ISLAMIC EDUCATION IN AFRICA

Writing Boards and Blackboards

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3.

ORALITY AND THE TRANSMISSION OF QUR'ANIC KNOWLEDGE IN MAURITANIA

Corinne Fortier
(translated from the French by Robert Launay)

Masters and Forms of Knowledge
Two Levels and Two Types of Masters

The analysis of Qur'anic education in Mauritanian Moorish society calls into question the appropriateness of the term Qur'anic school. In this formerly nomadic society, there is no specific term for Qur'anic instruction at the elementary level. The Arabic word kuttāb (from kitāba, “writing”) is never used, unlike North and West Africa and other Muslim regions. In Ḥassānīyya, the Moorish dialect of Arabic, the expression that signifies that a child is following such an education is “He is studying his writing board” (yagra lawḥi), which is linked not to any specific place but rather to the central tool of instruction, the writing board (lawḥ). It is striking that, wherever the pupil receives instruction—in a tent (khayma), in desert pastures (bādiyya), or in a luxurious villa in Nouakchott, the capital—the writing board remains the key symbol of Qur'anic instruction.

The writing board, the fundamental element in Qur'anic learning, is a thin rectangular plank of agal wood (Mitragyna inermis) whose upper corners have been rounded. On one hand, this board signals the interpersonal nature of transmission from master to pupil, independent of the mediation of books. On the other hand, as this movable instrument suggests, teaching may take place anywhere, provided it remains under the master's control, whether in his house or during his travels. In fact, according to Maliki jurisprudence (Ibn Saḥnūn 1953, 97)—the rite observed by Moors since the introduction of this rite in North and West
Africa in the eleventh century by the Almoravids—it is not permitted to recite the Qur’an while walking except when one is learning it.

Moorish society is a Bedouin society where each person belongs to a tribe (qabila) which bears a name that sometimes refers directly to the eponymous ancestor of the tribe through patrilineal descent and where each member has rights and duties toward the tribe according to the logic of tribal solidarity (aṣabiyya). Moorish society is also hierarchical, including nobles—marabouts (ezwāya) and warriors (ḥassān)—tributaries (znāga), and non-nobles—former slaves (ḥarāthin) as well as two castes, blacksmiths (māllimin) and griots (iggawān). Although most children pursue some level of Qur’anic instruction, the length of study varies with status and gender (Fortier 1997). Children from maraboutic tribes, given their specialization in religious knowledge, receive a more extensive education. It is also striking that in eastern Mauritania, in the Hawdh region, children of blacksmiths also receive an extensive religious education, which can be explained partly by the preponderance of maraboutic tribes in the region but also by the fact that their occupation allows them to stay sedentary, allowing them to give elementary instruction to girls as well as boys (Fortier 2002, 2006).

Because there is no clergy in Sunni Islam, religious instruction—such as leading prayer or the practice of law—is not professionalized. It is not unusual for an individual with another occupation to teach the Qur’an on the side. Often, a master will continue teaching while pursuing his other business, provided it does not prevent him from listening to his pupils. For example, pupils may recite the Qur’an in the presence of a teacher who is selling in his shop if he is a merchant, who is herding his animals if he has any, or if he is making a tool if he is a smith. Mobility does not disrupt teaching, which continues while the teacher goes to the mosque or when he is herding his animals. Such a system of instruction is easily mobile, partly because the central tool of instruction is the writing board on which the pupil writes his lessons and partly because knowledge is thought not to reside in books (kutub) but in the heart (qulūb).

At the elementary level, a male Qur’anic teacher is called mrābat, and a female teacher is called mrābat, both from the Arabic name for the Almoravids, al-Murābitūn. In the east, a teacher is also called tālāb, from the Arabic verb tala-aba, “to seek knowledge.” Throughout Mauritania, the pupil is called tamlidi, an Arabic word that more generally designates a disciple. Unlike primary instruction, advanced teaching, involving a considerable number of students and sometimes several teachers, is designated by another term. This is not the term madrasa frequently used in North and West Africa but rather ṭahāra (pronounced ṭahāra in hassāniyya), derived from the Arabic ṭahara, “session.” Throughout this chapter, I will use the term ṭahāra instead of university—a term that misleadingly evokes the Western history of this institution. In Moorish
society, the scholar who teaches several disciplines is called an ‘ālim, and a specialist in jurisprudence (fiqh) is called a fiqh.

Boys from maraboutic tribes who pursue their studies at an advanced level leave their homes to seek knowledge from a renowned master (Fortier 2003, 2007). This journey of initiation (riḥla) is only undertaken by young men; young women cannot leave their natal homes until marriage. A student in search of a master looks for a scholar who will exhort him to begin the lesson simply by commanding “Recite!” or literally “Proceed!” (mashshīl), without mentioning which subject the student wishes to pursue. Moreover, a scholar should be capable of answering any question without consulting a book or manuscript. The intellectual itinerary of a nineteenth-century scholar, Nābibha al-Ghallawi is paradigmatic. After having studied with his maternal uncle, he left his tribe, the Laghīl, and his region, the Hawadh, in search of a multidisciplinary education. Whenever any masters he consulted in the course of his travels asked him which discipline he wanted to study, he continued on his way. Finally, he settled in Daykan with Ahmad wuld al-‘Aqīl of the Trarza tribe of the Awdā Daymān (Idabbum), who answered all his questions and whose very first word was the one he was waiting for: “mashshīl” He married a kinswoman of his teacher and stayed in the Iguidi for the rest of his life. As this example shows, the search for knowledge could lead a student to integrate permanently through marriage into the master’s group.

Given the considerable number of students in the m’hāzar, scholars often chose to specialize in only one discipline, leaving other disciplines to their colleagues. In the early eighteenth century, one m’hāza of the Idadjba tribe in Brakna was called the “yellow and brown m’hāza,” referring to the colors of the tents in which instruction took place: one brown, made of camel hair; the other beige, from sheep’s wool. Students might pass a considerable part of their lives, even as much as thirty years, in the m’hāza.

