Islamic Education in West and Central Africa

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Abstract
Islamic schools in West Africa, madrasahs (medersas), continue to evolve and flourish, playing an increasingly significant role in the education of children. As school enrollment increases in the region, public schools are increasingly overcrowded. Related to overcrowding, but also to teacher preparation, curriculum, and the availability of learning materials, public schools face challenges in ensuring the education provided is of high quality, as recent studies (such as the early grade reading assessment and others) demonstrate. For Muslim communities in West Africa, Islamic schools have responded to parents’ dissatisfaction with educational quality and their desire to ensure that, in a rapidly changing world, children are strongly attached to and educated in their faith. This chapter draws on three studies that have been conducted in West Africa – in Nigeria (2003/2004), in Ghana (2006), and in Mali (2009/2010) – by the author, with funding from the US Agency for International Development, as well as other recent literature on the topic. This chapter looks at the characteristics of madrasahs in these countries and trends in the madrasah sector in light of the educational environment and needs to which these schools are responding, while also bringing in examples from other countries. Key topics touched on include school leadership, pedagogy and teaching, curriculum and parental preference, and involvement.

Keywords
Madrasah • West Africa • Islamic Education • Islamic Schools

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Introduction

Although African Islam is sometimes described as “overlooked” from an academic standpoint (Ware 2014), the durability and vibrancy of Islam in West Africa are evident in its Islamic schools and in the increasingly influential role they are assuming in the public education sector (Bleck 2015; Boyle et al. 2007; Ministère de l’Education 2010; Owusu-Ansah et al. 2013; Tsimpo 2014). Presently, Islamic schools across West Africa vary in type, and have different local names, including makaranta or madrasah or Islāmiyyah schools (depending on the country). (In the context of the francophone, African countries madrasah is spelled medersa. For the sake of consistency, however, the Arabic transliteration is used throughout this volume.) They can be found across West Africa, in diverse contexts such as Burkina Faso, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, and elsewhere (Boyle 2004a; Boyle et al. 2007; Boyle and Toyin 2004; Brenner 2001, 2007; Easton 1997; Iddrisu 2005; Owusu-Ansah et al. 2013; Reichmuth 1993; RTI 2014; Tsimpo 2014; Ware 2014). Indeed, while traditional Qur’ānic schools continue to be present in villages and neighborhoods, to ensure that children memorize some of the holy Qur’ān, West Africa has seen the development of a range of “new” Islamic schools over the past 40-plus years. In addition to Qur’ānic schools, these include private, exclusively religious schools that use “modern” methods, private schools that incorporate some secular and religious subjects, and government-registered, integrated schools that follow a government curriculum, while still teaching religious subjects.

These latter schools – government-registered, integrated Islamic schools – are especially significant and constitute the principal focus of this chapter because they are a leading example of the force of globalization in West Africa and its interaction with West African Islam and Islamic education. These schools reflect their communities – in particular parental preferences – relative to education; they also reflect the growing realization by governments in the region that they may need help in meeting the demand for education (Bleck 2014; Owusu-Ansah et al. 2013). Studies suggest that parents want transferability; they want choice and options, and most of all they want an education for their children that is both “modern” and “traditional,” one that includes secular subject to facilitate employment and civic participation in the “modern” state and one that at the same time promotes piety and correct Islamic
practices for personal development (Boyle et al. 2007; Ministère de l’Éducation 2010). Indeed, with these dual objectives in mind, they have stepped in where the state has largely failed, to try to leverage government support, market forces, and Islam to offer children a quality education, by their own definition.

This chapter first gives a brief overview and some context relative to the types of Islamic schools in West Africa and then discusses the significance of the integration and registration of religious schools as public schools. The chapter draws on both scholarly work and reports coming from field research funded by international donor organizations on Islamic schools. Donors have generally been interested in Islamic schools because of their potential role in increasing both access to and quality of basic education in West Africa. Relative to the latter in particular, this chapter draws on reports from three field studies conducted in the 2000s (2004, 2006, and 2009) in Nigeria, Ghana, and Mali, respectively, by the author and others, with USAID funding. Finally, this chapter discusses the evolving and changing role of Islamic schools in relation to the government and the education of children across these countries.

