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## Modernization of the Islamic Educational System

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After the colonial conquest of Africa, Muslim populations were reluctant to attend secular schools. Given the need for sufficiently qualified staff to run the administration, the colonial state created modernized Arab-Islamic schools. Such was the case of the French *medersa* of Timbuktu. However, as Brenner (1997:471) has correctly observed, the creation of medersa in West Africa aimed less at promoting Islamic education than at changing it to undermine the influence of the maraboutic establishment. The curriculum of medersa included some elements of French culture in an educational system that was basically religious. Therefore it was different from the educational system that was entirely in English, French or Portuguese, according to the colonies, which trained the political and administrative elite who inherited the African states at the end of the colonial reign.

Some Muslims, realizing the limits of the traditional Islamic teaching, strove to modernize it, by drawing inspiration from the system set up by the colonial administration. To do this, they diversified the educational curriculum by introducing other subject matter and creating different levels of teaching, corresponding to the age of the students. The pedagogical materials also underwent a transformation. The teaching that had been essentially oral became partly written. Teachers used a blackboard and chalk to write and the pupils abandoned their wooden tablets in favour of exercise books and pens. In many cases, private initiatives for modernizing the traditional Islamic teaching were interpreted as political acts and opposed (Brenner 1997:491). This was the case of the medersa created by Saada Umar Touré at Ségou (Mali) which ultimately served as the model for renovating the Islamic teaching that used Arabic as the language of learning. The French colonial administration blocked all the initiatives to create other schools along the lines of the medersa of Saada Omar Touré. In the same vein, it supported initiatives aimed at promoting a system of Islamic education using African languages, particularly Bambara and Fulani (Brenner 1997:487).

The experience of the modernized Islamic schools in Northern Nigeria was very similar. The colonial state created a few modern Arab-Islamic schools to train administrative staff. One of the most famous was the School of Arabic Studies at Kano. Muslims products of this modern educational system used it to set up networks of formal Arab-Islamic schools as, for instance, was done by Aminu Kano (who died in 1983). In the 1950s, he developed a system of modern Islamic schools under the name of Islamiyya schools. Very quickly, the system met with success, for not only did the pupils assimilate the Koran more rapidly, they also learnt Arabic relatively easily while they were still young. Soon, numerous schools of the same kind were created in other towns of Nigeria (Bray 1981:59-60). Nevertheless, because Aminu Kano was the leader of the Northern Elements Progressive Union (NEPU), a party that opposed the Northern People's Congress (NPC) that governed the region, the NPC sent thugs to destroy these schools and, out of a total of sixty, only three survived.

It was, above all, in the post-colonial period that the modernized Islamic schools experienced considerable growth. Northern Nigeria is undoubtedly where this growth in the new Arab-Islamic schools has been most prodigious. A major motivation was to ensure that formal education in northern Nigeria caught up with that of the south. This was partly due to the indirect rule policy that prohibited the Christian missions, who were mainly responsible for modern schools, from setting up and preaching in certain Muslim areas. With the ascension of Nigeria to independence, it was essential for the northerners to overcome this deficiency and, on the initiative of Ahmadu Bello, real efforts were made to modernize the Koranic schools. They received subsidies for the construction of classrooms and employment of teachers who could give a general education. The Hausa language, transcribed in the Latin script, a development encouraged by the British during the colonial period through the publication of books and journals, also underwent considerable development. Hausa now has the status of an official Nigerian language, in contrast with the situation in most of the West African countries, where only very timid initiatives have been taken to develop their national languages. There exists an abundant literature as well as daily newspapers and journals in the Hausa language. Many intellectuals hold lectures and write academic papers in Hausa.

Thanks to the oil revenue, however, formal education was to develop even more remarkably in Nigeria in the 1970s. There is no field in which the oil manna has not had some positive effect. As far as primary education is concerned, the Universal Primary Education programme was adopted in 1977. One year after the programme was launched, the official number of children in primary school was 9.5 million – more than the entire population of any other single West African country (Bray 1981:1). Even if the federated states blew up their figures to attract maximum funding from the federal state, which was the chief provider

of finance at that time, there is no doubt that primary education experienced tremendous growth. It was the same story for secondary and higher education. The latter was even more remarkable: with two universities at independence and five at the beginning of the oil boom, Nigeria has in 2011 over a hundred universities.

