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## What Schooling Engenders: Reflections from Arab States, Muslim Societies and Beyond

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## **What Schooling Engenders: Reflections from Arab States, Muslim Societies and Beyond**

Review Essay by Charis Boutieri, Kings College London, [charis.boutieri@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:charis.boutieri@kcl.ac.uk)

Osama Abi-Mershed (Ed.). *Trajectories of Education in the Arab World: Legacies and Challenges*. Routledge. 2010.

Sakurai Keiko and Fariba Adelhah (Eds.). *The Moral Economy of the Madrasa: Islam and Education Today*. Routledge. 2011.

The two edited collections *Trajectories of Education in the Arab World: Legacies and Challenges* and *The Moral Economy of the Madrasa: Islam and Education Today* are more than welcome additions to their disciplinary and regionally overlapping, though not identical, fields of study: education in Arab states and in Muslim societies. They both forward certain conversations that were on the verge of becoming rather stale, not only in the arenas of international policy and mass media but also in academic circles. The first collection gets us out of the much-discussed realm of religious education, without, however, excluding such education as a collaborator or competitor of state-controlled pedagogy. The joint historical and sociological angle through which the text addresses the complexities of education in modern Arab states complicates the conventional “periodization” of education (into the colonial, postcolonial, and development periods), which should itself be an object of interrogation rather than a frame of reference. The second collection remains within the space of the madrasa (a place of learning conventionally associated with moral cultivation), which it forcefully maps onto historical, socio-political, and economic configurations in Muslim societies, proving that the madrasa’s position in networks of engagement is far from marginal or stagnant. This collection illuminates the multifaceted role of this institution in educating ethnic or gender minorities—or in some cases, entire rural and urban populations—in settings that have not been easily penetrated and researched thus far. Both works productively disturb the distinction between secular and religious education. If there is something at which both collections gesture, if not quite offer themselves, it is the necessity for further research on the experience of these educational institutions, as this is articulated from the participants themselves. As is often the case with educational research, an emphasis on the organizational realm overshadows—to a degree and not without exceptions—the experiential domain, a domain that can bring more depth—through its very messiness and unpredictability—to sociological analysis.

*Trajectories of Education in the Arab World*, edited by Osama Abi Mershed, debunks some of the myths around education in modern Arab states and calls for an awareness of the involvement of older and newer forms of imperialism in what are formally considered to be national educational structures. The collection is framed as a multi-vocal response to the first series of Arab Human Development Reports (AHDR), produced by the United Nations Development Program between 2002 and 2005. AHDR reports on education in “the region” deplore both the character of state-run mass education, which they consider stale and backward, and the weak connection education has with both individual social mobility and collective development aspirations—aspirations that are, incidentally, set out by the same organizations that produce these diagnostics. The collection underscores the tensions of assessment between these diagnostics and the technical solutions they put forward and a more historically informed and politically sensitive analysis of state education. Most contributions set out to demonstrate that education, in the various settings of what is delineated by the UNDP as “the region,” constitute,

in reality, diverse involvements with socio-cultural and political transformation, the particularities of which deserve further scrutiny.

In the more strictly historical section, we get a clear sense of the conversations on the organization of and the desires around education that have for a long time informed the educational agendas of various Arab states. Gunther's contribution elucidates theories of pedagogy developed by medieval Muslim polymaths Abu Nasr al-Farabi (950) and Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (1111); he argues that these thinkers configured Islamically-rooted yet fundamentally syncretic views on pedagogy that anticipated what was subsequently called a Western humanist tradition of learning. Contrary to common misperceptions about education in the Arab world (reinforced in the reports mentioned above), the pedagogy these thinkers envisaged was argumentative, analytical, and open to the creativity of the individual imagination; also, education for them was assumed to be the key to social welfare and collective progress. Tamari's chapter unearths another dubious narrative that undergirds the AHDR report—and, I would add, has become an internalized discourse for many Arab students—that of a post-classical decline in the domains of Arabo-Islamic cultural and scientific production. Taking us to Ottoman-monitored madrasas, in 18th century Damascus, Tamari shows us a rigorously administrated and dynamically networked landscape of intellectual activity, where the conservatism of the so-called traditionalists met vigorous contestation. Zeghal brings us to the more recent history of post-Independence Tunisia and Egypt and alerts us to the close relationship religious institutions in these countries developed with the regimes of Nasser and Bourguiba. Both regimes directed Zaytuna and al-Azhar to mediate the reconfiguration of religion within the modern state, yet despite similarities in the processes, the trajectory of this alliance (see appropriation) in the two settings has not been identical. Their differences are worthy of elaboration if we wish to understand the social position of al-Azhar today in relation to the more peripheral place Zaytuna occupies in moral and political debates in Tunisia.

