

‘Conservative’ or strategic? Unpacking clerics’ attitudes to Qur’anic school reform in Senegal

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Abstract

Senegal is characterised by a dense network of Qur’anic schools dedicated to teaching memorisation of the Qur’an and moral education. Clerics running these schools face significant pressure to adapt their pedagogy and funding structures in the context of meeting Education For All (EFA). This pressure comes from above, from the state, NGOs and international donors, and below in the form of parent and student demand. Evidence shows that some clerics have altered their schools, while others have not. What is lacking is an understanding of *why* certain clerics do or do not change their practices. Such data is needed to inform culturally-appropriate solutions to Muslim populations’ education needs which work with rather than against clerics’ ideologies and material realities. This paper addresses this question by unpacking the decision-making processes among clerics in one village in northern Senegal – none of whom had altered their Qur’anic schools – using data collected during 15 months’ ethnographic fieldwork. Findings are that absence of change cannot be attributed to “conservatism” among clerics, despite this being a prevalent explanation among development actors. Rather, clerics’ orientations were unexpectedly heterogeneous, and reflected a complex combination of personal ideology, rational calculation of how to maximise their social and economic positions, and context-specific structural barriers to change such as funding. These findings demonstrate that development actors need to move beyond stereotypes that clerics do not adapt their Qur’anic schools because they hold “conservative” attitudes. Rather, there is a need to identify which clerics are in favour of change to meet parental demand for adapted Islamic education and why, and whether they might be prevented from doing so by structural barriers. Collaborating with clerics on their own terms to overcome these barriers would enable development actors to develop more culturally-appropriate solutions to Muslim populations’ education demands.

Author Biography

Anneke Newman is a PhD candidate in Social Anthropology at the University of Sussex. Her doctoral research focused on how parents and young people in a community in northern Senegal negotiate secular state and Islamic schools. Her thesis findings demonstrate that school models promoted by the state and international development organisations are incompatible with many local people’s epistemologies, priorities and definitions of “quality” education. This leads to a hierarchy in which only more privileged individuals can access expensive private Islamic school options which meet their needs. While the specific focus of this paper is Senegal, its problematisation of the label of “conservatism” applied by outside actors to Muslims is of

broader relevance to debates in many other contexts, including critiques of UK-based strategies such as Prevent. The theme of delivering Islamic education which meets people's needs links to Anneke's wider research interests, namely social justice in education, the effects of gender and other social inequalities, and indigenous/non-Western epistemologies.

1. Introduction

Senegal has many Qur'anic schools which teach memorisation of the Qur'an. Senegalese clerics have faced significant pressure to adapt these schools with respect to pedagogy and funding sources in recent decades, in the context of meeting Education For All (EFA). This pressure comes from above, from the state, NGOs and international donors, and below in the form of parent and student demand. Evidence shows some clerics have altered their schools in terms of pedagogy and funding, others have not. What is lacking here is an understanding of *why* certain clerics do or do not change their practices. In addition, development practitioners who I interviewed tended to interpret clerics' behaviour through a simplistic modernist lens. Those who accept change in line with state or international development agendas are portrayed as "modern" and "progressive", while those who do not are labelled pejoratively as "conservative" or "stubborn".

This paper tackles this question by illuminating the decision-making processes among clerics in one village in northern Senegal, called Medina Diallobé. Data were collected during 15 months' ethnographic fieldwork on educational decision-making strategies, using interviews, participant observation, and gathering life histories from parents, students, clerics, teachers, and local politicians. None of the clerics in Medina Diallobé had altered their Qur'anic schools, but explanations defied simplistic modernist stereotypes of "conservatism". I found clerics' attitudes to be very heterogeneous; further, some did want to change but were unable to do so. I identify barriers preventing them from reforming their schools, with significant implications for policy-making surrounding provision of Islamic education adapted to suit people's needs. I first explain the context of Qur'anic schools in Senegal including a historical analysis of pushes for reform, followed by the views of different clerics in Medina Diallobé and the socioeconomic and political factors influencing their decisions.

