Formalizing School: Religion and the Education Sector in the Sahel

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In much of Africa (and perhaps especially in Francophone Africa), the educational systems that were inherited from colonialism and largely maintained since then have been a very poor fit with societal demands and cultural realities, and this is at least part of the reason for the widespread failure of educational policies, as measured by such things as literacy and school enrollment rates. For many parents, sending children to the official state schools carries significant risks of uprooting them culturally and morally from their society, while presenting rather minimal advantages (the chances of having a child make it all the way through to a diploma and a job are very small).

Across the Muslim majority countries of the Sahel, one response to this bad fit between the provision of public education and social and parental expectations was the development of a vast parallel system of informal religiously-based education, outside the official state system, and created largely in explicit response to the limitations of the state educational system. These unofficial schools are widely varied, ranging from very basic Qur'anic schools to quite sophisticated "Franco-Arabic schools."

Strikingly, a number of factors in recent years have prompted several countries in the region to embark on experiments in reforming education, both by attempting to bring the informal religious schools more squarely into the state system and at times by reforming the formal state system to borrow characteristics from the informal, such as the introduction of religious education.

In collaboration with Mahaman Tidjani Alou of the Université Abdou Moumouni and the Laboratoire d'Etudes et de Recherche sur les Dynamiques Sociales et le Développement Local (LASDEL) in Niger, and with the additional participation of recent UF Ph.D. Abdourahmane Idrissa, we are engaged in a comparative examination of the reform processes in three countries—Niger, Mali and Senegal—all of which are fairly well advanced in the implementation of reforms. These reform processes are largely driven by the argument that bringing educational institutions more into line with local social realities and expectations will help to make things work better by creating systems that will work with social and cultural realities rather than against them.

The research project is organized around three basic questions: 1) Why have these reform processes been undertaken at this historical juncture? 2) How has reform proceeded? And, 3) What are the emerging or likely outcomes of these reforms? The fieldwork, carried out with the help of research assistants in each country, involves documenting official state actions, as well as interviews with a wide range of actors: state officials involved in the process; social groups both in favor and against these reforms, including religious and secular NGOs; officials in the ministries of education and in the state education bureaucracy, and school principles and teachers involved in the process. We are also interviewing a sample of parents of students in schools in each country, and carrying out ethnographic observation in the new reformed schools.

This collaborative project grows out of my broader research project on how aspects of democracy are being negotiated in the Muslim social contexts of the three countries. The educational reform projects represent one aspect of the more significant and profound long term transformations that have been sparked by the ongoing experimentation with democracy in these African Muslim countries.

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