The set of essays that inquire into the role of colonialism in modern Arab education serve as a reminder of the political gestures that put in motion the very systems that are now viewed as problematic by the AHDR. Sbaiti's chapter is a commentary on the linguistically mediated mission civilisatrice during the French Mandate in Lebanon. There, she refreshingly shifts her focus to what the title accurately calls the "strategies of language and learning" adopted by certain secondary schools and their actors (headmasters, language teachers, parents, and students). On one level, she presents the tautological definition of the French language and modernity, propagated through mandated administration into the Lebanese educational landscape—a move that has curtailed the flourishing of Arabophone education up to this day. On another level, Sbaiti's narrative traces the proliferation of efforts on the ground to accommodate or resist this institutional direction by school participants, some of whom were eager to preserve their nationalist ideals and some more immediately concerned with enhancing their chances of social mobility. These efforts may appear self-interested and small-scale, but they fed into larger ventures: the Maqasid schools (offshoots of the Maqasid Islamic Benevolent Society) undertook translation campaigns up until the 1980s and persisted, despite serious obstacles, in the teaching of math and sciences in Arabic. It is worth stressing the pertinence of this historical experience to the contemporary language ideologies of Beirut youth as investigated by Zakharia. Caught between a post-Independence drive for the legitimation of Arabic—in the interest of a unitary Lebanese identity—and the pragmatic maintenance of foreign language training due to the disintegration of state education during the civil war, Lebanese students have created a linguistic frame of reference that is as rich as it is fragmented. The issue is not, of course, that the system is bilingual but that bilingualism is mapped onto disciplinary divides (Arabic for humanities and social sciences, foreign languages for math and physical sciences) at a time when certain

disciplines are structurally excluded from paths to academic and professional promotion. Segalla's work similarly unpacks contradictions of colonial education in Morocco, which I would argue have been inherited by state-school students today. Contrary to Jules Ferry's republican vision for Algeria (that had its own nefarious consequences), the French Protectorate administration in Morocco engaged in the unrealistic project of maintaining social hierarchies and cultural authenticity—a notion it carved out with the help of colonial ethnology—at a time of dramatic socio-economic change due to colonialism. Devising multiple educational systems across linguistic, regional, ethnic, and religious lines in the spirit of social conservatism, the French administration failed to create a stratum of people dedicated to Protectorate goals who could also participate en masse in the economic development of the country. The predicament of state-school students in contemporary Morocco bears a cunning resemblance to that epoch: the Arabized educational system set up after Independence for the masses does not translate into opportunity in a French-mediated job market, while a Francophone (and increasingly Anglophone) elite by-passes state education and national curricula altogether.

The historian of knowledge and education of the Arab world will find plenty to work with in the collection. As far as social scientists of education are concerned, they may have appreciated seeing the voices of school participants come to the fore (with the exception of Sbaiti and Zakharia), for contrary to the methodological conservatism undercutting educational research that puts a lot of weight on institutional logic, schools are neither mechanisms for social reproduction nor instruments of nationalist inculcation unless they are invested in as such by their participants. This investment is far from certain in any of the modern states addressed in the collection, especially as shown by the anti-government youth-led movements that recently swept the region. Hovsepian's study of Palestine helps me elaborate on this point; his chapter insightfully traces the trajectory of the Palestinian school curriculum from a more progressive democratic angle to a more conservative direction. Yet, textbooks, long-considered evidence of what students learn, are, as argued by anthropologist Gregory Starrett, very imperfectly connected to processes of inculcation simply because students are socio-political actors who participate in many more environments than their classroom. Therefore, the question of reception becomes pertinent here: are Palestinian students, parents, and teachers endorsing this neo-conservative frame of pedagogy because it reflects their current appreciation of tradition and national security, or do they express their ambivalence, doubt, or outright rejection of this curricula, with which they only superficially engage during classroom hours? A similar doubt about the centrality of curricula applies to Brock and Demirdjian's proposal that a humanitarian attitude towards Palestinian education entails shifting the emphasis "from the political to the curricular." Assuming this separation was feasible in action, through what mechanism would these curricula be able to re-write the experience of exile and internal displacement, hardship, and humiliation inscribed on these students' minds and bodies through everyday life?

