one in Westfield (a very central and commercial urban area), which enrolls 90 girls, and one in Yundum (a semi-rural community on the periphery of the capital area, about 10 kilometers from Brikama) which enrolls approximately 230 boys. The Aisha Umm al-Mu'minin school in Kanifing, also founded in 2001, has enrolled as many as 225 girls at one time. The Soumayah school (named for Islam's first woman martyr), founded in 2013 and currently situated in the affluent Brusubi neighbourhood, has enrolled up to 50 girls at a time. The Al-Rahman school, established by a woman teacher in late 2016 in semi-rural Busumbala (adjoining Yundum), counts approximately equal numbers of boys and girls among its 30 pupils.

15 The Ministry of Education's yearbooks show that nearly all madrasa teachers (98%) are Gambian. See Republic of The Gambia 2017: 78-82, 210-214, 320-324, 428-432.

16 This school is mentioned by Gaibazzi 2015: 58, 85. The Imam Malick school has posted several videos, including "Children of the World" (4 minutes) and "Sumpudo Khati" (showing moments of a graduation ceremony, 5 minutes), added on 3 October 2008 and 17 February 2013, respectively. The Bilal school has posted numerous videos, including excerpts from a graduation ceremony (78 minutes) and from a visit by Sir Dawda Jawara, Gambia's first president (89 minutes), added on 28 February 2015 and 13 August 2017, respectively. (All on www.youtube.com, viewed on 17 August 2018.)

The two smaller schools report receiving numerous applications that they are unable to accept, due to lack of facilities. The director of the newer girls' school envisages the creation of a boys' section, subject to the obtention of adequate facilities. The rural school, located in the Kerewan area, currently has about 50 pupils, both boys and girls.

Of the schools visited, five privilege boarding; nevertheless, at least three (Bilal, Dar al-Arqam, and Soumayah) also admit day pupils. Ebo Town, which has always had both day and boarding students, now has 25-30 boarders, out of a total of 150 students. Bilal hopes to open a special facility for day boys on its campus in Yundum. The semi-rural school in Busumbala only accepts day pupils, who live within walking distance; but it hopes to secure facilities that will allow it to take in boarders. The rural school now receives only village pupils, but the madrasa that preceded it had many boarders.

Age ranges of pupils vary considerably among the schools. Ebo Town has a minimal entry age of 13, and admits many pupils who have completed their senior secondary studies, whether in Arabic or English; it thus enrolls many adults. The Bilal School admits children and teens aged 7 to 17, though occasionally it will accept younger or older pupils. Dar al-Arqam and Imam Malick accept a majority of young children, but also mid-teens. The Aisha Umm al-Mu'minin School considers that it is best for girls to begin their studies between the ages of 7 and 10; however, it sometimes accepts girls as young as 5, or ones that are already in their teens (up to age 16). The newer girls' school enrolls pupils between the ages of 4 and 18, and includes a majority of small children among its wards. Most of the children at the semi-rural school appeared to be about 8 to about 12 years old, with a total age range of about 7 to about 14. The rural school mostly enrolls young children and early teens.

With the notable exception of Amadu Somali, all the founders, directors, and teachers I have encountered in the memorisation schools have been Gambian. Some hail from the capital area or have long been based there, while others are from the interior. Pupils' origins, on the other hand, are considerably more varied. While nearly all pupils are of West African and most usually Gambian parentage, many were born or have lived abroad and/or their parents and some of their siblings continue to reside abroad. The proportion of children whose families reside abroad varies considerably among schools. Such children constitute perhaps a third of the pupils at the Bilal and Soumayah schools, and are also very well-represented at Imam Malick, Dar al-Arqam and Aisha Umm al-Mu'minin. These children include citizens of France, Spain, the United States and Canada, as well as ones whose parents reside in Guinea, Mali, and Senegal. The Ebo Town school currently draws boys from Senegal, Guinea-Bissau, and Mali. A considerable percentage of the Gambian children in the capital area boarding schools are

from “upcountry.” On the other hand, the Busumbala day school and the rural school seem to cater primarily or exclusively to local children.

