

Comparative Analysis of Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Islamic Educational Practices and Transmission: The Traditional *Mahdarah* in Mauritania

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Abstract

This article explored and compared the educational systems of indigenous societies and Islamic traditions, specifically focusing on traditional methods of education and knowledge transmission. Indigenous knowledge systems are often deeply rooted in their communities' cultural contexts and environmental settings, employing oral traditions, storytelling, and experiential learning as crucial pedagogical tools. Similarly, Islamic educational practices emphasise the transmission of knowledge through rigorous oral traditions, most notably illustrated in the preservation and teaching of hadith. The study delves into the linguistic and oral components that play a pivotal role in preserving and disseminating knowledge within both frameworks. Language and oral traditions are integral to sustaining cultural identity and environmental stewardship in Indigenous communities. These communities often employ multi-generational oral transmission methods to teach social norms and spiritual beliefs. Similarly, in the Islamic tradition, the hadith—reports describing the words, actions, or habits of the Prophet Muhammad—are meticulously preserved through chains of oral transmission (*isnād*), highlighting the importance of memorisation, recitation, and verification of sources. The study employed a qualitative approach; through a comparative analysis, the article examined the strengths and challenges of these traditional educational methods, particularly in how they adapt to contemporary educational demands. It highlights the importance of preserving linguistic diversity and oral heritage in indigenous societies and reflects on how the principles of hadith transmission can offer insights into effective educational practices. A look at a sub-Saharan society like Mauritania demonstrates how its inhabitants have incorporated both indigenous and Islamic



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systems to develop a reasonably effective educational system known as the *mahdarah*. Documents and case studies from observations of Mauritanian scholars who have studied at these institutions are analysed. This study underscores the value of integrating traditional knowledge systems into modern education to foster a more holistic and culturally inclusive approach to teaching and learning.

Keywords: indigenous knowledge; transmission; memorisation; chain of transmission; *mahdarah*

Introduction

Knowledge systems serve as the backbone of cultural continuity and intellectual development in education. This article explores the interplay between Indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) and Islamic educational practices, focusing particularly on their traditional methods, languages, oral traditions, and transmission. By examining the educational landscape within the context of the *mahdarah* in Mauritania, this study sought to illuminate how these diverse systems interact and complement each other, offering unique insights into pedagogical strategies that have endured over centuries.

The *mahdarah*, a traditional Islamic educational institution in Mauritania, integrates local cultural elements with Islamic teachings. Known for its emphasis on memorisation, recitation, and oral transmission of knowledge, the *mahdarah* provides a fertile ground for understanding how Islamic educational practices are deeply interwoven with Indigenous ways of knowing. Through a comparative analysis, this article aimed to uncover the synergies and divergences between these educational paradigms, highlighting the role of language and oral traditions as tools for knowledge preservation and dissemination.

This study situates itself against the backdrop of a growing recognition of the value of non-Western educational practices in the global education discourse. It argues that IKS, with their emphasis on holistic learning and community involvement, offer crucial perspectives that can enrich mainstream educational methodologies. Similarly, Islamic educational practices, deeply rooted in textual scholarship and spiritual growth, present a model of education that transcends the mere acquisition of information, aiming instead at the development of moral and ethical understanding.

By delving into the intricate dynamics of oral traditions and the transmission within these systems, the article seeks to underscore their critical role in fostering a sense of identity and belonging among learners. Furthermore, the discussion extends to the resilience and adaptability of these educational practices in the face of modern challenges, including globalisation and technological advancements. This comparative analysis not only reveals the shared values and distinct features across educational systems, but also advocates for a more inclusive approach to education that respects and integrates diverse cultural perspectives. The article identifies some of the salient

features and ways in which knowledge is transmitted and disseminated within Indigenous communities in Africa. It then identifies the same within Islamic knowledge systems. In conclusion, it demonstrates how the two are integrated in the *mahdarah* in Mauritania.

Indigenous Knowledge Systems: Salient Features and Transmission

IKS encompass a rich tapestry of traditional knowledge, practices, and beliefs cultivated by Indigenous peoples over millennia. These systems reflect a deep understanding of the natural world and embody cultural values, social structures, and the ethical frameworks that guide community life. As articulated by J. Ki Zerbo, “Every time one of the elders dies, a library disappears” (Jewsiewicki and Mudimbe 1993, 3), highlighting the intrinsic value of this knowledge that is often overlooked in modern educational paradigms. This article explores the salient features of IKS and examines their transmission methods, emphasising the necessity for recognition and integration of IKS into contemporary society.