2. History of Qur'anic schools in Senegal

Qur'anic schools in Senegal, known as *daaras*, date from the 11th century (Ware, 2009b). Prior to colonisation, *daaras* primarily taught memorisation of the Qur'an. Qur'anic school students – also known as *talibés* – learned Arabic literacy in the sense of being able to pronounce words correctly but did not learn the Arabic language or literal meaning of the Qur'an until after memorisation was complete (Robinson, 2004). The logic supporting memorisation before literal understanding was linked to the school's primary goal of moral education. The purpose was to form people who could apply Islamic values to any context, before they could interpret texts. Students learned to be good Muslims through imitating clerics' exemplary behaviour. Boys – who made up the majority of *talibés* – were often conferred to clerics' care for many years, and paid their way by working in the clerics' fields and begging for alms including food. Begging and experiencing hardship were seen as essential means for inculcating endurance, humility and generosity (Perry, 2004; Ware, 2009b). Students also gained economically from studying in the *daara*, acquiring knowledge of rural livelihoods, and skills to work as religious practitioners in the "prayer economy" (Soares, 2005).

3. Pressure on Qur'anic schools to reform

The Qur'anic schools have faced pressure to adapt their pedagogy and funding since the colonial period. The French administration established a secular public school system in the late 19th century, teaching the French language and mainly academic subjects suited to the formal economy. They were critical of the Qur'anic schools' pedagogies because they did not appreciate the cultural and moral justifications for these practices. They tried – unsuccessfully – to force clerics to teach French, and control the opening of *daaras* (Harrison, 1988). Although such policies from above had little effect, the public school created pressure to reform from below. Elite parents realised the school's economic value and increasingly demanded *daaras* more compatible with schooling. They preferred to pay cash for Qur'anic education outside of school hours, and long-term live-in tuition at *daaras* while working for a cleric declined in popularity. By the 1930s, most clerics in colonial towns had adjusted to this demand (Ware 2014). Pressure on clerics to reform the *daaras*' content also came from Senegalese Muslims. From the 1930s, currents of modernist Islamic reform originating in India, Egypt and the Hijaz reached Senegal. These reformers were inspired by European rationalist philosophy and school models, and made their own schools. These included Arabo-Islamic schools teaching Arabic language alongside the Qur'an, and Franco-Arab schools teaching French and secular subjects alongside religion (Dilley, 2004a).

Pressures on clerics to reform the *daaras* continued after independence. The Senegalese political class were educated in state schools, and subscribed to the colonial ideology critical of Qur'anic school pedagogies. From the 1970s, state actors used child protection as an issue around which to demand reform. Droughts and rural poverty had pushed many clerics to migrate to cities. Most adapted to the urban context by charging tuition fees, but some clerics obliged students to beg more in order to support the *daara*. In the 1990s, attacks on clerics to end begging became internationalised. Following Senegal's ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989, in 1992 UNICEF supported the government to urge clerics to end begging (Perry, 2004). Many NGOs have also attempted to “modernise” Qur'anic schools, supporting clerics financially to improve hygiene and stop students' begging (Keck & Sikkink, 1998).

Pressure to reform further intensified in the 2000s in the context of EFA and the second Millennium Development Goal to provide universal basic education. The state elaborated significant reform policies in 2002 with funding from UNICEF and the Islamic Development Bank, to develop eighty “modernised” Qur'anic schools which would teach national languages, Arabic, French, and vocational skills (UNICEF, 2009; Villalón & Bodian, 2012). More recently, the government has proposed a “modern” *daara* curriculum of three years' Qur'anic memorisation, followed by Qur'an combined with the primary school syllabus (MEN 2015). In theory, these reforms are intended to meet demand for Qur'anic memorisation combined with other income-generating skills (Lewandowski, 2011). However, the proposals have problematic elements. Instead of recognising populations' demand for full or advanced memorisation of the Qur'an with the extra skills they consider economically useful, the proposals prioritise French and forms of Islamic knowledge such as Arabic literacy which the state and international development actors consider economically useful. This reflects an underlying Western bias in education delivery inherited from the colonial era, which privileges rationalist epistemology and secularism. The reforms also instrumentalise Muslim populations. Children attending Qur'anic schools account for a large proportion of those not enrolled in state

primary schools,¹ so the government is obliging non-state Islamic schools to comply with government standards (Lange, 2003; Villalón, 2012) to “capture” pupils to increase enrolment statistics to meet EFA agendas (Villalón & Bodian, 2012).