Most children from Europe and North America are sent to the memorisation schools at a young age (c. 8-12). In many cases, two siblings come together. However, a significant number of mid and late adolescents are also enrolled (often after the completion of junior secondary school). These children and young people often declare that they had not been consulted about their wishes, and express the desire to return to their former homes – while also recognising the value of their current studies. Younger children declared that they expected to return to their countries of citizenship and to continue their studies there, after completion of memorisation. Youths also indicated that they expected their parents to come and take them home after graduation, and teachers confirm that so far, this has always been the case. However, this interruption in their secondary school studies obviously raises the question of whether or not they will be able to pursue a senior secondary or professional programme in their home countries, and therefore, of their future prospects. On the other hand, several older girls (aged about 18 to about 22, and fully veiled – unlike the other young women studying at the same schools) claim to have come to The Gambia, and their chosen school in particular, on their own initiative. They furthermore state that once they have acquired sufficient religious knowledge and skills in Arabic, they intend to travel to the Middle East to pursue their studies there. All children and youth are fluent in the official languages of their home countries (English, French, or Spanish), and the older ones are literate in them as well.

Children from Europe and North America are also enrolled in the madrasa – where they appear to form, however, a much smaller percentage of the student body. Parental preference for the memorisation schools may be due to the fact that they generally provide for on-site boarding, and exert closer control over pupils’ activities.

Islamic educationists, but also Gambians generally, view favourably the return of West African, and especially Gambian, children and youth for study in religious institutions in the African homeland. They consider that this is an excellent means of providing them with the religious and cultural knowledge, and sense of identity, that they might otherwise lack.

All the boarding schools included teachers and students from a diversity of linguistic and cultural backgrounds: Mandinka, Soninke, Fula, and Wolof, in some cases also Jola. At any given school, students sharing the “ethnic” or linguistic background of the founder constituted the majority, or alternatively, the largest single group within the student body. Thus, at the Bilal school and especially the Imam Malick Islamic Institute (which was founded by and receives the support of a Soninke community association), Soninke children

are in the majority; at the Dar al-Arqam school, Wolof children constitute the majority. Mandinka constitute the majority at both girls' schools, while the rural and semi-rural schools recruit among the local, Mandinka children. Many children learn an additional Gambian language through their interactions with their teachers and fellow pupils. Foreign-born pupils usually have some knowledge of their parents' native language, and improve it or acquire another African language. Teachers use any and all of the languages they know to communicate with their pupils. Usually this is a Gambian language, but teachers may use English with North American children, as well as with other foreign-born children who had studied this language in the course of their previous schooling. At the Bilal School, the majority Mandinka and few Fula teachers use these languages (especially Mandinka), but also Wolof, to communicate with their mostly Soninke pupils – who thus acquire Mandinka in the course of their studies. Among Gambians abroad, Soninke-speakers are the ones most likely to enrol their children in the memorisation schools.

Fees for day pupils are moderate. Dar al-Arqam charges 1,050 dalasis per year, the Busumbala school 100 dalasis per month, and the Soumayah school 150 per month. The Ebo Town school, which receives various charitable contributions, is free even for boarders. These charges are lower than those at most madrasa (3,000 to 5,000 dalasis per year, depending on the grade and the school) and average, neighbourhood English-medium private schools (6,000 to 8,000 dalasis per year).¹⁷

Bilal and both girls' schools charge 1,000 per month for boarders (inclusive of tuition and fees as well as room and board), while Dar al-Arqam has an annual charge of 8,000 dalasis. Although the above fees do not seem high by international standards (over the past two years, the Gambian national currency has fluctuated at about 40-50 dalasis to the euro), they are considerably more than most Gambian families can afford.¹⁸ All school directors comment that many families do not pay, while others pay partially, irregularly, or late – and that they have to make up for the shortfall from charitable contributions or their own resources. The relatively low fee levels (by international standards) may be a factor explaining the substantial representation of pupils whose families reside abroad. However, directors point out that foreign-based parents are among the least reliable fee-payers.