The Qur’ānic Teacher and His Pupils

The modalities of Qur’ānic instruction in Moorish society are more or less the same as in other Muslim societies. Indeed, there is an extraordinary pedagogical unity throughout the Muslim world in teaching the Qur’an, as indicated in Ibn Sahlun’s (ninth century) Kitāb ad-dāb al-mu‘allimīn (Book of rules for the behavior of school teachers).

Space is organized to take into account pupils’ different levels of instruction. Teaching generally takes place out in the open, in the courtyard of a house or in a tent. The teacher is seated on a mat or on a sheepskin. He faces the pupils, who squat on their heels and hold their writing boards vertically. In the first rows, side by side, sit those who have yet to learn how to write and who decipher the suras that the teacher has written out for them; in the next rows sit more
advanced pupils to whom the teacher dictates the lesson. Clustered according to levels of competence, the pupils can correct one another as they recite their lessons. According to Ibn Saññún (1953, 91–93), the teacher can encourage collective study among pupils as well as competition, as long as he monitors it. In Moorish society, the teacher encourages the students to not only emulate but punish one another. As a sign of excellence, the teacher may order his best pupil to spit on his incompetent peers or to pour sand on their head as forms of punishment. The worst student is additionally called a donkey or an "egg in the hole," a reference to an egg that remains in the nest without hatching. The other pupils make fun of him by hanging a necklace of dried camel turds around his neck. The teacher can, of course, punish pupils himself by pulling their ears, tapping them with a stick or tying them to one of the tent poles. Ibn Saññún (1953, 87) stipulates the number of blows a teacher can give his pupils: "When they abandon themselves to play or are inordinately lazy, he can strike up to ten blows; but as concerns the recitation of the Qur'an, he should not hit them more than three times."5

Aside from corporal punishment, this instruction is consistently embodied. For example, in Moorish society, pupils generally do not eat before going to their teacher's home, because their family considers that an empty state favors the incorporation of the suras. The attention that students devote each morning to religious instruction is considered a measure of their success throughout the rest of the day; there is a saying that "One must not sleep in the morning, because this is the time when God allotst everyone their share of luck." At noontime, the pupils take a break, and their families oblige them to nap. They resume their lessons when the sun begins to set after the early afternoon prayer (az-zukh). When instruction lasts after the evening prayer (al-maghrib), the pupils light a fire with the straw they have brought. At night, such fires are the symbols of Qur'anic instruction: around it, the various voices in recitation break the silence.

Classes are interrupted each week from Wednesday afternoon until midday Friday. Sometimes the pupils lack the requisite reverential fear of their teacher in composing unflattering verses behind his back. Some of these verses express the pupils' desires to extend the weekly pause—for example, "On Wednesday, may our teacher be bitten by a viper." In general, pupils who also attend modern schools wait until vacations to pursue their religious education. Occasionally some pursue both forms of education throughout the school year, taking a break after four classes in modern school and resuming Qur'anic instruction at nighttime. Nowadays, in upper-class circles in the capital, some teachers come to the home of their pupils, though such practices are sometimes criticized as debasing the status of religious knowledge and its transmitters. Daily lessons are obviously shunned for those who simultaneously attend modern and Qur'anic school. Although they are allowed to take their writing tablets home with them to study their lessons only the teacher is authorized to 
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only the teacher is authorized to write a new lesson. On the other hand, pupils
who are receiving only religious instruction leave their writing boards at their
teacher’s home so that he alone controls their instruction. The teacher considers
that his presence is indispensable at every stage of instruction, on the ground
that, once a serious error is engraving in the memory, it is very difficult to erase.

Foundations of Religious Learning

After the alphabet, teaching invariably begins with the Qur’an, the foundation
of all other sources of Islamic knowledge (jurisprudence, the life of the Prophet,
etc.). Nonetheless, other texts are taught besides the Qur’an. In the east, the study
of the Qur’an must be completed before learning any other text,6 but in other
regions courses of study are diversified earlier on. In Mauritania, every region
stresses a different kind of knowledge. In general, after they have memorized
part of the Qur’an, pupils begin to study theology (‘aqīda) and jurisprudence
(‘fiqh) in works of increasing difficulty. At this first stage, pupils learn the twenty
attributes of God as well as the “personal duties” (furū’ al-‘ayn) necessary for
religious devotion (‘ibāda), encompassing rules of purification (‘uḥūra), prayer
(salāt), fasting (ṣawm), religious taxation (zakāt), and the pilgrimage (hajj).

The works studied in Mauritania are generally identical to those studied
in Mali (Tamari 1996, 48) and in the Fuuta Tooro (Schmitz 1998). For example,
the basic works of Maliki jurisprudence, the Risāla, Khālī, and the Ajrūmiyya,
as well as the basic text for grammar, the Ajrūmiyya, are all taught. Moreover,
for most disciplines, Mauritania and Niger share the same standard reference
works: for jurisprudence, Al-Akhḍāri; for grammar, the Alfiyya (also taught in
Iran [Naraghi 1992, 48]) for poetry, the Mu‘allaqāt; and for exegesis, Al-jalālayn,
as well as at-Tabari’s commentary on the Qur’an.

There exists a shared core in the religious cultures of Muslim societies that is
due in large measure to the study of identical texts. References to the same basic
writings explain the similarity of certain institutions and representations in other-
wise culturally diverse Muslim societies. Most of these works are better known by
the names of their authors than by their titles. Thus, Al-Akhḍāri (sixteenth century,
Algeria) is the first author studied for jurisprudence, followed by Ibn Ashir (sev-
teenth century, Morocco), whose first chapter deals with theology (‘aqīda), the
second with jurisprudence (‘fiqh), and the third with mysticism (taṣawwuf). The
history of the early days of Islam (ṣira) is studied in al-Lamṭi’s (sixteenth century,
Morocco) Qurṭ al-Abṣār. For their part, girls study a short collection of hadith
called Dalā‘il al-khayrāt (The path leading to good works) by Al-Djazuli (fifteenth
century, Morocco).