There has been little investigation into clerics’ reactions to these various pressures to reform. However, this knowledge is necessary for influencing policy which meets parental demand for education according to their definitions of “quality”, and which works with rather than against clerics’ philosophies and economic realities. Evidence suggests many clerics oppose the state’s proposed reforms to the *daaras* for ideological reasons. The National Federation of Qur’anic School Associations in Senegal² objected to the state’s lack of collaboration with them to elaborate the new *daara* curriculum, and its placing too great an emphasis on non-Islamic subjects with some categorically opposing that French be taught (Abdourahman 2015; Balde 2015; Lo 2015; SeneWebNews 2015a; 2015b). However, many clerics have accepted aid from NGOs or donors to improve hygiene, end begging, and invite teachers qualified in French and other subjects. Nonetheless, there has been no focused analysis of clerics’ divergent attitudes, what kinds of change they are willing to accept and why, and under what circumstances. I use an ethnographic account of different clerics’ views towards reform in the commune of Medina Diallobé to suggest some answers.

4. Medina Diallobé: Educational institutions and demand

Medina Diallobé is a commune of roughly five thousand inhabitants in the north of Senegal. It is located in the department of Podor, but since the 16th century the region has been known by its inhabitants as the Futa Tooro. The commune has two primary schools, a lower secondary school (*collège*), an upper secondary school (*lycée*), and three *daaras* dating from at least the mid-19th century. The *daaras* are renowned in the zone and each hosts approximately one hundred students. The *daaras* operate according to the classical model in terms of form and content. Boys live with the cleric while studying the Qur’an, and contribute financially by working in the fields, seeking alms in the village, and sending gifts after they find work. Students are usually in their twenties by the time they complete memorisation.

The popularity of Qur’anic schools in the Futa Tooro reflects social characteristics specific to the region. The dominant ethnic group living there are the Haalpulaar. They have a caste-like hierarchical social structure divided into endogamous occupation-based status groups along three ranks: freeborn, artisan and (former) slave lineages (Dilley, 2004b; Tamari, 1991). The Muslim clerical lineages – known in Pulaar as *toorobe* – have sat at the top of the social pyramid since successfully mounting a revolution in the 18th century. Their social, economic and political superiority traditionally rests upon the status conferred through Qur’anic memorisation in *daaras*. I found that in Medina Diallobé many *toorobe* parents and young men still feel memorisation of the Qur’an is essential for their personal religiosity and social status. They also value *daara* education for economic opportunities in religious occupations like cleric, imam or healer, and professions dominated by *toorobe* such as trade and migration.

¹ In 2012, gross enrolment rates of boys and girls reached 80% and 87% in primary; 55% and 55% in middle school (*collège*); and 29% and 23% in high school (*lycée*) (Pôle de Dakar, 2013). However, numbers of children attending *daaras* are not quantified. In the late ‘90s, this figure was estimated at between 600,000 and 1 million children (Charlier, 2002), out of a total population of 14 million and a current primary-school-aged population of 2.2 million (Pôle de Dakar 2013). However, Charlier acknowledges that these statistics are problematic estimates and do not distinguish between full and part-time *daara* students.

² In French, the Fédération Nationale des Associations d’Ecoles Coraniques du Sénégal (FNAECS).

However, despite the value accorded to village *daaras*, I noticed significant pressure from below on them to adapt. In my interviews with adolescent *daara* students, all felt that French literacy, but also Arabic and English, are needed to find work in Senegal or abroad. They refuse to attend state schools because of low religious content. However, they also see the village *daara* as inadequate because it takes so long to memorise the Qur'an that there is insufficient time to learn additional useful subjects afterwards. The ideal strategy among affluent parents was to send their sons to expensive fee-charging boarding-school *daaras* in Dakar where they can learn the Qur'an faster.