Oil revenue has also affected the number of modern Islamic schools. Apart from the resources that Nigeria injected into them, Muslim oil-producing countries in the Persian Gulf have contributed to financing modernized Arab-Islamic education (Kane 2003:chapter 2). Funding, didactic materials and teachers were sent to Nigeria by certain organizations in the Arab countries of the Gulf, particularly Saudi Arabia, as part of their pan-Islamic policy. Although Nigeria received a large part of Saudi assistance, it was not the only country to do so. Numerous countries of Africa and Asia, as well as Muslim communities in the West benefited from the largesse of oil countries desiring to promote Arab-Islamic education (Kepel 2000:69 et seq.). The reform of Islamic teaching affected mainly primary and secondary schooling.

In Senegal, the reform of Arabic teaching took place in various fields. First, numerous colleges for teaching Arabic were established. These colleges, like the Ma'had Shaykh Abdullah Niassé of Kaolack, the Dar al-Quran of Dakar and the Manar al-Huda Institute of Louga, train Arabists until they obtain their secondary school certificates. Collaboration with Arab countries and institutions, the Al-Azhar University in Cairo in particular, provides technical assistance in the form of teachers to the above institutions and hundreds of others of the same kind in Africa. The certificates awarded by these schools are recognized by Al-Azhar and enable students, on completing their secondary education, to continue more advanced studies at the Egyptian university.

Another dimension of the reform of Arabic teaching was the creation of the so-called French-Arabic schools. Some of these were established by post-colonial governments concerned with harmonizing the teaching and creating outlets for the graduates of the local Arabic schools. Others have been set up by religious personalities or graduates from universities of the Arab world. These French-Arabic schools admit pupils who have already attended the Koranic schools and have memorized the Koran either totally or partially. In contrast with the traditional schools, the French-Arabic ones offer general education in Arabic, with courses in the French language at an elementary level. They award certificates that are recognized by the state and their graduates can apply for a job, very often as teachers or professors in colleges teaching Arabic. Some of the graduates of French-Arabic schools continue their studies in Arab countries and, more rarely, in African universities. In spite of the efforts made to provide them with jobs, the Arabists have greater difficulties than their counterparts trained in Western or African universities, in European languages, to obtain salaried posts.

In sub-Saharan Africa, there are two institutions of higher learning where teaching is essentially in Arabic, one in Niger and one in Uganda. The idea of creating one in Niger dates back to the summits of the kings and heads of states of Muslim sovereigns countries and presidents of Muslim nations held in Lahore in 1974 (Triaud 1988:160). But the project did not get underway until 1982 when construction work began on the Faculty of Islamic Studies and Arabic Language. Created for students from Francophone countries, the Islamic University is based at Say, beside the River Niger, and it will also include faculties of science, medicine, economics, etc. It has the following objectives:

- i. To consolidate an Islamic identity through the study of the Islamic and Arabic heritage and to enrich the life of Muslims in Africa by integrating the foundations of its civilization and putting them at the service of society;
- ii. To enable students to have access to science and technology and to apply the scientific knowledge acquired in the service of the well-being of Muslim peoples and countries;
- iii. To establish academic research and study of social problems in light of Islamic thinking, integrated into the needs of the milieu within the framework of Islamic cooperation;
- iv. To create a movement of activities and the orientation of publications of the Islamic heritage in the African continent, encouraging research and efforts seeking an understanding of Islam;
- v. To train competent staff and provide the necessary means for teaching and for advanced studies in different fields of knowledge and science;
- vi. To pay special attention to Arabic and Islamic studies; and
- vii. To provide cultural, sporting and scientific activities (Triaud 1988:160-61).

In West Africa, the Islamic University of Niger is the most advanced local initiative seeking to offer high quality training to local Arabists. It also aims to make known the Arab-Islamic cultural tradition.

The Islamic University of Uganda, which was founded by the Organization of the Islamic Conference in 1988, is aimed at nationals of the Anglophone countries south of the Sahara (Useen 1999 *passim*). The teaching is in Arabic and English. In 1999, it had some 1,100 students, divided into four faculties or high schools: literature and social sciences, educational sciences, management and Islamic heritage. It plans to increase its buildings to accommodate a student population of 10,000 in the near future and to increase the percentage of recruitment of its female students from 30 to 50. In some disciplines, an Islamic perspective is taught through complementary courses. As well as the economics traditionally taught in faculties of economics, students in these courses receive specific teaching

on the Islamic principles on interest, taxes and insurance. The university also includes among its teaching staff some Christians. The non-Muslim female students have to conform to the normal Muslim standards on dress and must cover their heads (Useen 1999).

Like these two universities, the higher education of most African Arabists took place – and still does – in the universities of the Arab world.

