Review

The choice of Arab-Islamic education in sub-Saharan Africa: Findings from a comparative study

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ABSTRACT

While it is a central issue for most sub-Saharan African countries, quantification and qualification of the Arab-Islamic education choice appear particularly poorly documented. After an inventory of representative data, we rely on household surveys from 9 countries (Nigeria, Côte d'Ivoire, Mauritania, Gambia, Burkina Faso, Senegal, Chad, Somalia and Comoros) with data on formal Arab-Islamic education and non-formal Arab-Islamic education. Arab-Islamic education appears mainly driven by non-formal education institutions like traditional Quranic schools rather than Arab-Islamic schools recognized by States. We show that a large number of recorded "out-of-school" children of primary school age are enrolled in Quranic schools and that there are significant differences between households depending on the education choice. Traditional Quranic schools appear as an important vector of knowledge transmission for poor households and those in rural areas, but the poorest population appears even more as really "out-of-school". However, formal Arab-Islamic schools seem to exclude vulnerable populations as much as other formal schools in the country do. In the context of Nigeria, parents appear sensitive to the quality of formal education provision. Thus when perceived quality deteriorates, the poorest households retrieve their children from formal schools and enroll them in Quranic schools.

1. Introduction

Fifteen years after the launch of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2000, Universal Primary Education (UPE) is not a reality for most African countries. Nearly 30 million African children between 6 and 11 years old are considered as out of school (UNESCO, 2015). But analysis shows that many of them are in fact enrolled in non-formal educational institutions, especially Quranic schools[1] in Sahelian countries (Antoninis, 2014; Ware, 2014), and therefore must be distinguished from those who have no education access of any kind. A precursor to other forms of education, the Arab-Islamic education model is central to the African continent and appears as a parallel education system active in almost all African countries. Over the centuries and until today, large numbers of African children have acquired their religious and spiritual education as well as values and skills from Arab-Islamic education institutions. In sub-Saharan Africa, this question of the Arab-Islamic education in general and Quranic schools in particular remains understudied by academics and inadequately addressed in the organization and planning of African education systems (Stambach, 2010). This subject sparks many polemics and attempted

reforms but very little is known about how many children are concerned, who they are and what the reasons for this choice are (Gérard, 1997).

The academic economic literature has traditionally analyzed educational choices and household behavior with a simplified model of investment in human capital, in which parents maximize their intertemporal utility (Ferreira and Schady, 2009). Most economic models emphasize five determinants that households consider when they make educational choices: (a) direct and indirect costs of schooling; (b) initial income and credit access; (c) opportunity cost of children's enrollment in school; (d) parents' beliefs about expected returns on education. Beyond pure material reward highlighted by most economic models, socio-anthropologists stress also (e) the impact of values that the school delivers and in particular religious knowledge as key elements on which households base their decisions (Brenner, 2001; Ware, 2014). Theoretical models of choices between several types of schools stress that how children are assorted depends on their own ability and on parent's incomes (Epple and Romano, 1998, 2008) or depends on their religion and ethnic group (Cohen-Zada and Justman, 2005).

In African countries with significant Muslim populations, Arab-

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Islamic schooling can be seen as an investment in one's community, which is often responsible for those schools (Wagner, 1989; Lofti and Wagner, 1980; Humery, 2013; Izama, 2014). For example Chen (2010) documents immediate returns on Arab-Islamic schooling with parents having consequently better access to credit. This suggests that Arab-Islamic schooling may provide important social norms and networks that facilitate social and economic integration. Dev et al. (2016) model Arab-Islamic education choice as an investment in ethnic capital as opposed to human capital. They show that parents who make the greatest investment in formal rather than in informal schooling are in general the richest, those with children with the best intellectual ability or those who belong to a minority ethnic group within their religion. The key element of the Dev et al. (2016) analysis which explains the contrast of their result on minority ethnic groups is the inclusion of social network effects.

From the traditional or modern Quranic schools, through madrasas, medersas and Franco-Arab schools, Arab-Islamic educational institutions cover a large range of realities in specific contexts and times. Despite its ubiquity in Muslim African countries, a large part of Arab-Islamic education has no national recognition. Governments and international organizations most often neglect this type of educational structure. However given the importance of the subject, some countries attempt to integrate and formalize Quranic schools or integrate some religious curriculum into formal schools (Dia et al., 2016). These types of reforms are difficult, however, and not always conclusive (Hugon, 2015). The academic literature on Arab-Islamic education institutions in Africa is much scarcer than on other types of educational supply (like public, Catholic or for-profit schools). It focuses primarily on qualitative and unrepresentative data. A comparative approach to the determinants of the choice of the Arab-Islamic education integrating the wide variety of situations between African countries is also missing (André and Demonsant, 2009; Chen, 2010; Gemignani et al., 2014; Boyle, 2014; Launay, 2016). Quantitative studies on the subject are still limited by the little representative data on the subject (André and Demonsant, 2009; Antoninis, 2014).