At a more advanced level, the sons of marabouts study the required social
duties (ma‘āmulat) in more extensive legal texts. These include “collective duties”
(furūḍ al-kifāya)—those that any given individual does not have to perform as long as they are undertaken by others (for example, teaching the Qur’an or reciting funeral prayers)—as well as “personal duties” (furūḍ al-‘ayn), in domains such as marriage, commerce, inheritance, and penal law. Between the ages of ten and fifteen, they begin by studying the Risāla of al-Qayrawānī (tenth century, Tunisia), which, in Chinguetti (in the Adrar region), is known in a version put into verse by ‘Abd-Allah wuld Ḥajj Ḥamāhullāh, a local eighteenth-century scholar from the maraboutic Lāghitāl tribe (Hamel 1992, 368, n. 167). Indeed, such texts are often versified throughout the Muslim world in accordance with the rules of Arabic prosody (‘arūd) to facilitate their memorization and oral transmission. Later, between the ages of fifteen and twenty, they are taught the Mukhtaṣar of Khalīl (fourteenth century, Egypt) and, after they reach the age of twenty, the Amīmīya of Ibn ‘Asīm (late fourteenth to early fifteenth centuries, Andalusia) before undertaking the study of ever more complex legal texts.

Pedagogical Techniques

Mnemonic Devices, Formulas, and Quizzes

The māḥāṣa employs mnemonic devices to facilitate learning Islamic jurisprudence and Arabic prosody. For example, the sentence “Live as long as you have the means” (‘ish lauka riqa) contains the initials of the seven obstacles to inheritance in Maliki jurisprudence (Khalil 1995, 453). The ‘ayn is the initial of the word “stillborn”; the shin of uncertainty about who died first in an accident; the lām of refusal to acknowledge paternity; the kāf of infidelity; the rā’ of slavery; the zā’ of illegitimacy; the qāf of voluntary homicide. This mnemonic formula, used in mḥāṣar in Mauritania, is cited by certain Maliki commentators (Ibn ‘Asim 1988, 430, n. 132). This demonstrates that, in a country like Mauritania, where essential knowledge is constituted with reference to Muslim scriptural sources, its transmission is effected by pedagogical methods that date back to the early years of Islam. In grammar, poems in the local Ḥassāniyya dialect of Arabic help students memorize rules of syntax—for example, that the fundamental units of any nominal or verbal phrase are the subject and the predicate. Similarly, short mnemonic poems in classical Arabic are used for learning the metrical structure of poetry.

In certain maraboutic families in the Trazza region, various disciplines are taught at home alongside instruction in the māḥāṣa. Women play an important role in teaching the life of the Prophet (ṣira). Thus, grandmothers or maternal aunts who are knowledgeable in the subject repeat to a young student before he goes to sleep the twenty names of men in the Prophet’s paternal line, the fourteen names of women in his maternal line, the four names of his sons, the four names of his daughters, the two names of the mothers of his children, and the names of the four caliphs and of the ten when the student has reached the four warriors who fought in the Prop’s time.

Indeed, the local reference scholar, al-Badawi, who sought revealed to him by a woman named the hijra. Wālī māḥāṣa, he met an old woman his patronym. Like most women’s encyclopedic genealogies and ancestry with a formula that asks for the first, Naẓm ansāb al-ara al-Ḍhānawī, on the early conq of the Prophet’s guide durir amāṣel al-Badawi.

In certain families, the pupil role in his education by quizzing him in throwing a ball, which the answer. These quizzes may cover theology. This kind of teaching in the rigidity of study under a Qur’an the right answer rather than punis answers a quiz correctly while his them contain a glass of this professor’s right answer to quizzes.

On their own, children invent knowledge and exercise their met group. The first will recite a verse with a verse that starts with the last line is eliminated. This kind of exercise young man arrives as a stranger in group and practice this kind of prayer in prayer circle. Even the Qur’an can be away from their teacher. Once the correct answers are written on their board, s
the four caliphs and of the ten companions who were admitted to Paradise. Later, when the student has reached the age of fourteen, they teach him the names of warriors who fought in the Prophet’s twenty-eight battles against unbelievers.

Indeed, the local reference work on the life of the Prophet was written by a scholar, al-Badawi, who sought to remedy his own ignorance on the subject, as revealed to him by a woman who questioned him about the name of Muhammad’s guide during the hijra. When he was in his thirties and still studying in the maḥāra, he met an old woman in a camp of the Idabhiṣan tribe who enquired of his patronym. Like most women her age, she was well acquainted with the intricacies of tribal genealogies and demonstrated her knowledge of his prestigious ancestry with a formula that acknowledges nobility, learning, or piety: wakhayrta. After having praised the erudition of his family, she gave him the chance to prove his own by interrogating him about the life of the Prophet, asking the name of his guide when he fled Mecca for Medina. Because he did not know the answer, al-Badawi decided to remedy his ignorance by writing two works on the subject: the first, Naṣm ansāb al-arab, on the genealogies of the Arabs; the second, al-Ghazawāt, on the early conquests of Islam. The first book begins with the name of the Prophet’s guide during his exile, the answer to the question that had stumped al-Badawi.

In certain families, the pupil’s father or maternal uncles play an important role in his education by quizzesing him. This kind of quiz is called zarg, “to throw,” as in throwing a ball, which the pupil must throw back (jawāb) by giving the answer. These quizzes may cover any subject: jurisprudence, grammar, poetry, theology. This kind of teaching in the family has a playful character in contrast to the rigidity of study under a Qur’anic master. The student is rewarded for giving the right answer rather than punished for mistakes. For example, if a young boy answers a quiz correctly while his father or uncle is preparing tea, he is exceptionally allowed a glass of this precious drink. Old men often have a chest with them containing treats (dates, biscuits, peanuts) reserved for pupils who give the right answer to quizzes.