Salient Features of IKS

Epistemic Plurality

IKS represent epistemic plurality, acknowledging the validity of multiple knowledge systems. It challenges the dominance of Western epistemologies, which often marginalise Indigenous ways of knowing. Chilisa (2020) notes that Indigenous knowledge (IK) fosters inclusivity, as “everyone has a right to a say.” This feature of IKS underscores the belief that even seemingly flawed ideas can stimulate critical thinking and lead to better solutions (Chilisa 2020, 291). Recognising diverse knowledge systems is crucial in developing a holistic educational approach that values all forms of knowledge.

How do indigenous communities stem their epistemology when their cultures are deemed unworthy? Affirming African IK in no way disregards other communities or knowledge systems. Education must be relevant. According to a UNESCO study in 2017, one-half of children and adolescents are not learning worldwide, and a substantial number of children in sub-Saharan Africa failed to meet basic numeracy and literacy targets (UNESCO 2017). The question is, what was the basis of this survey? Was it based on their expertise in a foreign language? The reason for this question is that in the case of Mauritania, for example, the traditional *mahdarah* was responsible for eradicating illiteracy from the community. This means that the citizens were literate in Arabic. This is supported by Ngūgĩ wa Thiong’o who estimated that the percentage of the population who are literate in the colonial languages of French, English, and Portuguese is less than 30% (wa Thiong’o 2005, cited in Mkhize and Ndimande-Hlongwa 2014, 15).

Some maintain that Western education helped mobility and employment outside the farms. This may be true to an extent; however, when the majority were taken off the farms, there was a food shortage, and people were starving. It is because of Indigenous people's knowledge and sustainable practices that the lands and waters they continue to manage contain over 80% of the Earth's biodiversity (Marrie AM 2019, 2). The inequality in tertiary education is a result of colonialism and apartheid.

Cultural Relevance and Historical Roots

The historical foundations of IKS are profound. Education in ancient civilisations, such as Egypt, involved oral traditions and the use of inscriptions and symbols to convey moral lessons and cultural values. This method of education was largely experiential and community-centred, emphasising the interconnectedness of knowledge and daily life (Sifuna 2020, 67; Stevens 2008, 26). The continuity of such educational practices through generations illustrates the resilience and adaptability of Indigenous cultures.

Community-Based Education

One of the most significant aspects of IKS is its community-centric nature. Knowledge is not merely an individual endeavour but a collective experience in which elders play a vital role in imparting wisdom. An entire community nurtures a child, ensuring that cultural heritage and language are transmitted effectively. Before colonisation, education in African societies was holistic, and it aimed to socialise the youth and make them responsible members of society (Mkhize and Ndimande-Hlongwa 2014, 14). This intergenerational transmission is crucial, as it not only preserves knowledge but also strengthens community bonds and identity (Annet 2025, 8–13; Masenya 2022, 11–12; Sifuna 2020, 67).

Experiential Learning

Education within IKS is primarily experiential, grounded in practical knowledge and skills essential for survival and community well-being. Rituals and practices associated with different life stages, such as initiation ceremonies, reinforce social norms and prepare individuals for their roles within the community. Learning through hands-on experiences, storytelling, and communal activities fosters a deep understanding of one's environment and cultural identity. This type of performative education through various social norms like cooking and weaving (for female children) and farming, and fishing (for male children) developed important skills. This is what made it "Knowledge for life." There were no formal examinations; assessment was informal, like how effectively a young boy cared for a wounded animal or a young girl cared for an elderly grandmother. This knowledge was generated for problem-solving, and the seniors in the family were the assessors. This was intergenerational and allowed for succession planning and the passing on of knowledge and culture (Davids and Waghid 2014; Sifuna 2020, 71; Stevens 2008, 26).