Background: Islamic Education, Colonialism, and the Growth of Public Schools

Islamic Education

As Islam spread across what we now call the Middle East, as well as North and West Africa, schools modeled on the halaqah (learning circle) followed to teach locals the core beliefs and practices of Islam, including memorizing some (or all) of the Qur’ān as a first and central step in the learning process (Boyle 2004b). Formal learning began with what is most important and certain: the word of God. Qur’ānic schools in West Africa proliferated and led to the establishment of higher-level schools and the evolution of many great centers of learning in the region, including Tombouctou, Djenne, Gao, Kano, Kanem, Sokoto, Ilorin, etc. These centers rose and fell with the various empires that helped to establish them, but it is fair to say that by the late 1500s, Islamic schooling and scholarship were firmly established in West Africa (Brenner 2001; Ware 2014).

The basic school day activities in a Qur’ānic school had students memorizing verses from the Qur’ān. Usually, there was one classroom space with students of mixed ages sitting on the floor with the teacher. In terms of teaching methods, the teacher typically worked one-on-one with the children, listening to each one in turn and correcting his (or her) pronunciation during recitation and the written verse on the slate (Boyle 2004b; Boyle et al. 2007; Brenner 2001; Diallo 2012; Iddrisu 2005; Ministère De L’Education 2010; Owusu-Ansah et al. 2013; Ware 2014).

The teacher was usually a religious figure – an imām or a shaykh – who had himself memorized the Qur’ān in this traditional way. He would have had a letter (an ijāzah) from his teachers attesting to his level of study (in Islamic subjects) and upon this basis was qualified to teach. In terms of operations, Islamic schools were generally very community-based and autonomous; there was not a formal system
for establishing and running a Qur’anic school. There were no formal administrative requirements or overarching rules that were followed, with the exception of the curriculum; this included fidelity to proper recitational form and, as a child got older and moved beyond memorization, a focus on traditional Islamic subjects and seminal texts (West Africa generally follows Warsh recitational style.). At most, schools formed a loose network, and each school director was autonomous in his decision-making and accountable to his community (Boyle 2004b; Brenner 2001; Easton 1997). (There are some examples of schools for girls run by educated women but by and large Qur’anic schools were established and run by men.)

**Colonial Education in West Africa**

Across West Africa, the colonial presence (the British in what are now Ghana and Nigeria and the French in what are now Senegal, Mali, Benin, Burkina Faso, Niger, Guinea, and Cote d’Ivoire) introduced new forms of schooling. In the larger “Soudan Francais,” as the region was referred to by the French, the colonists tried to establish French madrasahs for children of the elite in order to groom a generation of local colonial administrators; likewise, the British encouraged the spread of English language missionary-run schools across what was called the Gold Coast. These schools formed the precursors to the “modern” public school systems now in Mali, Ghana, and Nigeria.

The “Western” model of education introduced by the colonial powers and missionaries (on their behalf) was quite different in terms of structure, content, and values than the traditional schools they began to replace (Brenner 2001; Iddrisu 2005; Reichmuth 1993). In particular, the early focus on memorization was often misunderstood by colonial administrators and officials, who thought it useless (Boyle 2006; Brenner 2001, 2007; Ware 2014). Colonial schools were run centrally and mimicked systems in France and Britain. The curricular focus expanded early on such that children studied foreign languages, math, and science in addition to European history and literature in the later years.

It should be noted though that Muslim populations in the Northern areas of Ghana, Mali, and Nigeria, for example, were not as quick to adopt colonial schooling as other groups and in some cases stuck to traditional Qur’anic schools. These communities were suspicious of colonial schools (French schools in Mali, Gambia, and Senegal, British or missionary schools in Ghana and Nigeria). In some cases, parents saw these schools as tools of Westernization and feared children would lose their religious identity and beliefs.

**Public Schools and Education for All**

Postindependence, many of the schools established by the colonizers were drawn into or formed the basis of the newly independent country’s public system. West African public schools represented a path to economic prosperity for many citizens
across the region, and education in these new schools was pursued (Brenner 2001; Reichmuth 1993). Qur’anic schools continued to exist and in some cases adapted themselves and their schedule to serve children who pursued education in the public schools. However, even after independence, Muslim parents were slow to use the public schools.

Many countries in the region, including Ghana, Mali, and Nigeria, have signed onto the Education for All (EFA) agreement, which focused initially quite intensely on access to schools. In concert with EFA, many Muslim parents and leaders in West Africa began to change their position on utilizing the public schools, as they saw that the lack of “Western” education and the inability to speak the official language and often language of administration (English, French, Portuguese) left Muslim communities more marginalized in terms of political and social influence and economic development (Boyle 2004a; Boyle et al. 2007; Ware 2014).