On their own, children invent group games of poetry recital to bolster their knowledge and exercise their memory. Ten-year-old pupils will form a little group. The first will recite a verse of Arabic poetry; the second must continue with a verse that starts with the last letter of the first verse; and so on, until all but one is eliminated. This kind of exercise is called an “Invitation” (nadwa); when a young man arrives as a stranger in a camp, he is invited by the youth of his age group to practice this kind of poetry contest as a way of incorporating him into their circle. Even the Qur’an can be the subject of such games played by children away from their teacher. Once the class is over, even though they have left their writing boards with their master, supposedly preventing them from studying
the lesson in his absence, pupils continue to interrogate one another. This collective study is similar to a game in which each pupil recites a section (hizb) of the Qur’an as stipulated by the group. If the person who is challenged does not remember it, he is eliminated. As a result, the person who best knows the Qur’an wins the game.

Reading, Reciting, and Writing the Qur’an

The first phase of Qur’anic learning consists in its oral recitation (qirā’āt). This education, which is generally provided by the mother in maraboutic families, begins with teaching the letters of the alphabet even before the child learns to read. This process takes into account regional differences in pronunciation. First, the child learns to distinguish different letters in terms of the number of discriminatory points above or below the character. Second, he learns to recognize the vowel markers and the sign for doubling consonants. Once this phase is finished, the pupil will decipher the shortest suras of the Qur’an. As in the rest of the Muslim world, the memorization of the Qur’an begins with the first sura (al-Fatihah), followed by the shortest suras at the end of the Qur’an up to the longest suras at the beginning from the 114th sura, the People (an-Nās) to the 2nd sura, the Cow (al-Baqara).

The pupil learns the passage his master has written on his writing board by heart. He withdraws a bit in order to read his lesson out loud as many times as it takes to memorize it. To count the number of recitations it takes to memorize the text, he marks the sand with a dot for each reading, sometimes forming a triangle or rectangle of fifty dots. This technique of learning through repetition holds for all the suras of the Qur’an except for the first to be taught; these suras are effectively known to the pupil even before he learns to read, because he has already heard his comrades recite them incessantly. To facilitate study, the Qur’anic text is divided into sixty sections (azhāb), each with its own name. The first section, named for the three mysterious initials (alif, lám, mim) that open the sura, the Cow, is taught last, while the last section, known as sabil, is the first to be taught. Each of these sections is in turn divided into eight subsections.

The pace of teaching is adapted to each pupil. The master is the only person authorized to judge whether a pupil can begin learning a new sura. Suras are qualified as “cooked” (ṣūrtu tāyba) or “tender” (niyya) according to whether the pupil has assimilated them. Someone who has a “hard head” (rās gāssi)—the expression in Hassāniyya compares memorization to engraving—will take more time to memorize a passage than one who has a “soft head” (rās liyin). Only after the pupil has exercised his memory and learned to read will he finally be taught to write. A much higher value is placed on reciting the Qur’an (tīlāwa) than on writing it down (kītaba). Only when the pupil knows from two to four sections of the Qur’an by heart will he begin to learn to write. His quill (qalam) follows the trace made by his master until the end of the sura. As a result, the best pupil is the one who learned the Qur’an by heart on his own. The most advanced pupil writing verses on the writing boards is the one who has mastered the recitation of the Qur’an on his own. To remain as faithful as possible, he never omit vowel markers.

After the definitive memorization that other verses may be written on and recited, this gesture of erasing from the writing board, a ritual that underscores the value of the water that has been drunk, the water is poured reverently, out of respect for the scripture. According to Ibn Sa‘īdīn, the era of the Qur’an corresponds to the stone age, a period of memory, a memorial, where the texts are written and read and written by the master. These practices of recitation have assimilated a process that took place in the same period, the ritual logic of ingestion, whether of larj of the Qur’ān on the other.

Modes of Transmission and Types of Qur’anic Recitation above Reproba

Reading and writing are ultimately stigmatized as the ultimate object of Qur’anic recitation, as if memory were contained in the body of the master, their tireless repetition. The recitation, as if memory were contained in the body of the master, their tireless repetition, the word of God is repeated, the repetitive process of memorization. Although different verses, the master, like the conveyor belt, which he signals by tapping the level, children answer the teacher’s que
the trace made by his master until the teacher finally authorizes his pupil to write on his own. The most advanced pupil may also become an assistant to his master, writing verses on the writing boards of beginners and correcting their recitation. Writing is first executed according to the dictation of the master or his assistant. Once the pupil has mastered the recitation of the Qur’an, he can copy it directly on his own. To remain as faithful as possible to the original text, such copies must never omit vowel markers.

After the definitive memorization of a sura, the writing board is washed so that other verses may be written on it. Once the text has been copied, learned, and recited, this gesture of erasing from the writing board what one knows by heart—the Arabic expression is “on the back of the heart” (‘an zahiri qalb)—is the inverse of its engraving in the memory: That which is no longer written is acquired; that which is no longer objectivized is interiorized. The beginning pupil drinks the water that has been used to wash the sacred text from the writing board, a ritual that underscores the oral ingestion of the Qur’an. When it has not been drunk, the water is poured into a place where no one will step on it irreverently, out of respect for the sacred word that has been dissolved into it. According to Ibn Saḥnūn, in the era of the companions of the Prophet, pupils dug a hole in the ground where they poured the water that had erased the contents of their writing boards. These practices testify to the ways in which learning the Qur’an has been assimilated to a process of incorporation, and even of ingestion. I have noted elsewhere (Fortier 1998) that Qur’anic instruction for boys is the equivalent of force-feeding for girls—no longer practiced in Moorish society—a process that took place in the same phase of their lives and that shared the corporeal logic of ingestion, whether of large quantities of milk on one hand or verses of the Qur’an on the other.