Moral and Value-Based Framework

IKS are inherently moral and value-driven, instilling a sense of responsibility towards the environment and community. Indigenous teachings often emphasise sustainability and stewardship of natural resources, as reflected in the Cree expression: “Only when the last tree has been cut down, the last fish caught, the last river poisoned, only then will we realise that one cannot eat money” (<https://quoteinvestigator.com/2011/10/20/last-tree-cut/>). This perspective reinforces the need for a reciprocal relationship with nature, contrasting sharply with modern economic models that prioritise profit over ecological balance.

Dynamic and Adaptive Nature

IKS are not static; they evolve in response to social, economic, and environmental changes. This dynamism ensures that IKS remains relevant and applicable to contemporary challenges. For instance, in regions heavily impacted by climate change, IKS has been instrumental in developing sustainable practices that align with local ecosystems (United Nations 2019). The ability of IKS to adapt while retaining their holistic and spiritual essence is key to their survival and relevance (Marrie AM 2019, 4). As stated by Lalonde (1991), Indigenous people adopt various cultural strategies that are designed to address various ecological limitations by maintaining a level of protection of shared natural resources. The various adaptations and strategies were used in agriculture, trade, medicine, and even in knowledge production, because in Mauritania, they are all considered to be IK because they served the local communities for generations and also ensured their survival (Ayeni and Aborisade 2022, 160). Much of the land in West Africa is desert, and the trade routes attracted people, including scholars. This eventually contributed to a vibrant educational hub in the region of Timbuktu, which is even evident in the architecture of their famous Djenne Mosque. This system was eventually transplanted to Hausaland and other regions. The system adapted to the social, economic, environmental, and political changes. Adaptation is key to survival (Benna 2013, 1–17).

Linguistic Diversity

Language plays a crucial role in the transmission of IK. According to Nel (2008, 24), “The African philosopher, Wiredu (2004:24), states unambiguously: ‘Looking at our languages is a way of looking at ourselves, for language is a picture of how we interact with our environment and our kind.’” The decline of Indigenous languages, often owing to colonial policies and globalisation, threatens the preservation of traditional knowledge. Many youths today speak dominant languages like English or French, which can create barriers between generations and disrupt the continuity of IKS (Davids and Waghid 2014). French, for example, is still regarded as the official language in Senegal, despite the country having gained independence in 1960, while most of the population speaks one of the remaining 37 Indigenous languages. Efforts to revitalise Indigenous languages are essential for safeguarding the cultural and intellectual heritage embedded within them (Reutner 2023, 337–339).

Transmission of Indigenous Knowledge Systems

Oral Traditions

The primary method of knowledge transmission in Indigenous communities has historically been oral tradition. It must be stated that the social historiography in Africa involves the interaction of oral and written traditions (Jewsiewicki and Mudimbe 1993, 4). Storytelling, songs, folklore, and oral histories serve as vessels for passing down cultural narratives, values, and practices. This method not only preserves knowledge but also fosters community cohesion and identity. Elders are revered as custodians of knowledge, and their teachings are integral to the social fabric of Indigenous life. In many Indigenous communities, there are specially trained “keepers” of the traditions. These people’s knowledge is based on a deeper understanding of their surroundings (Ayeni and Aborisade 2021, 155–173; Kovach 2021, 155, 241; Stevens 2008, 29).

Rituals and Ceremonies

Rituals play a significant role in the transmission of IKS. They serve as formal occasions for educating younger generations about cultural practices, social roles, and environmental stewardship. Initiation ceremonies, for example, mark important transitions in life and involve imparting knowledge that is essential for adulthood (Davids and Waghid, 2014, 102–119; Sifuna 2020, 67). These rituals reinforce communal bonds and ensure that cultural values are ingrained in the social psyche.

Community Involvement

Community participation is vital in the transmission of IKS. An entire village often collaborates in nurturing children, imparting skills, and sharing knowledge. This collective approach ensures that knowledge is not only retained but also evolves with the community’s changing needs (Annet 2025, 8–13). Community elders are often called upon to share their expertise, thereby validating their roles as knowledge bearers (Marrie AM 2019, 7).

Experiential Learning Environments

As previously mentioned, experiential learning is a cornerstone of IKS. Practical skills are taught through direct engagement with the environment, including activities such as farming, hunting, and crafting. This hands-on approach allows learners to apply their knowledge in real-world contexts, reinforcing their understanding and appreciation of their cultural heritage. Many aspects are learned through phenomenological experience and daily activities (Ayeni and Aborisade 2021, 163; Sifuna 2020, 63–70; Sarr 2020, 105–110).

