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Esoteric Knowledge and Exoteric Knowledge

Based on a teaching model that started in Mamluk Egypt (Hiskett 1985:16-17), and spread throughout the Muslim world, a two-tier system of Islamic education was set up in Muslim Africa to promote the expansion of Islam. At the lower level, there are the Koranic schools (*kuttab*, plural *katatib* in Arabic) and at the higher level, the science schools (*madrasa*, plural *madaris*). The names of these schools in African languages vary, but their pedagogy and core curriculum tended to be identical throughout the Sudano-Sahelian region, if not in the Muslim world as a whole.

At the Koranic schools, pupils are admitted very young, between four and seven years of age. They are taught how to read and write in the Arabic script before starting to memorize the Koran. Some pupils are able to memorize the whole Koran within three to four years. Others take longer, some never manage it. They are also taught the rudiments of religious practice (ablution, prayer, fasting, etc.). Because parents do not always pay for the tuition and maintenance of their children, and teaching is the main activity of Koranic masters, pupils contribute to the costs of their education either by working in the fields in a rural milieu, or by begging. These days, many urban citizens consider begging as degrading and they criticize the Koranic school teachers whom they hold responsible for an inhuman system of exploitation. However, in their original context, begging was not at all degrading. Those who give have once been those who held out the bowl when they were pupils. Those who receive consider this begging stage of their life as a natural, transitory period that all children have to experience and which prepares them for adult life.

Pupils learn reading and writing at the same time. The learning tool is a wooden tablet. Once or twice a day they copied out on the tablet that part of the Koran they have been assigned to memorize, using black ink made from the charcoal they could scrape off their saucepans at home. After having memorized its contents, they washed their tablets and put them out in the sun to dry so that they

could use them again. Wednesday afternoon, all Thursday and Friday morning are holidays for the youngest pupils, while the older ones use these days to go over their past lessons. After they have written and memorized the whole Koran bit by bit (between one and two dozen lines daily), they revise it by reciting larger blocks of texts (several pages at a time) until they are able to recite it all. They then recite the whole Koran in front of a jury made up of *Huffaḥ* (singular, *hafiḥ*), people who have memorized the whole book. A successful pupil is known as *hafiḥ*. Pupils can be asked to recopy a whole manuscript of the Koran in calligraphic characters to see if they can master both the memorizing and the writing. This level of Islamic education applies to a large part of the child population. Whether Muslims are town-dwellers or rural people, it is rare that they have not attended a Koranic school and memorized a certain number of verses, even if it is only to be able to say their daily prayers.

The second level of traditional Islamic education takes place in the *madaris*, to which are admitted pupils who have memorized all or a large part of the Koran. While the children at the *katatib* only have to memorize what they are reading, without understanding it, at the *madaris* they follow advanced courses enabling them to understand Arabic, and to express themselves in that language. These schools are of unequal quality. Some, inherited from the medieval colleges, provide a complete course so that their graduates are recognized as *ulama*. Others offer a more restricted curriculum. Thus, the keener students spend a long time, going from one master to another so as to deepen their knowledge in a given discipline.

Among the schools that give a complete training, the college of Pire Saniokhor in Senegal is a good example. Thanks to Thierno Kâ, we have a wealth of information on this college which was based on the town of Pire, halfway between Dakar and Saint Louis and which was attended by many scholars (Kâ 1982). The training was essentially oral. The teacher taught all the books, chapter by chapter, reading them first in Arabic and then translating them in African languages. A student capable of reading in Arabic and translating the contents of a given book into an African language was assumed to have mastered it and given an *ijaza* (authorization to transmit knowledge) by his teacher. Some students study the same book several times before mastering it. This traditional education tends to be very scholastic.

In certain regions of Africa, there are scholars who specialized in teaching how to memorize the Koran. In Hausaland and Borno, they are called *alarama* (plural *alaramomi*) (Kane 2003: chapter 2). They have memorized the Koran and know how many times rare words occur, but do not necessarily understand the meaning of the verses. They are also very skilled in the widespread art in Africa of fabricating talismans, philtres and charms based on the Koran.