Modes of Transmission and Types of Texts

A Qur’anic Recitation above Reproach

Reading and writing are ultimately subordinated to memorization and recitation, the ultimate object of Qur’anic instruction. It relies in particular on hearing in the attention given to accentuation, intonation, the cadences of suras as intoned by the master, their tireless repetition (tikrār) out loud, and their rhythmic recitation, as if memory were constituted through audition. The rhythm of the torso rocking back and forth to the rhythm of Qur’anic verses facilitates the process of memorization. Although all pupils are simultaneously reciting different verses, the master, like the conductor of an orchestra, is listening for any error, which he signals by tapping the pupil with his rod. At a more advanced level, children answer the teacher’s questions by tracing the letters of the answer
on their arm, leg, or hand, concealing it from the other students. If the answer is valid, the master approves, or else he shakes his head and supplies the answer. The dominance of hearing for the transmission of knowledge explains why a blind person, but never a deaf-mute, can serve as a teacher.13

Even though the pupil acquires literacy by means of the Qur’anic text, reciting it remains more essential than reading or writing it. Moreover, this recitation should be perfect4 out of respect for the Divine Word, which is unique, final, eternal, and unchangeable. As al-Qayrawānī (1968, 301–3), the tenth-century Maliki jurist, recommended: “You are not permitted . . . to recite the Qur’an with accented rhythms as in profane singing. The majesty of God’s Book does not allow for any recitation other than in a serious manner and in such condition that you are sure that God would be satisfied and find it agreeable; and in bringing all your attention to bear on this pious recitation.”

Unlike most texts in classical Arabic, where only the consonants are written down, the Qur’an includes vowel markers to preclude any ambiguity in reading it. Among the ten styles of reading the Qur’an, seven of which are quite common throughout the Muslim world, Maliks have adopted the Na’īf style, which includes two variants: Warsh, where the hamza is distinctly pronounced, and Kafūn, where it is omitted. In Mauritania, the Qur’an is first taught according to the first variant; the student who wants to diversify his reading style learns the second afterward. Different styles of reading may have implications for the very meaning of the Qur’anic text. For this reason, the diversity of readings accounts in part for the divergent interpretations among Islamic schools of jurisprudence. Consequently, jurists (Khalīl 1995, 78) have even considered the question of whether prayer is invalidated because of a faulty reading of the suras; a mispronunciation of certain letters can be problematic.

In Mauritania, regional differences exist in the pronunciation of certain letters. They have sometimes led to heated controversies about the recitation of the Qur’an—for example, about the pronunciation of the letter jīm. Throughout the country, the letter is pronounced as a soft jī in dialectical Arabic or even in profane classical texts (poems, genealogies, etc.). However, when reciting the Qur’an or hadith, Moors from Adrar, Tagant, and Hawai pronounce this letter with a hard jī, whereas Moors from Trarza (except for the Idawallī, who are originally from Adrar and Tagant), pronounce it with a soft jī. The “quarrel of the jī” inspired an important exchange of legal opinions (fatawā) in eighteenth-century Mauritania, notably between a scholar from the Tanwāyūn maraboutic tribe in the east, Sidi ‘Abdallah wulā Abū Bakr at-Tanwājī (d. 1145 AH/1732–1733 CE), a partisan of the hard jī, and a scholar from the Idawallī maraboutic tribe in Triqet, Muḥammad al-Yadālī (d. 1166 AH/1752–1753 CE), an advocate of the soft jī. The biography of Sidi ‘Abdallah in the Fath ash-Shakūr describes him as a notable

mam, specialist in the seven readings. Ahmad al-Ḥabīb al-Lamṭī as-Sijīlī corrected the faulty reading of his co of the letter jīm (Hamel 1992, 418, n. 2) and was adopted his way of reciting the jīm when reading the Qur’an.

The art of chanting (tajwīd) the Qur’an (hadīr) is used for learning the Qur’an prayers during Ramadan, and the Qur’an requires discipline, as Thiwīl says: “Chant the recitation with care.”

Satiating the Thirst for Knowledge

In certain maraboutic tribes, a child of the Qur’an in five to seven years. The ling speaks Nomadic Arabic, and classical Arabic the process. A young man who is the hajja, a word designating a guardian who, in classical Arabic, alludes to the Word (Chabbi 1997, 484). Indeed, it is th in themselves; his person is invest th with himself, his person is invested; says suggests: “He recites and carries th the Allāh al-‘azīz.” Carrying the Qur’an in itself, the beneficent baraka of the Qur’ān are the elect of God. Consequently, the reciter is anA

The new status of the pupil who is visible in Moorish society by coloring his Moorish expressions used to designate the Qur’an refers to this practice: “We have seen the henna dries, the pupil thrusts who have not finished their education li is to incorporate the Divine Word that
imam, specialist in the seven readings of the Qur’an, which he learned under Sidi Ahmad al-Ḥabīb al-Lamṭī as-Sijilmāsī, and who, upon returning to Mauritania, corrected the faulty reading of his companions, in particular the pronunciation of the letter jīm (Hamel 1992, 418, n. 200). Ever since, the majority of Mauritanians adopted his way of reciting the jīm, known as the jīm of the Tanwājī tribe, when reading the Qur’an.

The art of chanting (tajwid) the Qur’an follows different rhythms: the fastest (ḥadr) is used for learning the Qur’an, a moderate rhythm (tadwīr) for reciting long prayers during Ramadan, and the slowest (tartil) for daily prayer. Chanting the Qur’an requires discipline, as this verse indicates (LXXV, 16–18): “Do not wiggle your tongue while saying it in order to go faster!” (Blachère 1980, 626). Perfect chanting is a token of respect toward the Divine Word and one form of Divine worship (ʿibāda); thus, the Book (LXXIII, 4) exhorts its meticulous practice: “Chant the Predication with care” (Blachère 1980, 621).