Directors and teachers strive to provide their wards with the best living conditions possible, within the limits imposed by the schools' means. Thus, living conditions are correlated to school fees, and the higher-fee schools

17 The most prestigious private schools may charge fees that are almost ten times higher.

18 Most public sector salaries range from about 1,000 to 10,000 dalasis a month, and the average annual GDP per capita is below 500 euros.

are located in average to better-income neighbourhoods. Conditions are minimal in Ebo Town, significantly better in the peripheral suburb of Sintu Alagie, but at the other schools, probably equivalent to or in some cases better than those children might have at home. Conditions are best at the Imam Malick, Aisha Umm al-Mu'minin, and Soumayah schools, all located in above-average neighbourhoods. Both girls' schools are located in private villas. Aisha's director added one, then a second, floor to her home, in order to accommodate the many applicants to her school. The director of the Soumayah school moved to and chose her current home specifically so as to be able to adequately house her pupils. Her husband, who works in Britain, provides considerable funds for the school, and brings treats and gifts for the pupils every time he returns to The Gambia. Directors of both girls' schools explain that they do everything they can to provide their pupils with a homelike atmosphere. With the possible exception of the Ebo Town school, all boarders receive abundant food.

Most pupils appear to come from families that draw their living from commerce, or from wage employment abroad; most fathers seem to have a background in Islamic studies rather than English. However, at least one senior civil servant, and one leading businessman educated in English, have enrolled their children in memorisation schools.

Children are largely liberated from the chores they might have to do at home (or would have traditionally accomplished at the Qur'anic schools), since the larger and more expensive boarding schools hire professional cooks and cleaners. At the family-run Sintu Alagie school (with teachers' families living in adjoining compounds), women family members do much of the cooking. However, at the two girls' schools and at Bilal, girls are required to join the cooks at certain times, so as to acquire appropriate skills. The boys at Bilal are required to help clean the school grounds, not only so as to keep their campus in better shape, but also to build their character.

All the boarding schools allow their pupils opportunities for leisure and amusement. Children may watch television or converse during breaks. Boys generally play football on their days off, while the two girls' schools encourage physical exercise and sports. Children may also shop and walk around in the areas near their schools. Some schools encourage children to relax rather than revise in the time immediately preceding sleep.

Some schools threaten young, unruly and unmotivated pupils with physical punishment, and exceptionally, apply it. Teachers explain that some of their wards had proven "troublesome" in the conventional schools or madrasa they had previously attended. Usually, their behaviour improves at the memorisation schools, but in extreme cases, they are sent home. I have seen no evidence of corporal punishment at the girls' schools.

Pedagogy

The daily schedules of the memorisation schools are based on those of the traditional Qur'anic schools. Boarding schools thus have an early morning session (beginning at 4 AM) in which pupils revise their previous day's lesson. This is followed by the dawn prayer, then a nap, then breakfast at about 9 AM. Then there is a substantial study session, in which the pupil may revise the previous lesson, have her/his knowledge tested, and/or receive a new lesson (on condition of having mastered the previous one). From about noon to three o'clock, there will be rest, the early afternoon prayer, lunch, and more rest or relaxation. Then, there is a long afternoon session, from about 3 to 6 PM, in which pupils revise and, if this has not been done earlier, have their knowledge tested and receive a new lesson; they also perform the mid-afternoon prayer. Students may then briefly relax prior to the sunset prayer. They will have some more food, then study until the night prayer, and sometimes after it as well. The daytime naps compensate for the relatively short night's sleep.¹⁹ Usually, day pupils do not attend the early morning or late evening sessions. The Bilal girls' section often follows up the morning prayer by a lecture on general topics of religion and morality (usually given in a local language, but in some instances partially in English – understood by some pupils).

