Can Arabo-Islamic education in sub-Saharan Africa be ignored?

A NUMBER OF PRECONCEIVED IDEAS NEED TO BE RECONSIDERED

Arab-Islamic education in general, and Koranic schools in particular, are still largely excluded from programs advocating for education for all in Africa. Consequently, recognizing its existence, its importance and its diversity is a prerequisite for building a consultation framework and a dialogue between all stakeholders.

http://editions.afd.fr/

While Arab-Islamic education remained on the sidelines of national policies for a long time, its education provision is, however, central in sub-Saharan Africa as a major socialization framework for children and youth. This category of educational structures, via a whole host of institutions, is currently benefiting from renewed interest on the part of national and international actors. Household demand for this type of education calls for a reasoned reconfiguration of African education systems to ensure that they are in tune with their societies, while remaining open to the world.

How did Arab-Islamic education come into being in sub-Saharan Africa?

Arab-Islamic education appeared in sub-Saharan Africa at the same time as the dissemination of Islam in the 11th century, as the first form of formalized collective education. It was initiated by Arab-Berber merchants in West Africa and was subsequently disseminated by religious brotherhoods starting in the 19th century. It initially took the form of Sufi Koranic schools. The memorization of the Koran was mainly taught at the time. To compete with Koranic schools and attract Muslim students to the Francophone colonial zone, the French administration subsequently created *medersas*, drawn from Algerian experience, the aim of which was to train competent Arabic-speaking *cadis* and civil servants. In the 1940s-1950s, new schools appeared, which broke with Sufi Koranic schools and where the Arabic language became the teaching medium. African graduates from universities in Morocco, Egypt and Algeria began to open new Muslim religious schools when they returned to their home countries (Benin, Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Senegal). During the 1970s-1980s, an Arab-Islamic education market emerged thanks to the initiative of these **...**

education entrepreneurs, who have been assisted and supported by external financing from the Maghreb region, Egypt and, more recently, Gulf States (Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates). Since 2000, certain West African countries have taken the dynamism of Arab-Islamic education into account and have sought to integrate it into the formal education system. They have gradually developed new educational structures (integrated or modernized Koranic schools and Franco-Arab public schools) incorporating them into national education systems.

What is Arab-Islamic education in Africa?

Arab-Islamic education encompasses a great diversity of institutions which, although they vary depending on geographical contexts, are present in nearly all sub-Saharan African countries. However, due to the lack of data, this category of educational structures is still scarcely taken into account by researchers working on education in Africa and education system planners. It is possible to differentiate between establishments depending on their level of recognition by States: on the one hand, formal educational establishments and, on the other hand, informal establishments. Formal education is the education that teaches the national curriculum within an official framework recognized by the country's institutions. It is managed by the national education system in line with a teaching method, operating rules, a validation process and a calendar defined by the State. Conversely, non-formal education is outside the official state framework. It does not train in the competencies expected in the national curriculum (see Table 1).

Formal establishments include *medersas* or *madrasas* (Arabic word meaning "school"), integrated, modernized and renovated Koranic schools depending on the country, and Franco-Arab schools in French-speaking Africa. These are establishments which provide teaching in the Arabic language, the Koran and Islamic sciences (theology, Islamic law, history…), but also certain basic school lessons (mathematics, official languages, geography, physics…). The balance between these two types of subjects taught in a school can vary enormously, but primary education is generally completed with a certification (validated or not by the State). The State often has a certain supervisory authority over these establishments and the school timetables and curricula validated by States are at least partly respected.

In terms of non-formal establishments, there is a great diversity of Koranic schools (also called *maktab* or *kuttab* or *daara*), which focus on memorizing the Koran in Arabic, religious practice, and the acquisition of Islamic sciences. Some of these Koranic schools can be more or less modern, more or less recognized by the State as religious structures, and involve time-sharing (allowing formal education to be followed at the same time) or are full-time, notably through "boarding" facilities. Studies are certified via the *ijazah*, which is an authorization to teach Islamic sciences. These establishments are not considered as formal education establishments by States and international organizations.

How important is Arab-Islamic education in Africa?

Quantifying the number of children attending Arab-Islamic educational structures poses a real challenge, as the vast majority of African countries do not collect information on this subject. The administrative data collected by the information systems of the various Ministries of Education focus on educational establishments considered to be formal. Information about Koranic schools is therefore not generally collected.