Public school populations grew in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s and classrooms became overcrowded; hastily organized teacher certification programs got teachers into classrooms to try to keep up with the influx of students; however, quality declined as class size rose. EFA is now balancing out its focus on access with a concomitant focus on quality, as articulated in the Sustainable Development Goals (see http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/education/). However, by the mid-2000s, parents in countries across the region were expressing frustration with their respective national school systems. International and national tests suggested that public schoolchildren were not reading at appropriate levels in Mali, Nigeria, Ghana, and Senegal (see: https://www.eddataglobal.org/documents/index.cfm?fuseaction=pubDetail&id=849 to download a copy of the report) (RTI 2016). States are under pressure to do better but they do not necessarily have the resources to make needed systemic improvements.

**Islamic Schools in West Africa: The Current Landscape**

The figure below lays out on a continuum four major types of Islamic schools currently found in the region presently. These categories are rather more liminal than absolute. For example, in all of these sorts of schools, there would be Qur’anic memorization. Differences emerge in terms of subjects taught, methods used to teach, qualifications of teachers, autonomy and government oversight, as well as sources of finance. These in turn can differ by country and local policy. (See also “Introduction”) (Fig. 1)

Traditional Qur’anic Schools: Qur’anic schools are still very much a presence today; most neighborhoods in cities or villages in rural areas with concentrations of Muslims have a Qur’anic school. The introduction of public schooling across the continent did not displace these schools although it did in many cases force them to adapt to the evolving wants and needs of the community. Adaptation came in several varieties, including becoming preschools, evening schools, weekend schools, or summer schools – i.e., supplementary schools attended in addition to public schools. Nevertheless, there are still some full-time Qur’anic school students (Bleck 2015;
Boyle 2004a). One particular type of full-time traditional Islamic school is the al-Majri school. These schools are privately organized, and pupils usually are sent from their homes to board with the teacher; one part of their studies includes begging for alms to support themselves and the teacher (Hoechner 2011). In sum, traditional Qur’anic schools still exist and serve diverse communities of Muslims in West Africa (Brenner 2001, 2007; Easton 1997; Iddrisu 2005; Reichmuth 1993; Sey 1970).

**Private Religious Schools that Use Modern Methods:** They grew out of an effort around the turn of the nineteenth century to “modernize” Islamic schools. Islamic scholars felt that the structure of learning needed to be more akin to what was used in the West (Brenner 2007; Ware 2014). These schools maintained a fully religious curriculum that went beyond the Qur’an and grouped children into classrooms, by age. The more student-centered pedagogy of the Qur’anic schools gave way to what we might call a more “Western” method, with children all expected to learn at a similar pace and to pass milestones as a group. Like the Qur’anic schools, these schools had a good deal of autonomy from state regulation and interference, although the past 20 years have seen an increase in the desire of states in West Africa to regulate all private schools to some degree. The teachers in these schools could be a mix of traditionally trained mallams and teachers returning from Egypt or the Gulf states with a more “modern” education themselves and perhaps some formal teacher training and/or a diploma or certificate (Boyle 2006; Boyle et al. 2007; Brenner 2007; Ministère de l’Education 2010; Owusu-Ansah et al. 2013; Reichmuth 1993; Tsimpo 2014).