This daily schedule differs substantially from those observed in the conventional schools and madrasa. The latter favour a long morning shift, from about 8 or 8:30 AM until 1 PM (punctuated by several short breaks), with an afternoon shift for classes that cannot be accommodated otherwise (due to lack of classroom space and/or teaching personnel).

The scheduling of weekly and holiday breaks, at both the memorisation schools and the madrasa, is inspired by Qur'anic school practices. Thus, all these schools either have Thursday and Friday off – the most common pattern – or break from Wednesday afternoon to Friday morning inclusive. Schools grant their pupils a total of two weeks to a month off for the 'Id al-Adha (Sacrificial Festival) and the 'Id al-Fitr (end of Ramadan) festival; some close for the entire month of Ramadan. Certain schools grant pupils one or two days off for the 'Ashura' and/or Mawlid (Prophet's birthday) celebrations.²⁰

¹⁹ Compare to the typical daily Qur'anic school schedule reported by Wilks 1968: 168-169, note 3. Tamari 2016: 34-36 also provides information about Qur'anic school schedules and holidays.

²⁰ The religious status of these holidays is controversial. Though Mawlid observances are becoming increasingly elaborate in some circles, they are criticised as *bid'a* (illegal innovation) in others.

Many pupils join the memorisation schools after study at a Qur'anic school, a madrasa or an English-medium school; for some of the youngest children, however, the memorisation school is their first scholastic experience.

The memorisation schools distinguish several levels of study. A fundamental distinction is drawn between the study of the Arabic writing system, called *huruf* (from the Arabic word designating the letters of the alphabet), and memorisation (*tahfiz*). All pupils begin with the study of the Arabic writing signs, unless they have learnt them earlier. Pupils study first the consonants, then the vowels, progressing from isolated signs to syllables. Having mastered these, pupils will then learn to read words and short sentences. Some schools will also introduce elements of *tajwid* (Qur'an recitation rules) at this stage. For those studying the Arabic writing system for the first time, this process may take anywhere from two months to a year (depending on the child and the school). Entering pupils who have a partial knowledge of the Arabic writing system are placed in an appropriate group, so that they can progress without loss of time.

This introductory study is in several respects very different from that traditionally provided in the Qur'anic schools. In The Gambia as elsewhere in West Africa, most Qur'anic schools teach the alphabet beginning with *bi-si-mi*, i.e. in the order in which the different characters and signs appear in the Qur'an, starting with the *basmala* (initial blessing formula) and Fatiha (the first sura, regularly recited in daily prayers); a few Qur'anic schools base their instruction on the *abajada* (old) order of the Arabic alphabet. But the memorisation schools base their teaching on the *a-ba-ta-sha* order of the alphabet, which though prevalent in the madrasa, has to the best of my knowledge been traditionally used only in Timbuktu.²¹ *Huruf* classes also differ from Qur'anic school instruction in that they make use of prepared booklets, presenting words and phrases that may be neutral rather than religious in content; whereas in the Qur'anic schools, pupils begin their study with the Holy Book. Furthermore, the teacher writes on the blackboard – as well as on individual slates and copybooks – and pupils typically follow the teacher's explanations in small groups, rather than receiving wholly individualised instruction.

21 Mommersteeg 1991 provides an excellent analysis of the process of learning to read (following the *bi-si-mi* method) in Djenne. Ndiaye 1985 analyses the pedagogies of reading and memorisation in Senegal. Eickelman (1978, 1985) analyses, in some depth, the process of Qur'anic memorisation in Morocco. It is an open question when the *a-ba-ta-sha* method – the only one known and remembered in the Timbuktu area – came into use; could it be related to the influence of the *médersah* (Fraco-Arabic school) founded in Timbuktu by the French authorities in 1910? (see Tamari 2016: 37-38).

As may be inferred from the above, a *huruf* class may integrate pupils of widely varying ages.

