Africa power and politics

# Religion and education reform in Africa:

Harnessing religious values to developmental ends

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Education is a vital publicly provided good and a crucial stepping stone on the path to both economic and political development.[2] Across Africa, however, public education has often been poorly delivered and its quality has been falling for much of the post-colonial period. One major reason for this is that in much of Africa – particularly Francophone Africa – the educational systems inherited from colonial times have had a very poor 'fit' with societal demands and cultural values. The result has been a history of very low school enrolment and completion rates, and a consequent widespread failure of educational policies to support developmental outcomes.

The Africa Power and Politics (APPP) Religious Education research stream has examined recent reform efforts to address this failure in three countries of the Sahel – Mali, Niger and Senegal – by harnessing the strength of popular religiosity. In these three overwhelmingly Muslim countries, major initiatives of the past decade have sought to make schools more attractive to parents by incorporating elements into schooling that reflect Muslim values and expectations and ensure training for future employment. To date, these reforms have affected only a small part of the total education provision in each country, and there are some differences across the three countries, but our research on the initiatives suggests that:

● incorporating religion into programmes has been highly effective in encouraging parents to send children to school, suggesting that religious values can be harnessed for developmental purposes
● attempting to build 'hybrids' combining dif-ferent value systems and priorities does pose some risks, including overburdening students and stretching curricula too thinly
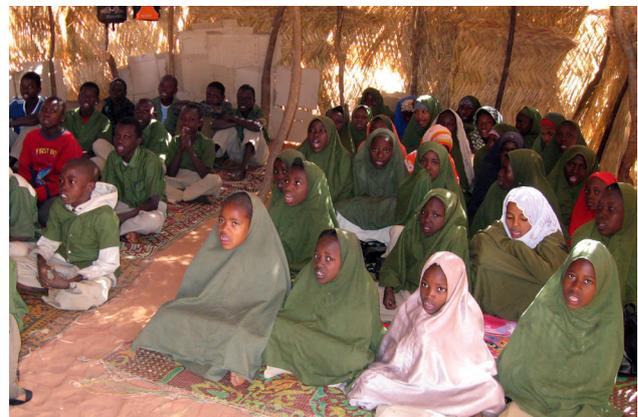
Qur'anic reformed school, PAEFAN pilot project, Niger. © Leonardo A. Villalón

● recourse to 'traditional' or non-state institutions by the African public may not be a rejection of state institutions, but rather a desire to have state institutions that reflect local cultural values.

The problem

The education systems inherited from the French colonial period in the Sahel were strikingly mal-adapted to local realities. Designed to create a francophone élite to staff the state apparatus, they were deeply rooted in the French ideology of secularism or *laïcité*. Under these systems, only a tiny percentage of the population ever completed secondary education. Despite calls for reforms early in the post-colonial period, few changes were made. As a result, most parents have seen official state schools as unattractive options at best, and often resist efforts to enroll their children.[3]

Across the Sahel, another response to the bad fit between the provision of public education and social expectations has been the development of a vast parallel system of informal and religiously-based education functioning outside the official state

system. These 'parallel' schools are of various types, ranging from very basic Qur'anic schools to quite sophisticated 'Franco-Arabic' schools. Because they are unofficial they are not counted in official school enrolment rates, and they vary widely in their ability to train a future productive workforce.

At national level, development policies have long been frustrated by the fact that too few children have completed official state education, while large numbers of families have pursued alternative informal options that have not equipped their children to join the workforce. These issues were further aggravated by the evolution of African political economies after independence. In particular, the Structural Adjustment Programmes of the 1980s further reduced the appeal of state education (because state employment opportunities declined) and the quality of the education system (because of cutbacks in public expenditure). Getting local populations to, literally, 'buy into' the provision of public education was very ineffective, given that the product on offer was not a product people wanted.

Various reform projects over recent decades have attempted, with very limited success, to encourage higher enrolment and better schools in the official system. These policies ignored, and sometimes attempted to suppress, the unofficial alternatives.