Integration into Formal Education

Recognising the value of IKS, some educational systems, such as those in Ghana, have begun integrating IK into their curricula. This initiative aims to honour cultural heritage

while providing students with a comprehensive education that respects and values diverse knowledge systems. By incorporating IKS into formal education, students can develop a greater understanding of their cultural identity and environmental responsibilities (Kaya and Seleti 2013, 30–44).

IKS represent a vital and intricate body of knowledge that reflects the unique histories, cultures, and experiences of Indigenous peoples. Their salient features, such as epistemic plurality, community-based education, and moral frameworks, underscore the importance of recognising and valuing these systems in contemporary society. The transmission of IKS, primarily through oral traditions, rituals, and community involvement, emphasises the intergenerational nature of knowledge sharing.

In a world increasingly dominated by Western paradigms, it is essential to acknowledge and integrate IKS into educational frameworks and societal practices. Doing so not only enriches our understanding of the world but also promotes sustainability, cultural diversity, and social cohesion. As we face pressing global challenges, the wisdom embedded in IK offers invaluable insights into living harmoniously with our environment and fostering resilient communities.

Islamic Knowledge Systems: Transmission and the Role of *Isnād*

Islamic knowledge systems are intricately woven into the fabric of Islamic civilisation, reflecting the profound relationship between knowledge, ethics, and community life. Central to these systems is the understanding that all knowledge originates from God (Allah) and is distributed among creation in two main forms: revealed knowledge and acquired rational knowledge. This section explores the transmission of Islamic knowledge, focusing on the significance of the chain of transmission (*isnād*), and examines the primary objective of knowledge in Islam—regulating the relationship between the individual, the Creator, and creation.

The Nature and Purpose of Knowledge in Islam

In Islamic thought, knowledge serves a dual purpose: it governs the relationship between the individual and Allah, and it regulates interactions with the rest of creation, including humans, animals, and nature. This duality emphasises the holistic nature of knowledge, which is not merely academic but deeply ethical and spiritual. As articulated by scholars such as Al-Zarnūjī in his monumental work, *Ta'lim Al-Muta'allim*, the acquisition of knowledge is integral to the development of the mind, body, heart, and soul (Huda et al. 2016). Knowledge nurtures individuals, provides education, and instils proper etiquette, which can be encapsulated in the concepts of nurturing (*tarbiyah*), education (*ta'lim*), and etiquette and character (*ta'dib*).

Knowledge as a Divine Trust

The foundation of Islamic knowledge systems rests on the belief that all knowledge is a trust from God (Allah). This perspective creates a sense of responsibility among scholars and learners alike. The dissemination of knowledge becomes an act of worship, reinforcing the idea that knowledge should be pursued not merely for personal gain but for the benefit of the entire society. Al-Zarnūjī further distinguishes between two categories of knowledge: *farḍ kifāyah*, which is essential for the survival of society and is binding on the community, and *farḍ ‘ayn*, which is individually obligatory (Ashimi 2022, 82; Huda et al. 2016). This classification underscores the communal aspect of knowledge, where individuals are encouraged to contribute to the collective understanding and welfare of their society as stated in the Quran, Surah al-Tawbah, verse 122: “And it is not for the believers to go forth [to battle] all at once. For there should separate from every division of them a group [remaining] to obtain understanding in the religion and warn their people when they return to them that they might be cautious.”

The Ethical Dimension of Knowledge

Central to the Islamic knowledge system is the ethical dimension that accompanies the pursuit of knowledge. Al-Zarnūjī argues that both the community-based obligations and the individual obligations must be guided by Islamic values, linking the pursuit of knowledge to moral and ethical conduct (Huda et al. 2016). The acquisition of knowledge is a religious duty and strongly connected to the development of the individual’s morals and character. Scholars like Imam al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) and others deduced and extrapolated important guidelines for a student from the Quran and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (al-Ghazālī 1996, 1/62–69). This ethical framework positions knowledge as a means of personal and societal advancement, emphasising the responsibility of scholars and students to uphold these values in their quest for understanding (Sohani 2017, 8, 23)

Methods of Transmission

The transmission of Islamic knowledge is multifaceted and includes several methods that have evolved over centuries. These methods are crucial for ensuring the continuity and authenticity of knowledge across generations.