The *tahfiz* (memorisation) phase comprises several levels. As in traditional Qur'anic instruction, pupils learn first the Fatiha, then the last *juz'* (S.78-114) of the Qur'an, proceeding from the last sura (S.114) forwards. They then continue towards the beginning of the Qur'an, concluding with a re-study of the Fatiha. During this phase, they are required, at least at some schools, to enunciate the Qur'anic text from memory, without looking at their slate (or more usually copybook), on which the teacher has written out the assigned text. In some memorisation schools, the pupil may be required to recite with his back to the teacher and the text, whereas in most Qur'anic schools, at least during the first "voyage" through the Qur'an, the pupil will on the contrary look at and attempt to follow the written text while reciting. On their second voyage through the Book, pupils may (as in the Qur'anic schools) proceed in normal order (from S.1 to S.114). Pupils are assigned progressively longer units to read and memorise, but the target for each pupil is set individually, in accordance with her/his ability. Teachers state that in the revision phase, pupils will review one, then two, and finally as many as ten *hizb* at a time. The final revisions are based on the four-quarter division of the Qur'an (S.1-6, S.7-17, S.18-35, S.36-114).²²

Most of the memorisation schools, teachers state, do not emphasise writing. Children nevertheless learn how to trace Arabic characters and words by copying from the blackboard during *huruf* instruction, and later in the context of lessons in the auxiliary subjects. However, a few schools, I am told, require pupils who have attained a certain level of skill in recitation and memorisation to also copy out the text of their lesson (as is done in the Qur'anic schools). None of my interlocutors knew of any school that aimed at the writing out of the Qur'an from memory.

In the larger memorisation schools visited – Bilal, Imam Malick, Dar al-Arqam, and Aisha Umm al-Mu'minin – learning is furthermore structured through "classes." These are, as one teacher explained, based neither on pupils' ages nor on their scholastic attainments. Rather, "upon completion of *huruf*, the pupil may be taken to any class." In practice, it seems there is a tendency to create classes of approximately similar size. Most classes include pupils of widely varying ages, positioned at very different levels of study; this

22 The *juz'* is a thirtieth part of the Qur'an, the *hizb* is a sixtieth part. The term *rub'* may refer not only to the four quarters of the Qur'an, but (in other contexts) to a quarter of a *hizb*. The *thumna*, which is a standard study unit in some phases of traditional Qur'anic memorisation, is an eighth-part of a *hizb*. Hamès 2013 studies the roles of these subdivisions in several sub-Saharan Qur'an manuscripts.

is too regular to be coincidental, and one could say that each class comprises a representative sample of the school's pupils. Each class is placed under the responsibility of its memorisation instructor, whom one could compare to a "homeroom teacher."

Though Dar al-Arqam states that it initially taught only memorisation, all schools currently teach other subjects as well. The most frequently taught subjects are *fiqh* (Islamic law and jurisprudence), *hadith* (study of traditions concerning the deeds and sayings of the Prophet), and Arabic and/or English; some schools offer additional religious disciplines or maths. These subjects are taught using differing methodologies. In some schools, such as Ebo Town and Dar al-Arqam, concise (often: medieval to early twentieth-century) manuals may be memorised.²³ At other schools, teachers may lecture on various religious themes, while interactive methods may be used to teach Arabic or English. Aisha Umm al-Mu'minin uses the English course (structured around videos) developed by the Islamic Online University (which has donated a copy to the school), studied with the help of a teacher.

Most schools introduce at least some of these complementary subjects early on in the memorisation process. However, Dar al-Arqam presents them only after this process has been completed; it nevertheless insists that pupils study them before leaving the school, as essential preparation for further learning. The complementary subjects are often scheduled on "weekends," i.e. the Qur'anic schools' traditional two-day weekly break, on which no Qur'an study takes place in the memorisation schools; but they may also be scheduled during some of the daily breaks. Their role in the memorisation schools' curricula has been growing steadily, with the goal of helping pupils make the best possible transition to further study at madrasa or conventional schools. At many memorisation schools, some pupils, especially ones who have entered the revision phase, may also attend a conventional school or madrasa (and therefore, in some cases, attend only some of the memorisation school's study sessions). This can be done with particular ease on Imam Malick's main campus, since it comprises both a memorisation section and a madrasa.