Therefore, there is pressure from below to change. Funding is accessible, as clerics in nearby villages had accepted NGO funds for mats, blankets, medicines, a cook and even French teachers. I therefore found it unusual that clerics in Medina Diallobé should still teach according to the classical model, and wanted to uncover why. The following section unpacks the different clerics' orientations and reasoning behind their decisions.

5. Clerics in Medina Diallobé: Attitudes towards reform

Why have clerics in Medina Diallobé not altered the classical model of teaching and funding their *daaras*, despite pressures to do so from above and below? When I interviewed development actors in Dakar, I often heard explanations that the Haalpulaar *toorobe* are conservative and resistant to change. The director of one NGO explained:

“We did a tour of the Futa Tooro in 2007. We met many religious families, suggested the idea of integrating a new curriculum into the *daaras*, having trained teachers. And some adhered, but others said ‘You’re trying to destroy our culture, you’ve been sent by the whites’, etc. There was lots of resistance from that zone, to review the ways of teaching. Between you and I, the Haalpulaar are very conservative, they refuse to speak any other language even”.

These simplistic judgements which attribute “progressive” attitudes to clerics who follow the state’s agenda, and “conservatism” to those who do not, are problematic. Empirically, absence of reform in Medina Diallobé cannot solely be explained by stubborn conservatism. Despite commonalities in teaching practice, the clerics exhibited divergent attitudes towards possibilities of change. For example, one cleric, Ousmane, was contacted by a man with NGO contacts who suggested securing funds to provide mattresses, improve hygiene, and employ a cook. But Ousmane refused any interference with his *daara*. Another cleric, Amadou, was more open to the idea of change. He showed me an unsuccessful funding proposal he had made to a regional state development agency in 2006, requesting 7.5 million CFA (roughly £10,000) to improve irrigation of his fields to better feed his students. He also hoped to collaborate with the imam’s nephew in the village to create a fee-charging boarding school to teach memorisation of the Qur'an and Arabic to respond to demand for these skills.

Why do Ousmane and Amadou have such contrasting views towards adapting their *daaras*? Is it just a matter of ideology, or are there other factors? Relevant lessons can be learned from Bano’s (2012) study of Qur’anic school reform in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. She argues that these countries offered clerics funding to accept reformed curricula with reduced religious content. Clerics opposed the states’ attempts to secularise and commercialise Islamic education, and were wary they would relinquish control of their schools if they accepted

funding. Thus, only clerics in weaker financial positions accepted the reforms. Nonetheless, many clerics also saw the need for more Arabic literacy in Qur'anic schools to respond to shifting demands from below. That said, few altered their schools' practice due to the large set-up costs involved and doubts over whether there would be sufficient demand for the new changes.

We can make a similar economic analysis of Ousmane and Amadou's positioning based on Bano's findings. To explain their respective situations, a brief explanation of the social context of clerical families in the Futa Tooro is required. In the 18th century, certain *toorodo* families were appointed to significant religious posts in each village. These positions included the cleric responsible for teaching the Qur'an in a *daara*, and imam of the mosque. Such positions followed a patrilineal line of inheritance. Therefore, clerics of the three *daaras* in Medina Diallobé all hail from the same family. Ousmane's grandfather founded a significant *daara* in the early 20th century, which Ousmane inherited in the 1970s. Many of his students have become wealthy, and bought him a house and car. Furthermore, Ousmane's nephew is an affluent civil servant and elected mayor of the commune of Medina Diallobé. Ousmane receives sizeable unofficial gifts from local politicians who seek his blessing and recognise his social influence. Interestingly, Ousmane sends his sons to boarding *daaras* and Franco-Arab schools in Dakar. But, he benefits socially and economically from the prestige of his renowned *daara* on the classical model in the village. Reform, especially accepting state or NGO funding, could symbolically undermine the customary basis of his authority as a cleric. Hence, Ousmane's attitude cannot be ascribed to "conservatism". He is fully aware of his possibilities, and prefers his current position as he benefits from contemporary sources of wealth which supplement the customary base of his authority.