Apart from the knowledge dispensed by Islamic schools, which could be described as exoteric, there were also other types of knowledge which, as they are spelt out in texts, made a major contribution to the development of Islam in sub-Saharan Africa. This knowledge was mainly expressed through a magical usage of the Koran and it enabled Muslim scholars to respond to the demand of a clientele that was looking for happiness, a cure, prosperity, fecundity and protection against enemies (both real and imaginary). Since the pre-colonial period, during which African sovereigns would request talismans from the marabouts, up to the present day, the clientele of these marabouts has not diminished, however much the modernization theories might deplore it. Often a person who is looking for, loses or fears to lose a job will consult a marabout. The same goes for someone who has embezzled funds and is afraid of being arrested. Sick people who do not have the means of getting hospital treatment, as well as those whom modern medicine does not succeed in curing, will go to a marabout. Whatever the level of knowledge or status, the clientele will follow the marabout's recommendations. They will wear talismans, sacrifice sheep, cattle or goats, or wash themselves with philtres, if necessary. In the political field, the marabouts are very often consulted. There are few politicians who have not consulted one or several of them. These marabouts are responsible for protecting them from spells cast by their adversaries or for destroying them – if not for influencing the outcome of elections by supernatural forces.

The works of Louis Brenner and Constant Hames provide invaluable information on this esoteric knowledge. Brenner (1985) analyzed geomancy and the central role it plays in West African societies (see his chapter iv) and he argues that, in spite of the condemnations of the *ulama*, who preach a very legalistic version of Islam, geomancy nevertheless responds to the expectations of the majority of the population. In his analysis of the Kabbe, an Islamic theological teaching in Fulfulde inspired by the *Umm al-barabîn* (source of proofs) of Al-Sanusi, Brenner (1985) shows the ability of West African Muslims to appropriate the Islamic heritage and adapt it to their own milieu. This minimal theological teaching attracted women as well as those for whom a more in-depth approach would be more difficult to access (Brenner 1985:63).

Hames's work (1987, 1993, 1997a, 1997b) has shown that in spite of this belief being widespread, the concept of magic derived from the Koran and its materialization through the use of talismans is not only held by the illiterate Muslim masses. It is to be found in the sources of Islamic orthodoxy. Not only did authors like Ibn Qayyim Al-Jawziyya (1292-1350) make unambiguous statements about the orthodoxy of the talismanic usage of the Koran (Hames 1997b:139 et seq.), but also the most reliable compilers of traditions, particularly Muslim and Bukhari, have reported undisputedly authentic accounts that legitimize the talismanic use of the Koran (Hames 1997b:139 et seq.).

The role of the magic Koran in Islamic theology is not well-known for two reasons. The first is that the Orientalists, who were heirs of the Enlightenment, with their desire to apprehend Islam ‘rationally’, failed to study the magical uses of the Koran, leaving this to the heresiologists and the anthropologists. Hames (1997b:139 et seq.) states that in the entry for Ibn Qayyim Al-Jawziyya in the second edition of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, there is no mention of the book *al-tibb al-nabawi* (Prophetic medicine) by this author, which is mainly concerned with the talismanic aspect of the Koran.

The second reason for the lack of recognition of the orthodoxy of the talismanic use of the Koran is that classical authors like Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Qayyim Al-Jawziyya, who are considered by a certain literature to be the inspiration of the most rigorous fundamentalist movements like the Wahhabis, are often read according to the interpretation that the latter give to their work. The Wahhabis, in their war against the Sufi brotherhoods and the cult of saints, have rejected outright everything that could be used to legitimize them, including the talismanic use of the Koran (Hames 1997b:141 et seq.).

Having briefly surveyed the transmission networks of Islamic knowledge, I will now address the ways in which this knowledge inspired Muslim scholars to speak out politically before European colonization took place.