Instruction at the memorisation schools thus involves an original combination of individual tutorials (for Qur'an memorisation), small group study (for the Arabic writing system), and classroom-type instruction (at many of the schools, for complementary subjects). Individual one-on-one instruction, with each pupil progressing at her/his own pace, is a hallmark of traditional Qur'an instruction in West Africa, and may well be general throughout the Muslim world. On the other hand, neither the madrasa nor the memorisation

23 These manuals are also used in the Qur'anic schools.

schools have maintained the tutorial study of other Arabic books that has traditionally been such a distinctive feature of advanced Islamic education in West Africa (as pointed out by both Santerre 1973 and Brenner 2001, 2008). Small group and classroom instruction clearly derive from Western models, as exemplified in the madrasa as well as conventional schools. On the other hand, as noted above, the use of local languages, both for general communication and for religious explanation, has been maintained in the memorisation schools and to a considerable extent, also in the madrasa.

Most pupils who have completed memorisation proceed to further study in a madrasa or English-medium school. Depending on the school, the individual pupil's ability and general educational background, s/he may be admitted to any grade between 6 and 10 in a madrasa or conventional school; those who have achieved proficiency in the complementary subjects tend to be admitted to higher grades. Some memorisation schools have developed a close relationship with one or two madrasa, and graduating pupils interested in Arabic-medium instruction usually pursue their studies at these. Many memorisation school leavers, and their directors and teachers, cherish the hope that they will eventually go on to university, whether in Arabic or English.

The ideal trajectory, according to memorisation teachers, is for a child to enrol in their schools at age 7 or 8, either directly or after a brief spell at a Qur'anic school or madrasa; after full memorisation, the pupil should proceed to and complete, if possible to senior secondary level, a madrasa or conventional school. However, many children come in at later ages, and as noted above, a small but significant number of young men in their late teens or early twenties enrol in a memorisation school at their own initiative, late in or even after their senior secondary studies.

Directors, teachers, and many other Gambians insist that children do not "lose time" by attending a memorisation school. They state that after mastering the Qur'an, all other subjects become easier, and children experience great facility in pursuing their studies at madrasa and conventional schools, where they are often among the brightest pupils.

As may be inferred from the above, mnemonic mastery of the Qur'an is not necessarily associated with Arabic language skills. Most of the memorisation schools attempt to instil their pupils with some knowledge of the Arabic language, but this may be limited to an elementary, formal study of (classical) Arabic grammar and/or elementary communication skills (in modern literary Arabic). Some memorisation school pupils may understand Arabic because they had previously studied it at, or are simultaneously attending, a madrasa, while a greater number will master this language later, through subsequent studies at a madrasa. However, those continuing in English are unlikely to

acquire significant Arabic comprehension or communication skills in the course of their secondary studies. One of the rural memorisation teachers, who had completed twelfth grade in English, is now seeking to learn Arabic. Some schools may hold *tafsir* (Qur'an commentary) sessions – enunciated in the local languages – in Ramadan, or at other times of the year, but this is not a major part of their curriculum.

Remarkably, none of my interlocutors – Islamic educationists, teachers, or pupils – ever expressed any misgivings about the teaching, study or use of English or any other Western language. As one Islamic educationist stated: “English is the official language of The Gambia. It does not interfere with our religion. It is a language of international communication, necessary for access to science and technology.”

In several respects, the memorisation schools exhibit the influence of the Western (specifically British) school system. Thus, like the conventional schools and the madrasa, they have names, school mottoes and statements of purpose. Their mottoes and paragraph-long statements of purpose (which are generally formulated in both Arabic and English) usually refer not only to Islamic ideals but to pupils' expected future contributions to national development. Furthermore, like the Gambian madrasa and conventional schools (and unlike most scholastic establishments in the neighbouring Francophone countries), most memorisation schools have a uniform (specific to each school).