**Private, Semi-integrated Schools:** They have grown in presence and attendance. Semi-integrated refers to the fact that the schools do combine religious and secular subjects. These schools might include, for example, the teaching of an official language, such as French or English, and some math and science along with religious topics and Qur’anic memorization. They do not generally follow the full government curriculum; however, they are responding to the growing market for schools, in light of the perceived poor quality in public schools in these countries. Consumers in this market want both Islamic and secular subjects so that children will become good Muslims and productive citizens. Some of these schools aspire to become registered, integrated schools (see below) but do not have the capacity to make required improvements or changes. There is a wide variation in terms of curriculum, pedagogy, and overall quality in these schools (Boyle et al. 2007; Brenner 2007; Ministère de l’Education 2010; Moulton 2008; Owusu-Ansah et al. 2013; Reichmuth 1993; RTI 2014, 2016; Sey 1970; Tooley et al. 2007).
Registered, Integrated Islamic Schools: The word “integration” here refers to the school curriculum, which is made up of both “secular” and traditional religious subjects. Further, if a school is “registered,” it has usually agreed to follow a government-approved curriculum and submit to some government regulation. That is to say, in most countries, these schools are now considered “public” and are often counted as such in government statistics (Bleck 2015; Boyle et al. 2007; Brenner 2007; Ministère de l’Éducation 2010; Moulton 2008; Owusu-Ansah et al. 2013; RTI 2014, 2016; Sey 1970; Tooley et al. 2007). Indeed, in Ghana and Mali, for example, they fall into their own subcategory of schools under “public.” They are regulated to a certain degree but generally operate with far greater autonomy at the school and classroom level than public schools. In Ghana, these schools receive full capitation grants from the state; in Mali and Nigeria state, support is less regular and might come in the form of books, sitting for national exams, perhaps secular teacher salaries and things like this. In Mali and Nigeria, parents do pay fees as the government support is usually not enough to cover all costs. (Fees are generally not prohibitive; in Mali, for example, school directors categorized 69% of their students as “poor” (Ministère de l’Éducation 2010).) Registered, integrated schools offer parents the security of knowing that their children can sit for ministry examinations and be promoted from one level to the next. Usually, transfer between registered, integrated Islamic schools and public schools is possible since they are both under the government umbrella. Likewise, certificates of graduation from registered Islamic schools are recognized by public institutions (junior secondary and senior secondary, of course, but also universities, colleges, and training institutes).

One could argue that the largest changes in Islamic education in West Africa have occurred or are occurring in the registered, integrated schools, which have submitted to state regulation and the use of a government curriculum in exchange for some state support. In an increasingly globalized world, their focus has expanded from religious and spiritual development to include the secular subjects that will lead to employment. Formerly, these schools operated, as the others mentioned above, as part of a loose network of schools with no overarching administrative system and a good deal of autonomy from government interference or oversight (Boyle and Toyin 2004; Brenner 2001, 2007; Easton 1997; Iddrisu 2005; Ministère de l’Éducation 2010; Moulton 2008; Owusu-Ansah et al. 2013; Reichmuth 1993; Ware 2014). As such, this chapter takes a closer look at some of the features of these hybrid schools.

Registered Islamic Schools: A Hybrid Model that is Growing in Popularity

While the hybrid model of an Islamic school is not new, the involvement of the government in a supporting and regulating capacity is relatively new and parallels a shift in parental and community thinking, wherein “secular” subjects have gained acceptance and are eagerly pursued in a religious educational context.
Resources and Infrastructure: While madrasah numbers appear to be on the upswing in West Africa, the physical state of many of these fee-charging schools is frequently very poor. Nigerian Islamiyah Schools working with the LEAP (Literacy Enhancement Assistance Project) project in 2004 appeared extremely under-resourced, in some cases lacking walls between classrooms and frequently lacking toilet resources, particularly for girls (Boyle 2004a). A nationwide survey of a sample of almost 10% of madrasahs in Mali registered with the government in 2009 highlighted the fact that the schools, although growing in popularity, occupied makeshift spaces and had very few physical amenities to offer students. Schools lacked supplies, basic infrastructure, toilet facilities, divider walls, electricity, running water, safety features (multiple exits), and furniture. In contrast, registered religious schools in Ghana had to meet minimum building standards to be able to register as a GES (Ghana Education Service) Islamic school, so the situation there seemed better in terms of Islamic school facilities. Still, a sector assessment done for USAID in 2006 likewise highlighted the lack of amenities (Boyle et al. 2007; Iddrisu 2005; Owusu-Ansah et al. 2013). On one hand, one might query parents as to why these schools are appealing when they appear so under-resourced. It is clearly not the facilities that parents are paying for. On the other hand, public schools are often similarly lacking in amenities so the difference may not appear as stark to parents and children on the ground.

Curriculum: The curriculum is at the heart of the appeal of registered Islamic schools. In all three studies mentioned (in Ghana, Mali, and Nigeria), enthusiasm was high for the integration of subjects across a variety of stakeholders including intellectuals (‘ulema or thought leaders) and parents (Boyle 2004a, b; Boyle et al. 2007; Iddrisu 2005; Ministère De L’Education 2010; Owusu-Ansah 2008; Reichmuth 1993; Tsimpo 2014).