In some countries, household surveys give an idea of the percentage of children of primary school age who only attend Koranic schools: it is low in Côte d'Ivoire (1.5%) and Nigeria (3.5%), but higher in Chad (6.8%), the Comoros (15.4%), Mauritania (23.1%) and Somalia (33.5%). A very low proportion of children are in formal Arab-Islamic education, with 0.4% in Mauritania, 0.46% in Nigeria, 1.7% in Côte d'Ivoire, 1.8% in Burkina Faso, 3.4% in Senegal (Franco-Arab schools), but some 10.9% in Gambia. Students in Koranic schools consequently account for over half the children considered to be "out-of-school" in countries such as Mauritania, the Comoros and Somalia.

Who are the children in Arab-Islamic education in Africa?

A very large proportion of Muslim households combine public or private formal education with a Koranic school. However, a significant proportion of households simply settle for a Koranic school (see Graph 1). Koranic schools are not exclusively for boys and the poorest households. A large number of girls are accepted in them. In countries such as Côte d'Ivoire, Nigeria, Somalia and Senegal, Arab-Islamic education can sometimes be even more favorable for girls than formal educational structures (see Table 2). Koranic schools concern an intermediate category between the most urban and richest households, whose children are in a formal educational structure, and the most rural and poorest households, whose children are not in any educational structure. By contrast, formal Arab-Islamic education concerns more boys and households with a level of income equal to or higher than those who choose public or private schools.

GRAPH 1. PERCENTAGE OF CHILDREN OF PRIMARY SCHOOL AGE BY TYPE OF EDUCATION

* The survey only collects data on formal Arab-Islamic education.

- 🟨 Other formal education
- ⬜ Formal Arab-Islamic education
- 🟧 Only non-formal Arab-Islamic education
- 🟦 No educational structures

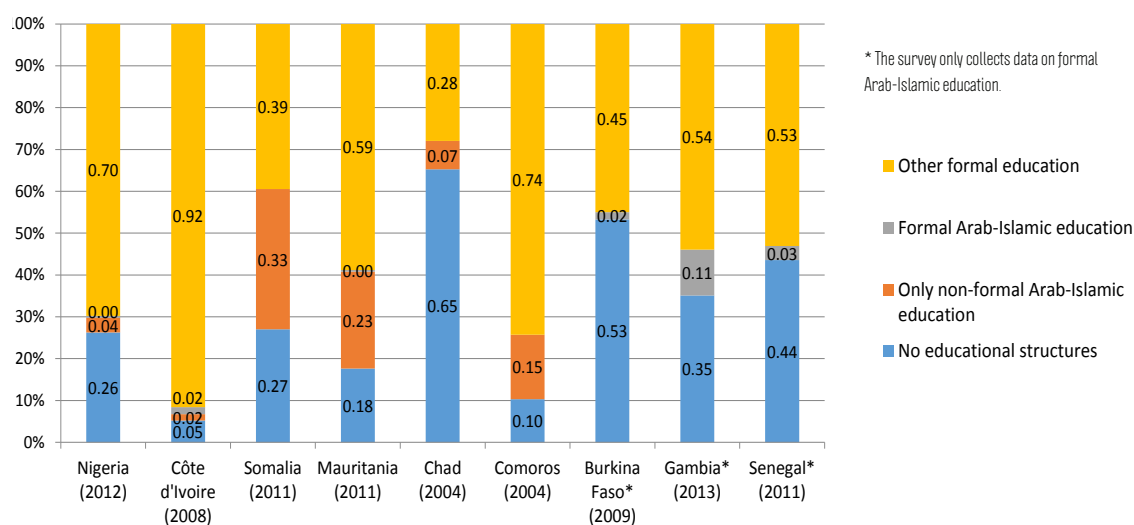Source: d'Aiglelepierre and Bauer (2017).

TABLE 1. THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN NON-FORMAL AND FORMAL ARAB-ISLAMIC EDUCATIONAL ESTABLISHMENTS AND THE OTHER FORMAL ESTABLISHMENTS FOR CHILDREN OF PRIMARY SCHOOL AGE