In the past decade, however, a number of factors have created the political conditions for countries to launch new experiments in education reform. At times, this has entailed both bringing unofficial schools more squarely into the formal state system and reforming the formal system by borrowing characteristics from the informal, such as introducing religious education in state schools. Social and political changes following the democratic flowering of the 1990s increased the importance of religion in the public sphere. This combined with growing international interest in educational outcomes to create a new policy-making environment. In this context, key actors in each country – notably ministry officials from previously marginalised divisions of Arabic or religious affairs – have been able to initiate previously unthinkable reform processes.

APPP researchers analysed experiences in Mali, Niger and Senegal to determine the likely impacts on education in the region, and to seek lessons for the broader APPP concern with institutions that work *with* rather than *against* prevailing moral orders and value systems in Africa.

Hybrid solutions: pragmatic responses to local contexts

The reform processes in the three countries were based on the idea that bringing educational institutions more into line with local social realities and expectations would improve things. In interviews, administrators, teachers, and other reform actors spoke in terms that resonated strikingly with APPP's core hypothesis about the power of working with the institutional 'grain' of African societies to improve developmental outcomes.[4] In the deeply religious societies of the Sahel, they insisted, only schools with programmes that reflect prevailing moral values could hope to convince large numbers of parents to send their children there.

In each of the countries, states embarked on reform projects inspired and justified by what one key actor called 'giving parents the educational options they want for their children'. Across the region, parents interviewed by APPP said that they want schools that incorporate religious values, but also schools that provide some hope of access to employment and practical life skills. Attempting to balance these dual demands, the reform projects have tried to recognise the parallel educational systems while imposing some degree of formalisation, or have tried to reform the official system by borrowing elements – such as religious instruction – from the informal. The result has been the creation of what are in effect 'hybrid' systems.[5]

While the underlying principles have been similar in each country, the reforms themselves have been developed pragmatically, in line with local opportunities and realities. As a result, the operating logic has differed in each case.

Niger, alone of the three, already had an official hybrid option of 'Franco-Arabic' schools, but their historical marginalisation had led to a flourishing rival system of private 'Arabo-Islamic' schools. The prevailing logic of the reform in Niger was to revitalise and expand the Franco-Arabic model. Mali, by contrast, had remained committed to an official system of secular francophone education, but its quality had deteriorated. The major thrust of the reform in Mali therefore has been to attempt to capture a flourishing but previously unrecognised 'madrassa' system, creating incentives for these schools to adopt the official state curriculum without relinquishing their religious mission. In Senegal, the State has launched an ambitious effort to compete

" the reforms have not exacerbated gender imbalances.

with the informal system directly, first by including religious instruction in all state schools since 2002, and by creating official state Franco-Arabic schools in various parts of the country.[6]

Despite these differences, and although the full impacts of these reforms have yet to be seen, a number of results seem to be shared across the countries. First, the core justification of the reforms has been vindicated in each case: the hybrid schools in their various formats have been extremely popular with parents, and the major challenge to the State is how to meet the high and growing demand they have created. Second, despite the fears of some observers, the reforms have not exacerbated gender imbalances. At primary school level, for example, the emphasis on religion has proven particularly attractive to parents of girls. In many hybrid schools, girls outnumber boys, sometimes significantly. Finally, preliminary indications suggest that the success rates of the hybrid schools, as measured by the number of students passing state exams, is as good as or better than that of the classic francophone schools.

Despite these positive indications, some significant challenges and unanswered questions remain. The most common reservation among both teachers and parents is that the reformed curricula, by incorporating both secular and religiously-inspired subjects, risk either overloading students or diluting quality. In addition, the capacity of states to train sufficient numbers of teachers who can teach in two languages – French and Arabic – remains to be seen. And while significant progress has been made, producing textbooks and curricular materials on new – and socially and politically sensitive – subjects remains a challenge.

Going with the grain?

The educational reform experiments in the Sahel provide strong evidence to support one of APPP's core hypotheses. In the Sahelian educational context, building institutions that work with or tap into prevailing moral orders and cultural values shows real promise as a means to address some deeply entrenched obstacles to better development outcomes. This is consistent with Kelsall's proposition that development efforts have a greater chance of success when they stop treating cultural factors as a problem and try instead to harness them as a means to channel behaviour in more positive ways.[7]

Strikingly, however, while the cases suggest the importance of local values, they do *not* suggest a rejection of the state as a primary actor in development.