The invitation to consider the domain of experience as a methodologically sound move applies to the last series of articles that debate the question of a "knowledge society" in Arab states. Mazawi rightfully deconstructs this phrase, arguing that not only is this 'society' shown to be the particular vision of market forces in a post-industrial era, but also that the circumscription of the meaning of 'knowledge' constitutes an authoritarian cultural prescription. The merits of this approach notwithstanding, the Foucauldian framework used by Mazawi does not allow for redefinitions and contestations from below; for instance, despite the author's and classical sociological theory's depiction of teachers as conservative agents (thinking here of Bourdieu and Althusser), this is simply not the case everywhere or at all times. Therefore, if we politicize knowledge, a project with which I am fully on board, we also have to politicize all school

participants, not just institutions such as the UNDP or Ministries of Education. The collection ends with the disarming assessment of the Qatari initiative by Bashshur; responding to Brewer and Goldman's presentation of "Education for a New Era," the author re-historizes the notion of cultural contact in the domain of education using the examples of Mohammed Ali and Christian missionary schools in Lebanon. He postulates that the central feature of this contact has been mutual accommodation, however unequal or uneasy. To this end, Bashshur suggests that the Education City in Qatar should seriously take into consideration the local response to modernity adopted by the state university (which insists on the instruction of Arabic and of Islamic studies) instead of blindly emulating an American experience of higher education.

The second collection, *The Moral Economy of the Madrasa*, edited by Sakurai Keiko and Fariba Adelhah, reflects on this institution as a socio-political player enthralled in multiple negotiations: from the internal negotiations that take place among its founders and participants to the external ones that play out on national and international arenas. Through the perspective of power relations, the collection highlights the on-going transformation of madrasas as institutions facilitated by their so far understated pedagogical flexibility. Inspired by a long intellectual heritage that has introduced such reflections to the space of religious pedagogy (Eickelman, Zeghal, Hefner, and Qazim to mention a few), the contributors approach madrasas in geographical locations that have received scarce ethnographic attention: from the FATA mujahidin (holy warrior)-run madrasas to the Hui nüxues (women's madrasas) in China. An interesting thread that runs through the contributions is an attention to the increasing demands placed on the madrasas to respond to market concerns and to assist their students, beyond their moral self-fashioning projects, in pursuing material opportunities. Two themes are developed throughout the collection in a particularly consistent manner: (1) the dynamic of competition that places the madrasa in a series of concentric circles—ethnic groups and religious minorities, state-controlled mass education, inter-state relations, and international funding, and (2) the mobilization of conventionally marginalized groups—among them, women—which is enabled and furthered by intellectual skills acquired inside religious schools.

Yamane's chapter is a forceful introduction to the first theme. The anti-Soviet war in Afghanistan in the 1980s led to the flourishing of madrasas in the Federal Administrated Tribal Area (FATA) region; these madrasas shaped Islam in line with the on-going struggle for liberation. The mujahidin who trained in and eventually headed these madrasas, being largely of non-Pashtun origin in a Pashtun tribal zone, clashed with and eventually displaced the authority of traditional tribal leaders. Yamane urges us to consider the historical and material circumstances that have undercut madrasa education in the FATA zone after the anti-Soviet war. Complementing this already heterogeneous landscape presented by Yamane, Kabir interrogates ulama (religious scholars) as to their intentions and networks that motivate the organization of madrasas in Bangladesh. Getting into the particulars of pedagogical methodology, from the inclusion of certain subjects to the choice of language, Kabir demonstrates that in the on-going process of the construction of Muslim identity, questions of interpretation are not isolated. Rather, the discursive domain should be seen in conjunction with the agendas of specific scholars who are concerned with protecting and promoting their authority and social status amidst competition. A third contribution, by Adelhah, maintains this focus on competition by illuminating the multi-faceted association of Afghan Shia seminaries with Iran. Here, what may at first seem like dependency (of the Afghan Shia community on Iranian doctrinal authority, organization, and provision of educational material) has one more face: the conscious use of this affiliation by the Afghan Shia, who deploy denominational difference to promote their status within a Pashtun-Sunni majority. Equally, what appears to be a tenuous inclusion within the Afghani state gives the Shia minority the opportunity to distance itself from more intensive