Slaking the Thirst for Knowledge

In certain maraboutic tribes, a child frequently learns the whole text of the Qur’an in five to seven years. The linguistic proximity between the language of the Moors, Hassāniyya, and classical Arabic, the language of the Qur’an, facilitates the process. A young man who knows the entire Book (al-Kitāb) is called ḥafiz, a word designating a guardian or keeper (Kazimirski 1944, 1460) and which, in classical Arabic, alludes to the indestructible and indelible nature of the Word (Chabbi 1997, 484). Indeed, it is the Divine Word which the reciter contains within himself; his person is invested with the Qur’an, this saying in Hassāniyya suggests: “He recites and carries the Divine Book” (ḥafizu wa hāmilu Kitābi Allāhi al-ʿazīz). Carrying the Qur’an inside oneself also means one carries within oneself the beneficent baraka of the Divine Word; a hadith affirms that “The carriers of the Qur’an are the elect of God, his close associates” (Ibn Saḥnūn 1953, 83). Consequently, the reciter is an intercessor between God and other humans. The numinous character of the student invested with the Divine Word comes to the fore at dangerous moments of “passage” such as burials. It is said on such occasions that he who knows the entirety of the Qur’an has “ceased wandering” (dāsar diḥāba)—in other words, that he is on the right path, the path of God.

The new status of the pupil who has finished learning the Qur’an is made visible in Moorish society by coloring his hands and feet with henna. One of the Moorish expressions used to designate the student who has finished memorizing the Qur’an refers to this practice: “We have put henna on his hand or his arm.” As soon as the henna dries, the pupil thrusts his right hand into a jar of butter. Pupils who have not finished their education lick off the butter that covers their arm in order to incorporate the Divine Word that has been internalized by their comrade.
It remains for the student who has, according to common practice, memorized the Qur’an in reverse order to take it up again, this time in the proper order. After this repetition, which generally lasts less than a year, the student acquires a new status. The termination of Qur’anic study is marked by a rite of passage whereby the student, over a period of two days, recites the entire Book before his master and two witnesses. Before beginning his recitation, he utters a conjuration designed to protect against any error inspired by the devil: “Cursed be the devil who has been stoned!” If the two scholarly witnesses consider that the pupil’s Qur’anic knowledge is sufficient, they deliver an ijāza, a certificate of transmission. This very common term is based on the same radical as ajāza, “to authorize.” As its name suggests, the ijāza authorizes the student to teach, which is to say that he can in his own right become a master. It is written in the teacher’s hand, using on this occasion colored ink for certain signs, such as vowel markers, such ink is normally reserved for copies of precious books, and its use for the ijāza testifies to the importance of this document. Its official character is underscored by the formula at the end of the document, “certified authentic” (ṣaḥḥah wathabata). This has all the characteristics of a legal document, as the names of the two witnesses are added to the seal of authenticity. In addition, the student’s level of proficiency is evaluated by a grade (takhdim) decided upon by the master and the two witnesses: “very good” (ḥassan jīdan), “good” (ḥassan), or merely “passable” (mutawaṣṣit).

The ijāza also includes the name of the teacher. As it happens, the chain of transmission (sanad) does not go back further than the master, proof that his reputation suffices to ensure the legitimacy of the knowledge that has been transmitted. This preoccupation with continuity in oral transmission is similar for those who collected the sayings of the Prophet. If the content of knowledge depends on the imitation (taqlīd) of those who came before, it is essential that knowledge be transmitted through a reliable chain of transmitters. Consequently, the biographies and the ijāzat of Islamic authors list, before their works, the names of their teachers, in turn part of a genealogy of transmitters of knowledge (sanad or silsila). The hierarchy of modes of transmission reflects the value placed on specifically oral transmission. Thus, an ijāza which testifies that a work has been recited (qirā’a) before a master without having been enlightened by his explanations carries less weight than an ijāza which specifies that the knowledge was learned by listening (as-sam’) to the master. Least prestigious is the wijāda, a sort of ijāza in absentia given to someone who has studied a work on his own without a master guaranteeing an accurate reading.

The Moorish term designating the process of transmission from master to student is particularly telling: The word ijādar refers to a human or animal who, once he has satisfied his tl the expression used to indicate particular teacher can be approxi thrist from so-and-so.” This for mized as a physiological thirst for knowledge. The disci ple desires to learn, according to this quest, associated with phys the master’s knowledge t another master. Once the stude of knowledge, his intellectual knowledge accumulated from a fixed point attracting new study that “they have taken the ijāza.

In Moorish society, the ijāza other forms of knowledge. This which consists of a single book c over long. If Qur’anic knowledge of knowledge, whose depth is lit generally compared. Given their mastery of one book leads one Mukhtasar (Précis) of Khalil is t Hassāniyya to refer to someone w the first and last words of the tex with the aphorism, “Now, you are even after having mastered the w immensity of what he still has left of Islamic practice, can be expli symbolically represents religious used to praise a scholar’s knowl ḥukum salātū). The saying attribu reader to pursue his quest for kno he has plumbed its depth while h ijāza cannot attest to the transmiss fede, surpasses the capacity of the

A Specifically Qur’anic Educatic The transmission of the Qur’anic sh forms of Arab-Islamic knowledge
who, once he has satisfied his thirst at a well, continues his journey. In an ijāza, the expression used to indicate that a student holds his knowledge from a particular teacher can be approximately translated as “So-and-so has slaked his thirst from so-and-so.” This formula explicitly shows that learning the Qur’an is conceived as a physiological process of ingestion. Moreover, the expression compares the Qur’anic teacher to a spring from which the student slakes his thirst for knowledge. The disciple effectively chooses the teacher from whom he desires to learn, according to his level and his field of specialization. In this quest, associated with physical travel, it is only once the student is “filled” with his master’s knowledge that he is authorized to leave him in search of another master. Once the student has progressively acquired an elevated level of knowledge, his intellectual wanderings come to an end. Nourished by the knowledge accumulated from a succession of masters, he himself becomes a fixed point attracting new students. Of those who are potential masters, it is said that “they have taken the ijāza.”

