

# NEW DAYS

In 1981, Prof. Daniel A. Wagner of the University of Pennsylvania (U.S.A.) and Prof. Abdelhamid Lotfi of Mohamed V University (Morocco) undertook a comparative study of traditional Islamic education in five countries of Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. Funded by the Ford Foundation, the U.S. Social Science Research Council, and IDRC, the study aimed to provide descriptive and analytical perspectives on Quranic schools. The following article is primarily extracted from two papers\* prepared by Dr Wagner as a result of the study.

**D**iourbel, Senegal. Shortly after dawn, Serigne Abdoulaye, the master teacher, arrives at the *jangu* — the traditional Islamic school. Boys and girls, some as young as three years old, soon begin to take their places in long tin-roofed rooms or in the outside courtyard. On their wooden slates are written 25 to 30 lines of Arabic script. Almost imperceptibly the room begins to hum as the 50 or more children, holding up their slates, start to chant the day's lessons. Class has begun.

These children are learning passages from the Quran, the holy book of the world's Muslims. While the youngest simply mimic the teacher, repeating phrases they do not yet understand, the older students with some knowledge of Arabic concentrate on more difficult passages (or *suras*).

A man in his mid-50s, Serigne Abdoulaye no longer teaches the younger children, but provides individual lessons for the small number of older adolescents who intend to follow in the footsteps of their master. Those who choose to become Quranic school teachers gain on-the-job experience by teaching the scores of younger children who are learning the basics of Arabic and the Quran. In recent years, however, fewer and fewer such apprentices have decided to become Quranic masters.

The scene in this Diourbel *jangu* is being repeated in much of the Third World. Senegal shares one key cultural element with about half the countries and half the population of the developing world — a faith in Islam. One of every five people in the world embraces Islam, and the Islamic tradition has maintained and regenerated itself across generations for over 14 centuries. Within this heritage, the Islamic religious school has been the accepted and most widespread means of social and cultural reproduction. These



# FOR OLD WAYS

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*Islamic education  
in a  
changing world*

schools began with the founding of Islam in the 7th century and spread with Islamic conquests to Spain in the West, to Asia Minor in the East and, later, deep into Africa and to the eastern reaches of Indonesia.

The traditional Quranic school instructs children in elements of Islamic belief and custom, basic literacy in Arabic, and advanced Islamic studies. In Arabic, the word Quran implies "recitation" and recitation of the Quran is a central goal of practicing Muslims. In order to recite properly, Muslim children are taught to memorize as much of the Quran as possible, a memory challenge of considerable magnitude, requiring six to eight years of full-time study for complete mastery.

But in spite of a central focus on the study of Quranic texts, the schools have adapted to the cultural constraints of each society. To the casual observer these traditional schools may appear to have changed little over the centuries but, in reality, they are undergoing significant transformations.

## TRADITION AND CHANGE IN THREE COUNTRIES

Indonesia is the largest and most populous Muslim country in the world. About 95 percent of Indonesia's population of 140 million are Muslims, and almost 20 million children attend the country's Islamic schools. Islamic education is provided both by the government and through private religious schools called *pesantrens*. These schools are descended in part from



In North Yemen (above, left), girls now participate in Quranic schools. Wooden slates, *luh*, used for the study of the Quranic *suras* lie stacked outside the school in Diourbel, Senegal (above, right).

the earlier traditions of Hindu-Buddhist monastery schools and the head teachers (*kyais*) are often charismatic leaders and community organizers, as well as learned scholars.

The *pesantrens* are economically self-supporting institutions. Students work in the fields and occasionally engage in small commercial activities organized for communal needs. In this way, students support themselves through five to ten years of study and maintain close ties with the Islamic community in which they reside.

Religious subjects, which make up about half the curriculum, are taught using the Arabic script needed for all Quranic study. For Indonesian children, learning to read Arabic is a major and difficult task. Special small classes for young children are often organized for this purpose by volunteers. And while some children make better progress than others, it is clear that all children learn enough to feel part of the dual cultural galaxy of Islamic Indonesia and the Islamic Arabic-speaking world.

Modern teaching methods are making some inroads in Indonesia's Quranic schools, particularly in the cities. In one school next to a Jakarta mosque, for example, a visitor could overhear each of the teenaged students chanting his particular passage loudly, helping to produce a cacophony of sounds.

The teacher had adapted foreign language learning techniques to Quranic study: Each student had headphones, a cassette recorder, and tapes of all the *suras* of the Quran. This year, confided the teacher, one of his students might win the national championship for rapid and accurate Quranic recitation.

Islam arrived in Senegal in the 11th century with the slow but continuous arrival of traders and occasional military incursions from North Africa. The process of Islamization took many centuries, but was undoubtedly spurred on by the arrival of European slave traders in the 16th century. Lasting more than 200 years, the slave trade disrupted the social and economic structure of the country. The main consequences were the rise of Islam as an indigenous anticolonial force and the ascendancy of several large Islamic brotherhoods, which had each developed around a holy religious figure and his descendants.