Although there was great enthusiasm for integrated schools in Ghana, there was some grumbling by the early adopters about decreasing time for religious subjects. Indeed, in these integrated schools there is definitely a trade-off, but this trade-off is one that parents and Muslim intellectuals are very willing to make (Boyle et al. 2007). Mali provides a similar example. In 2002, the MEALN (Ministère de l’Education, de l’Alphabétisation et des Langues Nationales) drafted a standard curriculum for registered madrasahs to use. By 2009, 85% of school proprietors in Mali reported following this curriculum (Ministère de l’Education 2010). As in Ghana, these schools had broad-based support, from the “ulamā” sector, the MEALN, and parents themselves. One ālim from Kati (who also ran a madrasah) summed up the mood of the parents:

In my opinion, [traditional] Qur’ānic schools are becoming less and less popular; there is less interest in them because in our time you could count up to 1000 students, but today, if French is not taught in your madrasah, it is difficult to have even 300 students. Before, parents sent their children so that they would understand the religion. But today, these children become their parents’ [financial] responsibility because they cannot find work. I can use myself as an example: I have nine classrooms built and we taught religion here; there came a time when my madrasah had a very low enrolment and when I held consultations with parents, I realized that it was time to change our teaching practices and to add French to enable the students to have a way forward in their lives. Since that change, I often have to refuse students [because all our places are taken]. (Ministère de l’Education 2010: 21)
The process of integration in Nigeria has been less standardized than in Ghana and Mali, perhaps due to the highly federated nature of the Nigerian government. Decisions and policies are principally made at the state level and these vary across states. Nonetheless, the registration of Islamic schools with state educational authorities has been steadily occurring over the past 20 years at least, and indeed interaction between “Western” and Islamic learning has been occurring for decades (Reichmuth 1993).

School Governance, Autonomy: Across the three countries, school leadership appeared to be an important factor in school survival and success. Easton (1997) pointed out in that Qur’anic school teachers and headmasters were often quite entrepreneurial, weaving educational and commercial networks together. The same trend, in a different format, can be seen today. Across the three countries, school directors displayed a similar entrepreneurial spirit. As parents themselves and community members, many school directors/proprietors sensed the demand for an alternative to public schools, combined with a strong desire to preserve and indeed bolster a strong Islamic culture and identity, one characterized by piety and observance within the next generation. There was also a keen awareness on the part of school directors in all three countries that demand was high for “secular” subjects and that communities saw the mastery of national languages (French in Mali and English in Ghana and Nigeria) as important to expanding students’ future economic prospects, as well as the Muslim community’s influence at a national level in Ghana and Nigeria (Boyle 2004b; Boyle et al. 2007; Brenner 2007; Iddrisu 2005; Ministère De L’Education 2010; Owusu-Ansah et al. 2013; Owusu-Ansah 2008; Reichmuth 1993).

Interestingly, especially for countries with very centralized systems like Mali, a school’s movement to fall under the state umbrella did not limit the school director’s autonomy in the same way as it did for public school directors. Across the three countries, school directors or proprietors retained a good deal of decision-making power at the school level and at the financial level. As such, in Mali, for example, directors could act more decisively to solve problems, buy supplies, or redirect resources than their public school counterparts. Perhaps the state presence was most heavily felt in Ghana which had a more extensive regulatory system, at least in terms of building standards, teacher qualifications, and the like (Boyle et al. 2007; Ministère De L’Education 2010; Owusu-Ansah et al. 2013).

Financing: Financing arrangements vary for Islamic schools, according to the school type. For example, registered Islamic schools in Ghana receive capitation grants, and the GES pays teachers’ salaries, which is by far the biggest expense. Government funding (for IEU schools) is more comprehensive than in the other countries although there are still issues. In Mali, the government offers a few system supports, including an Arabic Section within the national ministry and Arabic pedagogical counselors/supervisors in the districts where there are registered madrasahs. However, the ministry does not assume a significant share of the cost of running the school. In Mali, registered madrasahs charge fees, which are managed by the school director/proprietor and school-based management committee and are used to support the school. The same is true in Nigeria where support varies
by state. The studies mentioned above, as well as others, suggest that Nigerian Islamiyya schools are supported by student fees, more so than the state (Boyle 2004a; Boyle et al. 2007; Moulton 2008; Reichmuth 1993; RTI 2014). The model of parents paying fees for educational services extends to a variety of forms of Islamic schools in West Africa, including traditional Qur’ānic schools and private mixed (religious and secular) that are not registered with a ministry of education.