In Moorish society, the ijāza is limited to the Qur’an and does not include other forms of knowledge. This is because of the specificity of such knowledge, which consists of a single book committed to memory over a limited time, however long. If Qur’anic knowledge is limited, this is not the case for other forms of knowledge, whose depth is limitless like the sea (al-bāḥr), to which they are generally compared. Given their limitless character, their study has no end; the mastery of one book leads one to study another, and so on, indefinitely. The Mukhtasar (Précis) of Khalil is such a dense work that a common expression in Hassāniyya to refer to someone with perfect knowledge of a subject simply echoes the first and last words of the text. It is said that Khalil finished the Mukhtasar with the aphorism, “Now, you are only just capable of praying,” suggesting that, even after having mastered the work, the scholar cannot rest content, given the immensity of what he still has left to learn. The reference to prayer, at the heart of Islamic practice, can be explained by the fact that knowledge of its intricacies symbolically represents religious knowledge in general; the Moorish expression used to praise a scholar’s knowledge is “He knows the rules of prayer” (yaraf ḥukum salātu). The saying attributed to Khalil, marked by humility, invites the reader to pursue his quest for knowledge without succumbing to the illusion that he has plumbed its depth while he is still only at the surface. Consequently, an ijāza cannot attest to the transmission of such knowledge, which, given its amplitude, surpasses the capacity of the human mind.

A Specifically Qur’anic Education

The transmission of the Qur’an should thus be distinguished from that of other forms of Arab-Islamic knowledge (e.g., grammar, jurisprudence). Because the
Book is unique, learning it is, by its very nature, finite; on the other hand, for other branches of knowledge, the number of works varies with the nature and level of specialization, and their study is in principle unlimited and infinite. Above all, Qur’anic instruction can only take place under the supervision of a master who rigorously controls learning, whereas other forms of learning can in principle be self-taught without the mediation of a teacher. Consequently, during the time strictly limited to the study of the Qur’an, the pupil is not authorized to review his lesson by bringing his writing board home, lest a third party lead him into error. By contrast, in maraboutic families, the teaching of other subjects can take place within the family; students are often tutored by women in the family about the early history of Islam as well as traditions of the Prophet and by men about grammar and jurisprudence. In addition, whereas the Qur’anic text is learned by heart, disciples (ti’āmid) in the maḥāzīn often resort to mnemonic devices to remember certain grammatical or legal rules. Furthermore, the only means of controlling knowledge of the Book is by recitation, while other subjects are tested through questioning, and learning is based on not only memorization but comprehension. Finally, punishment constitutes an essential means for teaching the Qur’an, while other subjects may be learned through play. It is necessary to qualify the notion that there is a single form of Islamic pedagogy valid for the acquisition of different forms of knowledge (Qur’an, grammar, jurisprudence, etc.). Diversity of pedagogical style follows from the different natures of the subjects taught; the how of transmission seems intimately linked to what is being transmitted. The specificity of the mode of teaching the Qur’an is strictly a function of the very singularity of the text. The status of this text is not comparable to that of any other scriptural reference; called The Book (al-Kitāb), it is considered by Muslims to be the very manifestation of the Divine Word.

The Qur’an is conceived to be timeless and intangible, not subject to any human modification. The divine status of the text determines the attention given to its exact memorization. It must be learned word for word to reproduce the Qur’anic discourse exactly. Moreover, its recitation must not undergo any alteration, and it is not permitted to ask questions while studying it. Thus, a Muslim would prefer to abstain from citing any verse he does not know precisely rather than both its recitation. This concern for exactness is not only cognitive but religious, because it testifies to a respectful faith in the Word of God.

The study of the transmission of Islamic knowledge raises the question of the relationship between writing and orality in the Muslim world. The modes of learning described in this chapter testifies to the importance of memory acquired through hearing, recitation, and repetition. The primacy of orality over writing in the transmission of knowledge is confirmed by numerous practices in the intellectual and religious world of Islam to the predominance of orality over writing. Becoming the Book, was the Divine Word from the first word revealed to the Prophet. Injunction that is proper to a discourse: the Qur’an is considered to be the explicit expression to make the message flesh, in which explains on one hand why the necessary leitmotif in the Qur’an: “Let the Reminder” (LXXXVII, 9). On the other hand, the Qur’an is religiously meritorious; it is he who has learned the Qur’an chanting the Qur’anic text (v. 12). The Prophet: “They will say to him, ‘Arise, chant it as you chanted it in the mosque by the last verse you read’” (Nasr).

Uttering verses or even simple words ritual, whether in prayer, where the fatiha is spoken aloud; or even in the word bismillah. Compared to the Qur’anic text is not only the fundamental unit but its verses are frequently uttered in union, given the supernatural quality of human powers on he who recites it. Knowledge is also power. The absolute singularity of its mode of transmission limnates societies a veritable Qur’anic litany of texts.

Finally, the mode of transmission has modes of transmission, subordinating the concept of orality differs in th civilization, to freedom of imaginatio in Arab-Muslim civilization, to the totality of transmission. Yates (1975) explored the concept of memory was a system of images that appealed to the sense of sight. Th the Muslim world shows that the Muslim (muḥādkara), relies essentially on the orality in the full sense of the word.
intellectual and religious world of Islam. The very foundation of Islam testifies to the predominance of orality over writing, given that the Qur'an, even before becoming the Book, was the Divine Word. The very name of the Qur'an stems from the first word revealed to the Prophet: "Iqra'" ("Recite") (XCVI, 1), an injunction that is proper to a discourse that has been heard and not read. Because the Qur'an is considered to be the expression of the Divine Word, appropriating it is to make the message flesh, in order that it remain indefinitely alive. This explains on one hand why the necessary remembrance of the Divine Word is a leitmotif in the Qur'an: "Let the Reminder be heard, because it is good to remember!" (LXXXVII, 9). On the other hand, it explains why learning and teaching the Qur'an are religiously meritorious acts, as asserts a hadith: "The best among you is he who has learned the Qur'an and who has taught it" (Nawawi 1991, 280). Chanting the Qur'anic text leads the way to Paradise, as suggested by this saying of the Prophet: "They will say to he who is familiar with the Qur'an: Read and arise, chant it as you wanted it in this world, as your final home shall be determined by the last verse you read" (Nawawi 1991, 281).