Oral Tradition

The oral tradition has played a pivotal role in the preservation and transmission of Islamic knowledge. This method emphasises the personal interaction between teacher and student, allowing for the nuances of language and meaning to be conveyed effectively. Oral transmission fosters a deep connection and mentorship, which is fundamental in Islamic pedagogy. Scholars often recount their own learning experiences and the teachings of their teachers, reinforcing the importance of direct transmission (Nasr 1992, 1).

Memorisation

Memorisation, particularly of the Quran and hadith, is another cornerstone of Islamic education. The act of memorising sacred texts not only serves to preserve the content but also creates a strong spiritual connection to the material. This practice has historically been a hallmark of Islamic scholarship, ensuring that essential teachings are retained within the community. It began when the Prophet Muhammad received revelation, and he memorised the verses of the Quran and recited them to his companions, who also memorised them and passed them down (Casewit 2014, 12–14; Ramdane and Souad 2017, 143–144; Ware 2014, 67).

Isnād: The Chain of Transmission

One of the most critical elements in the transmission of knowledge is the concept of *isnād*—the chain of transmission that verifies the authenticity of knowledge. *Isnād* serves as a safeguard against misinterpretation and distortion, ensuring that teachings are traced back to reliable sources. The importance of *isnād* is particularly pronounced in the context of hadith literature, where scholars meticulously verify the integrity of the narrators in the chain.

Al-Ghazālī and other scholars emphasise the significance of *isnād* in establishing the credibility of knowledge, arguing that the reliability of a hadith is contingent on the trustworthiness of its narrators and their ability to retain the information and then transmit it accurately (al-Ghazālī 2001; Awwamah 2017, 13–28). This meticulous approach to knowledge transmission underscores the Islamic commitment to authenticity and integrity, ensuring that what is taught aligns with the core tenets of the faith. These chains of transmission were passed down from teacher to student through the awarding of an *ijāzah* or license and permission to transmit. There were *ijāzah*'s that confirmed the student's mastery and qualification as a scholar (Azhar 2024, 4172–4175; Makdisi 1970, 260–262).

Teaching and Formal Education

Formal teaching, conducted initially within homes, then in mosques, and thereafter in dedicated educational institutions, is another vital method of knowledge transmission. These settings provide structured environments where students can engage with scholars and in discussions that deepen their understanding. Some mosques had public libraries, and individual scholars possessed personal libraries, and they often welcomed their students to use their books. The leaders and the state patronised educational institutions, as was evident from the Nizamiyah Institution in Baghdad, Iraq, and other institutions. The integration of formal education within community life underscores the collective responsibility for knowledge dissemination, reflecting the communal nature of Islamic scholarship (Itr 2022, 335–339).

The teaching and formal education is conducted by scholars who hold a revered position within Islamic society, acting as custodians of knowledge. Their role extends beyond

mere transmission; they are responsible for interpreting and applying knowledge in ways that align with Islamic principles. The relationship between scholars and their students is characterised by mutual respect and a shared commitment to ethical conduct, reinforcing the idea that knowledge is not just an academic pursuit but a holistic endeavour that encompasses spirituality and morality. Because some Prophetic traditions refer to the scholars as “heirs of the Prophet” (al-Tirmidhi 1996: hadith 2682), the scholars are afforded additional respect within Muslim societies and many families aspire to have their children become scholars or at least be closely attached to the scholars. The scholars are in an ethically embedded, socially responsible intellectual position, and hence their aim is not simply to disseminate knowledge but for knowledge to become a transformative force changing individuals and societies for the better. Scholars were most creative when, in their diverse disciplines, they maintained dialogue, interdependence, and encouraged independent thinking (Sahin 2024, 261, 267)