Iranian control. In sum, these essays put forward the vigorous engagement religious education has with the modern state and the global system, without becoming apologists for the tensions and occasional violent outbursts (as in the case illustrated by Yamane) provoked by the dissonance of interests.

Very informative is the emphasis placed by some contributors on women as well as ethnic and religious minority groups, who improve their social and material predicament by tapping into the resources of religious education. This dimension is already explicit in the case of the Afghan Shia but becomes central to the contributions of Keiko and of Matsumoto and Shimbo, who investigate women's religious education in Iran and China, respectively. Keiko traces the development of Jamiat al-Zahra, a state-founded women's seminary in Qom, where Iranian, Pakistani, and other international students pursue higher religious training. Highlighting the fact that it was Khomeini's intention to create a state-monitored structure within which women's empowerment would be set in motion, Keiko contends that this space has indeed furthered women's issues in Iran. As a result of their training, and while remaining compliant to high-ranking clerics' conservative articulation of gender difference, female seminary graduates participate in the debate of women's rights along with secular and Islamic feminists. A similar conclusion about the conservative yet advantageous involvement of religiously-trained women in the public sphere is reached by Matsumoto and Shimbo's study of Hui women in China. Their detailed delineation of the Hui educational predicament, sensitive to gender disparity, is highly revelatory of strategies of cultural survival and self-promotion that make use of two types of hybridization: On the one hand, Hui parents condone the state curriculum in order to further the position of their offspring in social and economic structures of prestige in modern China without renouncing their ethnic and religious specificity. On the other hand, Hui women schooled at the *nüxue* institutions are able to both forward their Islamic status for the sake of social and cultural recognition and benefit from Chinese legal codes that do not comply with certain tenets of the sharia (Islamic legal code). Without absolving the Chinese state from its lasting discrimination towards the Hui, the writers claim that educated Hui women navigate a horizon of multiple exigencies and opportunities; some are better served by their rooting in religious values, and some benefit from their inclusion in the secular Chinese society.

The participants of this second collection artfully bring together dimensions of madrasa schooling through a vigorous gathering of historical, statistical, and qualitative data. Once again, however, the experience of students, parents, and teachers is not foregrounded, with contributors opting for an overview style in order to depict the madrasas in question. Sure enough, the difficulty of access to some of these settings or the necessity of introducing some of these spaces to an Anglophone audience for the first time may justify such choice; nonetheless, this direction maintains the primacy of organization versus experience and tips the analytical balance of the collection over to the utilitarian aspect of religious education. This is worth reflecting on: While the editors are very clear they do not wish to limit their examination of educational processes to the syllabi of modern madrasas or to "ideas, belief and culture," they are nonetheless interested in the "political economy of meaning." This latter concept shifts the focus from the act of interpretation to the configuration of power that precedes it, but should it leave the act of interpretation aside? After all, participants of any system do not simply and holistically involve themselves in the frame of that system—*ijaza* (certificate of clerical accomplishment) versus high-school diploma, *nüxue* versus state school—but they also invest, intellectually and emotionally, in ideas that are sometimes governed by intentions much less pragmatic than social mobility, political representation, and material gains. I suggest that by privileging the experience of madrasa education by its participants, the concept of 'moral economy' that presides over the

collection would remain truer to its intellectual heritage. Thompson's work on 18th century English peasants, in which the concept of 'moral economy' was coined (1971), did not simply address the balancing of economic interest with a vision of social justice from an institutional angle but intended to provide an insight into people's mentality and behavior—their "deep emotions" —which this collection aspires (but does not quite manage) to address. These methodological comments, which emerge from the two thought-provoking collections reviewed, should sound as an invitation for further anthropological and sociological research that would complement the extensive investigation we find in these works.