> " *the demand is for modern state structures that have been adapted to contemporary local values.*

Significant popular demand for education in the Sahel takes the state model as its point of departure, but asks that it be adjusted to local values. Echoing the findings of the APPP Local Justice research stream, we find that the 'grain' of popular demand in contemporary Africa is not a desire for 'traditional' institutions, but rather for modern state structures that have been adapted to, or infused with, contemporary local values.[8]

Taking the religious grain seriously

Our findings also underline a particularly important – and too often overlooked – element of dominant cultural systems in Africa today: the religious factor. Africa is a continent of deeply-held and vibrant religions, whether Islam, Christianity or more traditional religions.[9] The religiosity of African societies needs to be recognised as a central – and in many places *the most* central – element of prevailing moral orders and cultural landscapes. Development practitioners ignore the religious element of the cultural grain at their peril.

At the same time, the very dynamism of religion in Africa makes it a powerful force that can be harnessed. Religious institutions across the continent have, to varying degrees, rivaled or compensated for the state in the provision of certain public goods. In both Muslim and Christian areas, there has been a proliferation of organised religious institutions with broad influence on public affairs and, therefore, a direct impact on the effectiveness of state initiatives. Both state agencies and NGOs have begun to engage directly with 'faith-based organisations' to pursue public policy issues, including in such fields as health and natural resource management.[10]

Engaging with religious actors and building policies that reflect religious values may be uncomfortable for official donors, but resistance to such engagement is sure to be counterproductive. If we are serious about working with African values and local understandings, these have to be taken as they are, not as others would like them to be.

The trade-offs

This is not to deny that engaging with religion in Africa may imply clashes with other values. There are likely to be trade-offs, including with principles of entitlement and equity that are held to be international or universal and that underpin much international development policy.

We believe not only that such trade-offs are unavoidable, but that it is vital that they are recognised and confronted. 'Going with the grain' makes very good sense when it produces more functional institutions to reach desired outcomes. It becomes more questionable if it simultaneously weakens the capacity of institutions to generate other equally or more desirable transformations in society. Deciding where to strike this balance should be an explicit part of any judgment on the benefits of any given institutional configuration for development.

References

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2. T. Bierschienk, 'L'Education de base en Afrique de l'Ouest Francophone: Bien privé, bien public, bien global', in *Une anthropologie entre rigueur et engagement: Essais autour de l'œuvre de Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan*, eds. T. Bierschenk, G. Blundo, Y. Jaffré et M. Tidjani Alou. Paris: APAD-Karthala, 2007.

3. For one classic statement of this trend, see Issa H. Khayar, *Le refus de l'Ecole: Contribution à l'étude des problèmes de l'éducation chez les musulmans du Ouaddai*. Paris: Maisonneuve, 1976.

4. D. Booth, 'Introduction: Working with the Grain? The Africa Power and Politics Programme', *IDS Bulletin* 42(2), 2011.

5. The hybrid solution is not entirely new; similar schools had been tried in the colonial period, but for political reasons they were to be historically marginalized in favor of secular francophone schools.

6. For detailed discussion of each case, see L.A. Villalón and M. Bodian, *Religion, demande sociale, et réformes éducatives au Sénégal*, APPP Research Report 05; L.A. Villalón, A. Idrissa and M. Bodian, *Religion, demande sociale, et réformes éducatives au Niger*, APPP Research Report 06; and L.A. Villalón, A. Idrissa and M. Bodian, *Religion, demande sociale, et réformes éducatives au Mali*, APPP Research Report 07.

7. T. Kelsall, 'Going with the Grain in African Development?', *Development Policy Review* 26(6), 2008.

8. R. Crook, K. Asante and V. Brobbey, *Popular Conceptions of Justice and Fairness in Ghana*, APPP Working Paper 14.

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10. M. Kaag and M. Saint-Lary, 'Nouvelles visibilités de la religion dans l'arène du développement: L'implication des élites chrétiennes et musulmanes dans les politiques publiques en Afrique', *Bulletin de l'APAD* 33, 2011.