	Non-formal Arab-Islamic education (conventional Koranic schools)	Formal Arab-Islamic education (*madrasas, mahadras, medersas*, integrated Koranic schools, Franco-Arab schools…)	Non-Arab-Islamic formal education (public or private)
Inspection	No oversight or supervisory authority.	Ministry of Education theoretically the supervisory authority.	Ministry of Education the supervisory authority.
Educational objectives	Memorization of the Koran, basic learning of Arabic (alphabet); learning of the ritual practice and acquisition of Islamic sciences; life skills; interpersonal know-how.	Teaching of Arabic, the Koran and Islamic sciences, but also basic school education. Part of the teaching is in Arabic and the other part in French.	Basic school education.
Timetable	Full-time (the student sleeps at the Koranic teacher's or in dedicated sleeping quarters) or shared with formal education.	School hours and timetables.	School hours and timetables.
Organization of classes	The Koranic school can receive students aged between 5 and 18, or even older.	Classes are formed depending on the ages and levels of students.	Classes are formed depending on the ages and levels of students.
Teacher's role	Teaching is interpersonal, depending on what is being taught, between the student and the Koranic teacher.	Teaching is intended for the entire class.	Teaching is intended for the entire class.
Organization in the classroom	Students sit in a circle around the Koranic teacher, or in a square or rectangle in front of him.	Students generally sit at table-benches opposite the board and the teacher.	Students sit at table-benches opposite the board and the teacher.
Educational materials	Students memorize the Koran on a wooden tablet, called a *lawh.*	Students write in notebooks with pens.	Students write in notebooks with pens.
Assessment and diplomas	Two levels of assessment: depending on the verses and chapters, then after a memorization of all the 114 chapters of the Koran (*ijaza*).	Students are assessed at the end of each school year to move up to the next level, with the CEP diploma at the end of the cycle. Arabic is part of the assessment.	Students are assessed at the end of each school year to move up to the next level, with the CEP diploma at the end of the cycle.

👤 ROHEN D'AIGLEPIERRE
Human Capital Research Officer
Research and Development Division, AFD.

👤 HAMIDOU DIA
Social Anthropologist
Research Officer, IRD-CEPED.

👤 CLOTHILDE HUGON
Doctor of Political Science
Temporary Associate for Teaching and Research,
LAM - Sciences Po Bordeaux.

TABLE 2. PERCENTAGE OF GIRLS BY TYPE OF EDUCATION

% of girls	Côte d'Ivoire (2008)	Chad (2004)	Com- oros (2004)	Mauri- tania (2011)	Nigeria (2012)	Somalia (2011)	Burkina Faso * (2009)	Gambia * (2013)	Senegal * (2011)
No educational structures	44	58	57	53	49	53	51	49	49
Only non-formal Arab-Islamic education	48	28	46	46	64	49			
Formal Arab-Islamic education	50			26	50		34	42	59
Other formal educational	42	38	47	52	45	45	48	51	51

* The survey only collects data on formal Arab-Islamic education.

Source: d'Aiglelepierre and Bauer (2017).

How to build a compromise between African Governments and Arab-Islamic education?

In most African countries with a substantial Muslim majority or component, there is a dual education system: one Western-based, and the other the result of the encounter between Africa and the Arab world. Initiatives are being carried out either by religious movements, initially reformist then brotherhoods, or by governments, sometimes supported by international and non-governmental organizations, to flesh out a "third way", which would reconcile demand for religious education and the need to align with international standards.

Reform initiatives have consequently been launched: Project to Support Bilingual Education (French-Arabic, English-Arabic), Program to support "Modernization" (Senegal), "Renovation" (Niger) or the integration, in Mali, of Koranic schools into national primary education cycles. In Senegal, since 2002, the Government has set out to "modernize" the *daara* (Koranic schools), *via* the *Daara* Inspectorate and Arabic Education Division, and build new Franco-Arab public schools nationwide. Certain governments are moving towards a "hybrid" system, where religious and Arabic education are combined with "secular" education where, right from the primary cycle, basic education is given in the national language (French or English) for reading, writing and mathematics. These models are, however, still in the experimentation phase. School curricula are not fixed and the number of hours spent in class varies depending on the schools. Furthermore, the recruitment and training of teachers in Arabic and religious science are not fully effective and the number of inspectors in the Arabic language remains very low. In addition, the future of students when they leave these schools has so far not been a priority for the reflection of public authorities.

Today, there is a need to define a framework in which a compromise would be established between the various current movements which structure Arab-Islamic education, on the one hand, and governments, which are responsible for organizing their education system, on the other hand. Efforts need to be made by all the stakeholders in order to overcome the mutual incomprehension, build a common project, and innovate to improve education in sub-Saharan Africa in terms of access, equity and quality. ◼

● REFERENCES ●

d'Aiglepierre, R. and A. Bauer (2017), « Quantifier et qualifier le choix de l'enseignement arabo-islamique en Afrique subsaharienne », *Afrique Contemporaine*, n° 257, pp. 25-40.

Dia, H., C. Hugon and R. d'Aiglepierre (2017), « États réformateurs et éducation arabo-islamique en Afrique », *Afrique Contemporaine*, n° 257, pp. 11-23.

Loimeier, R. (2009), *Between Social Skills and Marketable Skills: The Politics of Islamic Education in the 20th Century in Zanzibar*, Leiden: Brill, 643 p.

Villalón, L.A. and M. Tidjani-Alou (2012), "Religion and Education Reform in Africa: Harnessing Religious Values to Developmental Ends", Research Report n° 7, Africa, Power and Politics.

AFD