Examination and graduation practices reveal the influence of both traditional Islamic and Western education. Thus, traditionally in West Africa, those who completed certain phases of Qur'an study underwent a public examination, in which they were required to recite before – and answer questions from – several recognised scholars, in addition to their own teacher; usually, some of the examining scholars hailed from other localities. In some regions, persons who wished to have their knowledge of “books” recognised would pass an oral examination in front of an assembly of scholars. Nowadays in The Gambia, the memorisation schools call together a panel of internal and external examiners (including teachers from other memorisation schools, and in some instances, also other reputable scholars) to formally examine those pupils who, they believe, have successfully committed the Qur'an to memory. Schools may organise these examinations, which are usually held for several pupils, at fixed times of year. Some schools cooperate regularly in this task, examining each others' pupils (but also adding other external examiners). The fixed dates, and the vocabulary employed to describe these examination practices, suggest that Western models have contributed to their elaboration.

At their graduation ceremonies, pupils receive written certificates from their schools – whereas traditionally in most West African societies, written certificates were not delivered for Qur'an recitation or memorisation;²⁴ somewhat more commonly, the completion of “books” – or of certain books only – could be recognised by a written diploma (*ijaza*), signed by the teacher (Wilks 1968). The grandiose graduation ceremonies, which are filmed and photographed, are clearly indicative of Western influence.

Memorisation schools operate with a mix of traditional (or semi-traditional) and Western-style furnishings. All have blackboards, which are systematically used in *huruf* lessons, often in complementary subjects, and in some schools, also in Qur'anic instruction. Pupils usually sit on mats but there may also be desks and chairs. One school is planning to obtain furniture specifically designed for children.

To sum up, the schools' approaches to their pupils are best described as humane, with considerable tolerance for slower learners as well as encouragement for brighter ones, and concern for their physical and psychological well-being and their futures.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Qur'anic memorisation schools, which at first glance might appear to be a prolongation of the traditional Qur'anic schools, in reality constitute a veritable revolution in social and educational ideologies and practices, while auguring further changes to come. Their success shows that many parents feel that their offspring should be spending their childhood and adolescence studying full-time, rather than working to support themselves or their families, or even as apprentices to a trade. Furthermore, parents are willing to invest substantial resources in order to provide their children with adequate learning opportunities. Qur'an memorisation, though a supreme value in itself, is not conceived in opposition to madrasa or English-medium study, but rather as a particular phase in a young person's educational trajectory, which may be followed – or more rarely preceded – by secular or practical studies. In all types of educational establishments, both Islamic and secular, boys outnumber girls, but the latter are everywhere substantially represented, and constitute a quarter to a half of the pupils at the coeducational memorisation schools that I have had the good fortune to visit. The rapid growth observed in nearly all educational sectors²⁵ and the continual experimentation with new curricula and pedagogical methods – this unceasing

24 With the notable exception of Borno, in present-day Nigeria.

25 The Qur'anic schools may be an exception.

educational “bricolage” – is expressive of a relatively recent yet very strong demand for formal education – which is, in itself, a sea change. Notwithstanding any appearances to the contrary, Islamic education, including the Qur’anic memorisation schools, can provide a path towards educational and professional advancement, and increased personal autonomy, for women and girls. A significant number of European and North American minors are being sent to study in Islamic schools in The Gambia, not always in accordance with their own wishes. Qur’anic memorisation schools see themselves as fully preparing their pupils – spiritually and morally, but also in terms of general knowledge and a range of practical skills – for life and a better future in a developing nation state.

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ASCL Occasional Publication 34

Published by:
African Studies Centre Leiden
Postbus 9555
2300 RB Leiden
asc@ascleiden.nl
www.ascleiden.nl

Editors: Anneke Breedveld and Jan Jansen

Cover photos: Class in South Africa. Photo: Marieke van Winden. Class in Mali.
Photo: Wouter van Beek.

Layout: Via Bertha, Utrecht
Printed by Ipskamp Printing, Enschede

ISBN: 978-90-5448-173-7

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