The benevolence of proprietors is another factor in the financing of Islamic schools in the region. In many cases wealthy individuals would establish or endow a school; communities often supported teachers with in-kind contributions instead of money. Donations from school alumni and especially those who have gone abroad were cited as a source of income for schools in Mali (Ministère de l’Education 2010). However, by and large, school fees/parental contributions seem to be the primary source of support across all of the types of Islamic schools.

Teachers and Pedagogy: Across the three countries, teacher qualifications were uneven. On average, the level of education of teachers was not high, by public school standards. In Ghana, many teachers boasted higher education credentials from Arabic-speaking countries, but at the time, these were not recognized by the central government, and there was a great deal of resentment on this score. Overall though, in Ghana, over 50% of the official teachers – from private as well as IEU schools – had some postsecondary education. In Mali, the majority of madrasah teachers (officially registered madrasahs) had a junior secondary certificate (DEC). In Nigeria, state education offices provide teachers of secular subjects to Islamiyya schools that are registered with the government. In Nigeria, a diploma from a teacher training institution is the minimum qualification; hence, state-supplied teachers to Islamiyya schools are likely to have this diploma but a teacher of a traditional subject less likely has a “Western” type of qualification (Boyle 2004b; Boyle et al. 2007; Ministère de l’Education 2010).

Although perhaps not holding the highest credentials, madrasah, IEU, and Islamiyya school teachers did consistently express a sense of mission though – a sense that their work was important and that there were spiritual and moral rewards coming to them for this work. When asked about why he taught in a registered Islamic school in Ghana, one teacher summed it up this way:

Both [secular and religious subjects] are important for everybody to learn on this earth. Since they are profitable in this world and the hereafter. Even the prophet of God said, ṭalab al-ʾilm farīḍah-tun ʿalā kull-i muslimin wa muslimah (Seeking knowledge is a must for every Muslim male and Muslim female.) It is secular education that will enable us live well on earth while Qurʾānic education will lead us to our Creator. It is therefore better to learn both.

(Teacher Interview, Wa)

Teachers across the three countries often expressed a sentiment of themselves as caring for their pupils’ souls as well as their intellects, which is traditionally a very Islamic view of education. Despite originally having a pedagogy and philosophy of education very different from what came to be common in the West, for the most part, registered Islamic schools in West Africa have not retained those practices.
Generally, they have elected to hew more closely to the “Western” notion of age grouping and examinations and more teacher-directed work (i.e., with the teacher at the front and everyone listening, choral recitation, etc.) It is not frequent to see students move at their own pace, mixed age classes, and one-on-one tutoring or peer/group work that one might have seen in schools of old. Hence, the teaching methods observed were not very different from public schools. One appealing factor to parents may have been smaller class size. Islamic school classes were generally smaller than the public school class sizes in these countries. In Mali, in 2009, there was a mean of 32 pupils per teacher in registered madrasahs, while World Bank figures put the average ratio of pupils to teachers at 48:1 (Ministère de l’Education 2010).

Girls’ Education: There is also an aspect of “girl friendliness” that was significant in these “new” or “modern” Islamic schools across West Africa. Female enrollment was generally strong. Parents reported that these schools were good educational options for girls as they were safe spots for girls. Female honor is very important in Islam, and Islamic schools offered spaces that parents felt were more attenuated to their concerns about honor and more apt to ensure their daughters’ safety.

A survey of teacher attitudes across the three countries (Ghana, Mali, and Nigeria) suggests that for the most part, teachers do believe that boys and girls are equally capable of learning and that they were gender sensitive or aware in the classroom, not favoring boys over girls (Boyle 2004a; Boyle et al. 2007; Ministère de l’Education 2010). This is not to say that as public school teachers believe or teach differently; however, there have been many cases of sexual harassment or abuse documented in public schools in West Africa (and indeed worldwide). Because those schools often employ teachers from other regions of the country, they are less rooted into the local culture and web of community relationships and are perhaps less accountable.

Discussion and Conclusion

Current state support for the registration of Islamic schools in West Africa initially developed from two directions: (1) the post-9/11 sentiment that Islamic schools might be a threat to governments and as such should be watched more closely and indeed monitored and (2) the recognition on the part of states that public school enrollment was increasing, quality was declining, and commitments, such as universal primary education (UPE) and education as part of the millennium development goals (MDGs), were not going to be realized by 2015.