Family, Community, and Trade

The family plays an instrumental role in the early stages of knowledge acquisition. From birth, children are exposed to Islamic teachings and values, laying the groundwork for their educational journey. Prophetic teachings encourage parents or guardians to instruct children to pray from as early as seven years old. These teachings also guide the behaviour and etiquette between male and female children and their separate sleeping arrangements (al-Tirmidhi 1996, hadith 407). This family influence is reinforced by the broader community, which supports the nurturing and sharing of knowledge. The community serves as a collective reservoir of wisdom, fostering an environment where learning is encouraged and valued. These are combined in certain rituals or community-based functions, events, or ceremonies that include the annual Hajj (pilgrimage), the weekly Friday prayer, wedding ceremonies also known as *nikah*, and the funeral of a beloved (Nurhuda 2023, 359–364; Vahed 2000, 43–69). In many homes there are specific tasks for boys and girls that develop skills and personalities, and when the father prays, the entire family gathers behind him, including children as young as four years old (Ware 2014, 46–50). Trade and the movement of traders from one region to another contributed to the spread of certain cultural and religious symbols, like dressing styles, in particular the donning of the *fez*, and the spread of the Arabic language through booksellers. Trade contributed to greater travel between regions, hence the Al-Azhar University in Cairo can be credited for having influenced the education system in Timbuktu, and in the thirteenth century there were students from Kanem Borno studying in Cairo (Bunza 2020, 128–133).

Language and Adaptability

Language, particularly Arabic, is a key component of transmitting Islamic knowledge. The use of Arabic not only preserves the original meanings of texts but also fosters a shared linguistic identity among Muslims. It serves as a unifying factor between Muslims across the globe, who, despite different Arabic dialects or even languages and

cultures, all pray in the same language. Moreover, the adaptability of Islamic knowledge systems allows for the incorporation of contemporary methodologies, ensuring relevance in an ever-changing world (Sa'dudin et al. 2022). Islamic knowledge systems are rooted in the belief that all knowledge is a divine trust, aimed at regulating the relationships between individuals, their Creator, and the creation. The transmission of this knowledge is multifaceted, relying on oral tradition, memorisation, teaching, and community engagement. Central to this process is the concept of *isnād*, which safeguards the authenticity of knowledge and underscores the ethical responsibilities of scholars and learners alike.

As Islamic knowledge continues to evolve in the digital age and the age of artificial intelligence, the foundational principles of transmission and ethical conduct remain vital. The integration of contemporary methods must be approached with a commitment to preserving the integrity of knowledge and its alignment with Islamic values. Ultimately, the pursuit of knowledge in Islam serves not only to enlighten the mind but also to cultivate the heart and soul, fostering a society grounded in ethical principles and a deep connection to the divine

The Educational System in Mauritania: The *Mahdarah*

Mazrui (2005) discusses five phases in the conceptualisation of knowledge in Africa. In the third phase, he speaks about Islamisation in the continent that awakened Black consciousness without promoting Black inferiority. This can be illustrated by the fortunes of Timbuktu. Mudimbe draws attention to Edward Blyden's enthusiasm for the role of Islam historically in Africa. At some point, there is a duality between indigenous African culture and Islam (Mazrui 2005, 70–71). Ware maintains that Quranic schooling played a foundational role in building Muslim societies in the African West for at least 1000 years (Ware 2014, 2). While Timbuktu seemed to be the most historically significant, this article demonstrates the integration between the two systems in the educational structure and establishment in Mauritania.

The *mahdarah* represents a unique and historically significant educational system in Mauritania, one that has shaped the intellectual landscape of the region for centuries. Known for its community-based, nomadic structure, the *mahdarah* serves as a traditional institution for disseminating knowledge, encompassing various disciplines from religious studies to the sciences (Ahmed 2021, 54). This article explores the *mahdarah*'s origins, its educational methodologies, and its socio-cultural impact, particularly within the context of Mauritania's historical and geographical setting. It also addresses some challenges faced by the *mahdarah* in the modern era and considers potential adaptations to maintain its relevance.

Historical Context

Mauritania is a West African country with a rich intellectual heritage influenced by the Muslim conquests in the seventh century and the subsequent influx of Arab culture in

the eighth century. The region known as Takrur, along the banks of the Niger and Senegal rivers, became a centre for the transmission of Islamic knowledge. By the tenth century, Quran teachers were already active in the area, emphasising the longstanding commitment to education.