In the 19th century, the brotherhoods made a series of accommodations

hoods, represented by their own *serignes* in villages, used the schools as a way of gaining access to converts, land, and economic and social power.

The alliance between the brotherhoods, the colonial government, and agriculture has diminished since Senegal's independence, due to the death of various religious leaders, crop diversification, and increased urban migration. The traditional Quranic schools have also felt the changes. The Senegalese are finding that Islamic schooling must adapt or lose its students to the French-language public school system. *Serigne* Abdoulaye's school, for example, has almost no funds as fewer children accept the traditional mode of teaching. New schools and teachers have begun to replace the old.

At one such modernized school (referred to as an "Islamic institute"), in the island city of Saint Louis, rote learning and recitation are still considered reasonable ways for young children to begin Quranic study. After two or three years of memorizing, however, children

values for the future.

After Saudi Arabia, North Yemen is the country most closely associated with the founding of Islam. It has also remained closer to its traditions than any other Muslim country as, until the 1972 revolution, Yemen had been effectively cut off from the Western world for almost a millenium. Before the revolution, the only school system in the country was the traditional Quranic school. Boys would attend from age four to 10 or 12, or until they were needed for agricultural chores. Rote learning, recitation, and the rudiments of literacy were the rule. Only a few exceptional adolescents went on for further study to become Quranic scholars and teachers at the *med-rasahs* (institutes for more advanced studies) in larger towns.

Because of Yemen's low literacy rates, the religious scholars were the controllers and arbiters of most local legal issues. Since the revolution, however, the government has made a concerted effort to increase public school enrollment. This has had two related effects on the separate Islamic school system. First, fewer adolescents have gone on to become Quranic school teachers, because attending modern public high schools offers them a brighter future. Second, with fewer Quranic teachers, and with an increasing school-aged population, the Islamic school authorities have been filling teaching positions with Egyptian school teachers trained in modern secular schools.

Most of the traditional schools now have younger, better trained teachers. Many have begun to use secular primers to learn Arabic and are expanding enrollment in the primary school years. Thus, the traditional school system has begun adapting to some of the pressures of modernization, and is providing a culturally and religiously valued alternative for Muslim families who do not wish to break with their religious traditions.

Quranic schools are thus continuing to play important educational, social and economic roles in Islamic societies in today's world. The part Quranic schools will play in the current Islamic awakening is uncertain, but the fact remains that millions of children attend these schools for all or part of their formal education. The Islamic school is one of the most culturally embedded and least understood institutions that touches the lives of the rural poor of the Third World. Its role in the development process is only just beginning to be known. □

## THE FUTURE OF TRADITIONS

For many Third World governments, budgets for education are at the top of the list in terms of cost. It should not be surprising, therefore, that they are beginning to reassess the utility and productivity of educational programs.

The achievement of literacy is perhaps the most agreed upon goal of all contemporary educational systems. Interestingly, for a great number of children in the Third World, literacy skills are acquired only through indigenous schools, which have generally been ignored by development planners.

Contemporary Islamic schools are an important example of indigenous education. Like other forms of indigenous schooling, these schools continue to attract large numbers of children. Changes in recent years

have also brought them into direct competition with modern secular school systems, forcing adaptations in both systems.

Many researchers agree that national literacy programs in a number of countries have achieved only limited success in recent decades and that a closer relationship between these programs and culturally indigenous forms of schooling could be beneficial. More information is needed about these schools, however, to avoid wasting financial resources while taking advantage of cultural resources. Their involvement in education policies and programs might enable development planners and policymakers to increase literacy in areas where indigenous schooling touches the lives of so many children.

with the French colonial administration to produce the important groundnut crop for export. The crop necessitated a large, quickly mobilized, and relatively unskilled labour force for planting and harvesting. Or, by the brotherhoods were capable of providing the social organization and mobilization of such a force. Thus they were given support by the French and profited greatly from the groundnut trade.

The Quranic schools in Senegal became more or less the instruments of this new agricultural effort. The schools gathered young, able-bodied boys together for study, providing an easily mobilized and cheap source of labour. Students were paid very little because working for the brotherhood was considered a duty. The brother-

are given comprehensive training in reading and writing Arabic. Community support for the institute is high: Besides modern classrooms, the school has a large meeting hall. That poor people choose to make an economic investment of this kind shows the strength of their conviction that Islam is central to their lives. It is also indicative of the increased sense of community felt by the Senegalese toward Middle Eastern Muslims.

*Serigne* Abdoulaye himself has decided to send his children to the modernized Islamic schools. It is a statement that captures the thinking of many parents and teachers: Within a single generation, many Muslims are re-evaluating their pedagogical and social past in order to reinforce their basic

\*Wagner, D.A. "Indigenous education and literacy in the Third World", in D.A. Wagner (ed.) Child Development and International Development. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass (in press); and "Islamic education: Traditional pedagogy and contemporary change", in T. Husen & T.N. Postlethwaite (eds.) International Encyclopedia of Education: Research and Studies. New York: Pergamon Press, 1983.