Uttering verses or even simple words of the Qur'an is obligatory in all Muslim ritual, whether in prayer, where several suras are recited; for marriage, where the jātiha is spoken aloud; or even when initiating any action, by pronouncing the word bismillah. Compared to the foundational texts of other religions, the Qur'anic text is not only the fundamental reference for how to live an ethical life, but its verses are frequently uttered in accomplishing ritual practices. In addition, given the supernatural quality of the Word, its knowledge confers superhuman powers on he who recites it. Unlike other forms of knowledge, Qur'anic knowledge is also power. The absolutely unique status of the Qur'an explains the singularity of its mode of transmission and accounts for the existence in Muslim societies of a veritable "Qur'anic pedagogy distinct from modes of learning other texts.

Finally, the mode of transmission of learning in Islam, in contrast to Western modes of transmission, subordinates writing to orality. The very content of the concept of orality differs in the two civilizations, referring, in Western civilization, to freedom of imagination and to the spontaneity of creation, and in Arab-Muslim civilization, to the taming of imagination and to the continuity of transmission. Yates (1975) explained that the foundation of Western "art of memory" was a system of images and spaces inherited from the Greeks and that appealed to the sense of sight. The study of the transmission of learning in the Muslim world shows that the Muslim art of memory, which is remembrance (mudhakara), relies essentially on the sense of hearing and on oral ingestion—orality in the full sense of the word.18
1. There are Feul, Sounkine, and Bambara communities in Mauritania in addition to Moors.
2. On the subject of gifts to teachers and pupils who are from another locality, and on the services that pupils provide their master in Moorish society, see Fortier (1997).
3. The real name of Nâhiba al-Ghullâwi is Muhammad wuld 'Amar. He died in Tanawhâ in 1524 AH (1839–1830 CE).
4. Muhammad ibn Sa'nûn (Tunisia, 817–870) was the son of Sa'nûn ibn Sa'id (Tunisia, 76–856). The latter, author of the Mudawwana, is considered largely responsible for the introduction of the Maliki doctrine in the Maghreb at the expense of the Hanafi school. M'sa'nûn's manual is apparently unknown in Mauritanian.
5. However, Ibn Sa'nûn (1953, 92) forbids teachers to hit their students in the face or to withhold from them food or water.
6. In Nigeria as well, it is only after the complete recitation of the entire Qur'an that pupils begin learning other texts (Reichmuth 1997).
7. In certain Trarza tribes, until about thirty years ago such education could be conducted in the Berber language (klâm znâga).
8. In teaching the Torah—for example, among Moroccan Jews—learning to write is as important as recitation: "L'écriture, au niveau éducatif comme indispensable à la poursuite des études, n'est enseignée que bien tard" (Zafrani 1998, 65).
10. According to Ibn Sa'nûn (1953, 86), there is no problem with erasing the writing board by licking off the ink.
11. In both cases, the ingestion involved subjection to corporal punishment (Fortier 1998).
12. Eickelman (1974, 495) remarks that the memorization of the Qur'an is assimilated to recitation.
13. Colonna (1981, 198, n. 30) notes the expression employed in a community in the area for a blind person: "He learns by ear."
14. A similar preoccupation with perfection is found in the teaching of the Torah. "The correct reading of the liturgical texts of the Bible implies a perfect knowledge of the fine points (diqduq'im) and the accents (qur'un) of the Torah. Chanted reading of the scroll of the law, where neither vowel marks nor inflections are written down is one of the fundamental elements of the service. The child is progressively familiarized with it through repetition and memorization. The audience of believers scrupulously monitors the chanting and bares his signals any errors on the part of the reader, who has to repeat the fragment of the verse correctly" (Zafrani 1998, 64).
15. Someone who has memorized the entire Qur'an is less commonly known in Moors society as mu'âr, a term that refers in classical Arabic to a Qur'anic reciter.
16. It would seem that this is a remark posthumously attributed to Khalâl; this sentence was not included in the Arabic edition I consulted. Even if the comment is apocryphal, it suggests a certain attitude toward knowledge.
17. Muslims insist on the definitive and fixed character of the Qur'an, compared to the "human" corrections of the Bible. The status of the Qur'an and the Bible are very different from an Islamic viewpoint: Whereas the Qur'an is the literal Word of God, the Bible is simply written by humans, even if both sacred books are considered divinely inspired.

REFERENCES


This chapter explores various aspects of Islamic education in West Africa through an analytical study of the life of a scholar, al-Ḥāfi al-Kirān wa Tarājīm al-ʿUlam, and his educational and intellectual pedagogical tradition. Such an analysis can contribute to our understanding of how Islamic education was transmitted to Muslim scholars through the memorization of the Qur’ān and the transmission of knowledge in the forms of hadith and other authoritative texts. The chapter provides a narrative of the life of this scholar, highlighting his role in the transmission of knowledge and the development of the Islamic education system. Using three case studies, this chapter demonstrates the impact of Islamic education in traditional societies.

The Scholar and His Corpus in Context

Born in a village near Kano to a Tuareg pastoralist family, he began his Islamic education with men skilled in the Qur’ān and the elementary texts of the Qur’ān. Falke relocated to Katsina in 1931, where he was initiated into the Tariqa order. He spent several years in the desert, learning and teaching the principles of Islamic education. The impact of his work is evident in his writings, which have been influential in the development of Islamic education in West Africa.