The *mahdarah*'s roots can be traced back to the arrival of the scholar Abdullah ibn Yasin al-Jazuli in 1039, marking the beginning of a structured educational tradition in Mauritania (Ahmed 2021, 55). The fall of Granada in Spain in 1492 further accelerated an academic revival, attracting scholars and intellectuals fleeing from political turmoil in the Iberian Peninsula. This influx enriched the *mahdarah* with new ideas and texts, fostering a vibrant scholarly environment that would influence the broader West African region (Ahmed 2021, 55, 65).

The Structure and Function of the *Mahdarah*

The *mahdarah* is characterised by its informal, community-driven approach to education, which spans from primary to university-level studies. Unlike formal institutions elsewhere in the Arab and Muslim world, terms like *madrassa* or *kuttab* are often used, while the Mauritanian *mahdarah* reflects the nomadic lifestyle and cultural specificity of its people. This unique terminology symbolises the relationship between the educational process and the lifestyle of the Sanhaji, Berber, and various African tribes that populate Mauritania.

Curriculum and Teaching Methods

The curriculum of the *mahdarah* encompasses a wide range of subjects, including Arabic language, mathematics, geography, medicine, astronomy, Sufism, and, most importantly, the Quran. Teaching is conducted in a highly flexible manner, with students allowed to choose subjects and even teachers. This adaptability is a hallmark of the *mahdarah*, where the head teacher adjusts schedules to accommodate the varying number of students, often moving between locations based on invitations from neighbouring villages (Ahmed 2021; Matarid and al-Ulbi 2021, 225–227).

In terms of methodology, the *mahdarah* is marked by a strong emphasis on memorisation. Students often study together, dividing texts according to their levels of difficulty and using poetry to aid in retention. Memorisation occurs through constant repetition and early morning study sessions, with families often taking responsibility for the education of one to five students. The absence of formal examinations alleviates pressure on students, allowing them to progress at their own pace based on competency rather than rigid academic benchmarks (Casewit 2014, 15–16).

Teacher-Student Relationships

The relationship between teachers and students in the *mahdarah* is characterised by mutual respect and affection. Teachers often receive little to no monetary compensation for their work, relying instead on gifts such as livestock. The informal nature of

instruction—sometimes conducted while walking, tending to animals, or even riding—fosters a personal connection that enhances the learning experience. This approach reflects the saying among teachers, “Our students are our teachers,” highlighting the reciprocal nature of the educational relationship (Ahmed 2021, 56).

The Role of Community and Social Structure

The *mahdarah* operates within a complex social framework that includes various ranks and roles. Society is structured around an upper class of scholars and religious leaders, artisans, poets, and musicians, with students occupying a significant place within this hierarchy. The community plays an essential role in supporting the *mahdarah*, with residents often taking care of students and contributing to their educational needs. This collective responsibility fosters a sense of unity and shared purpose, reinforcing the idea that education is a communal endeavour.

The Influence of Geography and Lifestyle

Mauritania’s harsh geography, characterised by vast deserts, extreme heat, and scarce water resources, has profoundly influenced the *mahdarah*’s structure and operation. The nomadic lifestyle of many Mauritians necessitates an educational system that is adaptable and mobile. The *mahdarah*, therefore, is designed to fit the realities of life in the desert, with teachers and students often relocating as circumstances require. This adaptability has allowed the *mahdarah* to endure despite the challenges posed by environmental conditions.

Recognition and Success

The significance of the *mahdarah* has been acknowledged internationally, with UNESCO recognising its value and in 1981 undertaking to revive it (Ahmed 2021, 57). Several factors contribute to the success of this educational system:

- (1) Importance of knowledge: The *mahdarah* has historically been seen as the primary means of education, facilitating the transmission of essential knowledge throughout the Sahara and beyond.
- (2) Caravans and trade: The movement of traders and caravans has facilitated the exchange of ideas and knowledge, enriching the educational landscape.
- (3) Annual pilgrimages: Events such as the Hajj promote interaction among scholars and students from various regions, fostering the dissemination of knowledge.
- (4) Arrival of paper and ink: The introduction of new writing materials enhanced the ability to record and disseminate knowledge. Modern technology and AI could further enhance it.

- (5) Migration of scholars: Scholars migrating for various reasons have brought with them new texts and methodologies, further enriching the *mahdarah*'s curriculum.
- (6) Adaptability of the Bedouin lifestyle: The inherent flexibility of the nomadic lifestyle allows for the *mahdarah* to thrive under varying circumstances.
- (7) Mauritanian scholars travelled to other parts of the world and returned with books that were a useful addition to the existing curriculum.