In terms of the former, this suspicion of Islamic schools was perhaps more extreme outside of West Africa. In some Asian countries, the government shut Islamic schools and endeavored to regulate what and how they taught. West Africa has not been immune to aspects of this trend; however, the movement toward registration of Islamic schools in these countries proceeded 9/11. Indeed, the biggest and most prominent of the Islamic schools in the North of Ghana, Nad’ha, Anbarriya, and Nuriyya had all integrated secular subjects into their curriculum.
well before the Islamic Education Unit was set up in 1987 (Boyle et al. 2007; Iddrisu 2005; Owusu-Ansah et al. 2013; Owusu-Ansah 2008). In Nigeria, the notion of registration came about in the 1980s, a policy for registration was not laid out until 1998 (Moulton 2008; Reichmuth 1993) and in Mali has been happening since at least the 1980s (Brenner 2001, 2007; Ministère de l’Education 2010). Thus, state motives in registering Islamic schools in West Africa did not derive from unease or suspicion.

In terms of the latter reason – commitments to universal primary enrollment – states were (and still are) hard pressed to provide a quality education to all children in the face of ever-increasing demands; ministries saw in Islamic schools, especially those that had already integrated some secular subjects into their curriculum, a means of helping governments reach their commitments to universal primary education. With some degree of regulation and standardization to ensure a full curriculum and some support in the form of teachers and/or textbooks, graduates from these schools could be counted in national enrollment and completion totals. As such, the process of registering Islamic schools within the orbit of state education authorities was in part to assist them in expanding and standardizing their curricular offerings and to boost Education for All (EFA) or universal primary education (UPE) counts in these countries.

What do these modernization efforts mean for traditional Qur’ānic schools? As a separate genre, are they likely to disappear? In Ghana, ulamā’ predicted that Qur’ānic schools would become less relevant as integrated Islamic schools grew in numbers (Boyle et al. 2007). Attitudes were perhaps a bit more conservative but likewise positive toward the registered madrasahs in Mali. However, despite these predictions, Qur’ānic schools continue to exist as a robust presence in Muslim communities in West Africa as many parents who send their children to public schools also want to secure some religious education for their children. These schools also represent a connection to the past and to the West African Muslim communities’ social, cultural, and spiritual history.

However, a case study of traditional Qur’ānic school pupils in Kano, Nigeria, suggests that attitudes have changed as regards older pupils who pursue Qur’ānic studies fulltime. Nigeria has a tradition of al-Majri, itinerant students who are sent by their parents to live with and study with a Qur’ānic mallam or master. Hoechner writes a compelling account of the increasing marginalization these students suffer as ideas of what is appropriate for children, what education should look like, and what it should contain are very much changing, “the push by Islamic reform movements for the formalization of religious learning has furthermore intensified struggles over the legitimacy different avenues to sacred knowledge” (Hoechner 2011). She talks of the institutionalization or perhaps co-optation of Islamic schools as contributing to an “exclusionary modernity” in Nigeria. What was once a prestigious avenue to learning, education, and power is now looked down upon; al-Majri are now street children not seekers, orphans not children sent to receive a valued spiritual education. Hardship was an educational goal of al-Majri – they learned to do without to strengthen their social and moral character. Now they are characterized as neglected as opposed to initiates. In Nigeria, estimates of children in traditional
Islamic schools (i.e., not registered and not necessarily following and approved curriculum) are high: “enrollment in Qur’ānic schools all over Nigeria is estimated to exceed 9.5 million, with more than 8.5 million in the Northern part of the country” (Universal Basic Education Commission, Nigeria 2010; Hoechner 2011).

In conclusion, while Qur’ānic schools continue to exist in great numbers across West Africa, and memorization of some of the Qur’ān is still a necessary part of Muslim education (formal or nonformal), the philosophy and values relative to traditional Islamic education are changing. For example, foreign languages are useful, and parents want their children to be able to take advantage of the opportunities to gain this knowledge. Seeking knowledge “even as far as China” has always been a Muslim value; this is not new. However, the connection of education with economic development and employment and the greater systematization and structuring of Islamic education at the early years is a newer development. Where once, the Qur’ān was the beginning and other subjects followed as a child grew, today’s parents and governments in West Africa want the other subjects started right from the beginning. Hence, the growth of integrated Islamic schools, especially those registered with the government, unites some “secular” or Western notions of education with a line of thinking that acknowledges God’s presence in the creation of knowledge and the development of humans.

References