In contrast, Amadou is Ousmane's younger brother. From the same family, he also possesses the customary authority to teach the Qur'an, but did not inherit a *daara* so had to create his own. Amadou is struggling financially. He has neither students who have become particularly wealthy, nor political connections. Unlike Ousmane, any possible symbolic damage to Amadou's reputation or status by accepting state or NGO funds, or altering his pedagogy, would be outweighed by the returns of more students and greater income. Amadou's plans to collaborate with the imam's nephew also support the theory that clerics preferring change tend to be those benefitting less from their current situation. The imam's nephew is a respected scholar of Arabic and *sharia*, but cannot start his own *daara* in Medina Diallobé because he lacks the capital, and Ousmane and Amadou's family has customary monopoly on this profession. The imam's nephew sometimes teaches privately cannot make a living from this activity. Like Amadou, his incentives to establish a Franco-Arab or Arabo-Islamic school are obvious: he could make more economic returns on his knowledge than in the current context, which restricts the running of classical *daaras* to families with inherited privilege.

Inspired by Bano's analysis, this evidence reveals an important element of economic calculation behind Medina Diallobé's clerics' orientations towards changing their *daaras*. Those who are more opposed gain more economically from the classic model of long-term learning in *daaras* run by a customary elite. However, it turns out that there are further barriers to securing funding linked to local political power struggles over Islamic authority.

For instance, interviews suggested that Amadou's inability to obtain funding was linked to Ousmane deliberately preventing him from doing so. Several of my informants revealed that Ousmane does not want to reform his own *daara*, but also uses his social power to ensure that Amadou – who he sees as a threat – cannot either. One 45-year-old *toorodo* man explained:

“You see Ousmane, he hasn’t learned French, so if someone put a Franco-Arab school in the village he would lose his prestige! So he doesn’t want that! It would be run by others, but for one hundred years or so his family has had a monopoly on religious teaching!”

When I learned of Amadou’s unsuccessful funding proposal, I speculated as to whether the commune or migrants’ village development association (VDA) could assist, given that they had invested in local infrastructure. Both of these institutions are headed by Ousmane’s nephew, the mayor of Medina Diallobé. However, an insider at the commune told me:

“The VDA won’t do that. The people in Medina Diallobé who are in the VDA, for the last twenty years, they are with Ousmane’s family. They are not with Amadou. Even those who run the commune are in Ousmane’s camp.”

Thus, clerics wanting to reform their *daaras* in response to local demand are prevented from doing so by barriers including lack of access to, or information about, possible funding sources. However, these barriers need to be situated further in social context. In contemporary Senegal, these relevant social dynamics include kin-based political alliances and power struggles over religious authority.

6. Conclusions and implications for policy

The implications of these findings are three-fold. First, absence of *daara* adaptation cannot be attributed to stubborn conservatism among clerics, despite this being a prevalent explanation among development actors. Second, a situation of lack of adaptation does not necessarily imply a homogenous orientation among clerics. Rather, the heterogeneous causes of this absence of change need to be examined empirically, unpacking different clerics’ personal orientations as well as structural conditions. Clerics’ diverse attitudes must be seen as combining ideological resistance to the state’s imposition of secularist, materialist curricula which undermines the Qur’anic schools’ philosophy and epistemology; recognition of demands from below for adapted religious education, but also; rational strategies to further their social and economic positions. Third, policy makers need to pay more attention to structural barriers, such as poor access to funds, which inhibit clerics who do want to change from adapting their *daaras*. These barriers also need to be contextualised within locally-specific social dynamics. These combined insights need to be taken into account in order to improve Islamic education provision which responds more appropriately to parents and young people’s learning needs. There is a need to identify which clerics are in favour of change to meet this demand and why, and whether they might be prevented from doing so by structural or social barriers. Collaborating with them on their own terms to overcome these barriers would enable development actors to develop more culturally-appropriate solutions to Muslim populations’ education demands.

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