Educational Tools and Memorisation Techniques

The educational tools used in the *mahdarah* reflect its cultural context and show how some degree of assimilation took place. Students typically use wooden tablets (*loh*) for writing, employing ink made from water, milk, and a paste derived from gum trees. The focus on memorisation is paramount; memorisation is achieved through collaborative study, division of texts by difficulty, and the use of rhyme and poetry to aid retention (Ahmed 2021, 58).

Methods of Memorisation

- (1) Group study: Students often gather to study texts together, enhancing learning through collaboration.
- (2) Text division: Texts are divided based on their complexity, allowing for a more tailored approach to learning.
- (3) Poetic techniques: The use of poetry simplifies complex texts, making them easier to memorise.
- (4) Early morning sessions: Classes commence after breakfast, using the early hours for focused study. This is supplemented by extensive repetition.
- (5) Parental involvement: Parents play an active role in monitoring their children's progress, reinforcing the communal aspect of education.

There is gradual progression in the student's learning from one level to the next under the guidance of the teacher. Lessons typically run until sunset, creating a rigorous yet flexible framework for learning.

Challenges Facing the *Mahdarah*

Despite its historical significance and successes, the *mahdarah* faces several challenges in the contemporary landscape (Matarid and al-Ubi 2021, 230–231).

Social and Economic Conditions

The Bedouin nature of Mauritania often leads to contentment with minimal advancements, making it difficult to persuade communities to adopt new educational methods. Additionally, severe social conditions, exacerbated by drought and economic hardship, have resulted in a declining infrastructure for education (Matarid and al-Ulbi 2021, 225–228).

Modern Education Systems

The emergence of formal schooling systems has provided alternatives that often offer better employment prospects for students. The focus on memorisation in the *mahdarah*, while valuable, has drawn criticism for potentially lacking depth in understanding. For example, in the study of *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), students may not learn the foundational proofs and evidence underlying the laws they memorise.

Language and Curriculum Concerns

Insufficient attention is paid to the language of instruction, as many students rely on commentaries from earlier scholars rather than engaging with primary texts. This reliance can limit the students' depth of understanding and critical engagement with Islamic scholarship. Sometimes, there is little consideration for alternative views. There is also a noticeable absence of subjects like mathematics (Limam and Ghaddour 2023, 436–449).

The Future of the *Mahdarah*

Considering the challenges above, there is a need for the *mahdarah* to adapt to modern educational needs while preserving its unique cultural identity. The Mauritanian government has recognised these challenges and is actively addressing them. It also aims to encourage the women who traditionally made unique leather book-covers as part of the attempts to preserve the scholarly legacy of the country (Shoup 2020, 494–508). Incorporating new teaching methods and adapting the curriculum to align with contemporary demands are crucial steps for the future of the *mahdarah*. Collaboration with other institutions can help enhance the curriculum while preserving the role of the *mahdarah* (Matarid and al-Ulbi 2021, 230–231).

Conclusion

The *mahdarah* stands as a testament to Mauritania's rich educational heritage, reflecting the values and traditions of its people. Despite facing significant challenges in the modern era, the *mahdarah* has the potential to adapt and thrive by embracing new methodologies while retaining its core principles. By acknowledging the importance of historical context and contemporary needs, the *mahdarah* can continue to play a vital role in the education of future generations in Mauritania and beyond. It is an excellent example of assimilation between Indigenous and Islamic systems that combined to

provide a thriving scholarship that influenced the literacy rate in the country. Some of its scholars have served in government, others have had an impact in neighbouring West African countries, while those who authored books have had their works read and studied across the Muslim World (Ahmed 2021, 66). This rich legacy could be shared with the world and incorporated into education systems with effective usage of digital technologies that can record, preserve, and disseminate knowledge more widely. More collaboration and integration could provide positive results and workable solutions, for instance, the Agroforestry Research Project in Kenya that was carried out in conjunction with the International Council for Research in Agro-Forestry (Ayeni and Aborisade 2022, 167). While doing this, scholars need to be mindful that this is not abused by usurping the intellectual rights of the respective communities (Marrie AM 2019, 12).

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