To fill the gap in the literature, we consolidate available recent data representative of African countries and adopt a comparative approach. We develop a typology of Arab-Islamic education institutions and a methodology to evaluate the number of children concerned by this type of education. We first find that the number of children benefiting from non-formal Arab-Islamic schooling (Quranic schools) varies over a wide range across sub-Saharan countries from 1.5% to 33.5%, while the number of children benefiting from formal Arab-Islamic schooling is smaller and always below 15%. Second, we describe the population benefiting from this type of schooling. Contrary to popular belief,[2] traditional Quranic schools support a significant number of girls and sometimes have even better gender parity than formal education institutions. Quranic schools seem also to concern an intermediate class between the richest households, which choose the formal schools, and the poorest which cannot send their children to any educational structure. Formal Arab-Islamic education mainly concerns households with higher or at least similar income rather than households enrolled in other formal educational structures. Here again there is a wide variety of situations across countries, and the national context is decisive. Finally we address reasons for enrollment in Arab-Islamic schools. Self-reported reasons emphasize religion and culture, and the quality of formal non-Arab-Islamic schooling. With longitudinal data from Nigeria, we show how enrollment in Arab-Islamic schooling is partially determined by an increase in perceived quality of education.

The implications of our results for public policy design and monitoring are threefold. First, our analysis underlines the lack of

quantitative and easily comparable information across countries on this type of education, both from a household survey and an administrative data perspective. Second, it highlights the large diversity of the audience of these types of schools, calling for political action that is adapted to the local demand. Finally, it suggests that policies that aim at building bridges between Arab-Islamic and non-Arab-Islamic education should account for the importance of quality perception in parents' decision to combine these two types of education.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 provides a typology of Arab-Islamic education institutions and a discussion of the available nationally representative data. Section 3 presents the empirical strategy to identify the Arab-Islamic education choice. Section 4 presents our results, answering three questions: (1) how many children are concerned; (2) which household and which children are concerned; (3) what reasons explain this choice. Section 5 concludes.

2. Definitions and typology of Arab-Islamic education in sub-Saharan Africa

A central education provider for several centuries before the start of formal public education systems, Arab-Islamic education appears as an important alternative to formal education systems in most African countries (Gandolfi, 2003; Fortier, 2003; Ware, 2014). However, it remains largely understudied in the academic literature, and poorly understood by ministries of education and education planners in the African context.

To facilitate comparison across countries and in line with data availability, *we distinguish two main categories of Arab-Islamic education*. We focus on educational institutions that educate children old enough to enroll in public primary schools (i.e. children between 6 and 11 years old in most countries). Our distinction criteria between both categories adopt an administrative view: the formalization of the educational institution. The first category of educational institution offers an education recognized by the State as formal. Fig. 1 describes how they differ. In those educational institutions, teachers teach non-religious fields and curriculum, organizational rules, validation criteria, and schedules are defined or approved by the national ministry of education. In contrast, the second category of educational institutions is mainly outside of the State's authority. They do not teach the skills expected in the national curriculum and do not deliver nationally recognized diplomas. This separation criterion appears in line with data availability.

As examples of *formal Arab-Islamic educational institutions*, we can mention madrasahs (Arab word for "school"), mahadras, medersas, integrated Quranic schools or Franco-Arab schools in Francophone African countries. Most such institutions offer classes on Arabic literature, the Quran, Islamic studies (theology, Islamic law, history, etc.) but also other basic knowledge (mathematics, official languages, geography or physics). The share of those two types of fields (religious and secular) at a given institution varies significantly across Arab-Islamic schools. Formal Arab-Islamic institutions, however, deliver a certificate at the end of primary education, allowing pursuit of education in other types of educative institutions. The State also has some authority over most of these institutions, which generally respect national curricula, and agenda.

There is also a wide diversity of *non-formal Arab-Islamic educational institutions*: namely traditional Quranic schools (*Daara Maktab* or Kutt$\bar{a}$b), where students focus mainly on memorizing the Quran, on learning religious practices and Islamic studies. Among Quranic schools, some are more modern than others; some are more recognized by the State as religious institutions, and finally some offer part-time curriculums that allow students to be simultaneously enrolled in the formal schools, while others are boarding schools. The learning process terminates when students pass the *ijaza* and obtain the authorization to teach Islamic studies. Most often, States and international organization do not consider these institutions as "schools" to the extent that they are

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[2] "See for example Human Rights Watch article mentioning only boys: https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/04/20/senegal-decade-abuse-quranic-schools".