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Registered Medersas in Mali: Effectively Integrating Islamic and Western Educational Epistemologies in Practice

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This article examines *government-registered medersas* in Mali and suggests that their appeal and expansion are due to their unique and innovative integration of Western and Islamic educational epistemologies (not simply subjects). Registered medersas respond to parental demands for the early introduction of "secular" knowledge, alongside Qur'anic memorization. Secular subjects have not overwhelmed the schools' focus on spiritual development and discipline, even as they feature more Western organizational features and teaching methods. The value placed on secular subjects by parents signals their newer and expanded views on the purpose of schooling. Further, parents viewed registered medersas as accountable to them in terms of ensuring student learning, both in secular subjects and appropriate Muslim behavior and in ensuring the ability of students to continue their schooling beyond the primary level (and ultimately find productive work). Finally, because of their unique history, the regulatory environment in which registered medersas operate is significantly more autonomous and efficient than regular public schools in Mali.

Introduction

As public schools across West Africa have struggled over the past decades with issues of class size, overcrowding, and poor quality (UNDP 2015; UNESCO 2017, 13; World Bank 2017), *government-registered religious schools* have steadily grown in number (Owusu-Ansah et al. 2013; Boyle 2014; Launay 2016b). Generally, across the region, government registered religious schools feature the following: (1) the integration of both religious and secular[1] subjects, (2) accountability to communities, and (3) a willingness to accept some government oversight, while maintaining a good deal of local control. These features make them distinct from both regular public schools and from the plethora of private, faith-based schools one finds in the region.

[1] "Secular" is a problematic term in Islam. Islam traditionally did not make the distinction between secular and religious knowledge; further it embraced (embraces) knowledge coming from the world, from man as well as from God. The world is not divided into spheres such as secular and religious. Nevertheless, I use the term secular here as it has become part of the common discourse on the subject of public Islamic schools.

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In 2009 in Mali, registered medersas[2] constituted approximately 16 percent of the schools in Mali and educated almost a quarter million children (MEALN 2009a). The numbers of students who are educated in registered medersas has continued to rise; that number was 354,309 in 2013–14 according to the Malian Ministry of Education and National Languages (Ministry), a 32-percent increase in enrollment (MEALN 2014).

In this article, I examine the case of government-registered medersas in Mali and suggest that their appeal and expansion are due to their unique and innovative integration of Western and Islamic educational epistemologies in practice. Epistemology here refers to the study of knowledge and in particular the investigation of the origin, nature, methods, and limits of human knowledge. While there are significant differences between classical Islamic and Western educational epistemologies, particularly in the ways in which knowledge and the purpose of education are conceptualized and the ways in which teaching and learning are organized, there are also overlapping ideas, which integrated medersas in Mali demonstrate. This article is in some ways a response to recent discussions and in particular to Robert Launay's "call for a reevaluation of classical Islamic education in Africa in an attempt to understand it in its own right and on its own terms" (2016a, 1).[3]

In making these arguments, I draw on (1) data from a qualitative research initiative on registered medersas undertaken by the Mali USAID/PHARE program (*Programme Harmonisé d'Appui au Renforcement de l'Education*)[4] and the Ministry between March and May of 2009 and/ (2) the growing body of both scholarly and international development literature on the mission/purpose, evolution, and growth of Islamic schooling in West Africa.

I first present some background on educational epistemology in classical Islamic education, as registered medersas in Mali still draw on these ideas; I

[2] The word *medersa* is a Malian/West African variation of the Arabic word *madrasa* (school) and is used in Mali to indicate a school's status as an Islamic religious school that offers secular subjects.

[3] Launay asserts, in *Writing Boards and Blackboards*, that "the comparative dimensions of the subject [classical Qur'anic schooling, 'modern' Islamic schooling, and the overlay of colonial educational systems and values] have received relatively little attention" (2016a, 1). While the book is impressive and informative, it ignores a good deal of the literature on Islamic education, Qur'anic schools, and colonial educational policies and practices published within the field of education—both academic studies and those associated with and/or funded by international development donors and nongovernmental research, development, and implementation organizations. A partial list of foundational research on classical Qur'anic schooling, "modern" Islamic schooling and the overlay of colonial educational systems and values not cited includes Wagner and Lotfi (1980); Wagner (1983, 1989, 1991); Pollack (1983); Clignet (1984); Heggoy (1984); Kelly (1984); Spratt (1984); Abu-Talib (1987); Wagner and Spratt (1987); Houtsonen (1991, 1994); Holmes and McLean (1992); Easton and Peach (1997); Bouzoubaa (1998); Boyle (2000, 2004a, 2004b, 2006, 2014); Benoliel (2004); Daun and Walford (2004); Gunther (2006); Hoechner (2011). Many of these studies do focus on North and West Africa; describe, explore, and problematize classical Islamic pedagogy and "modern" and/or colonial pedagogical practices; and look at issues of how classical Islamic schools have evolved and changed.

[4] The mission of the *Programme Harmonisé d'Appui au Renforcement de l'Education* was to improve the teaching and learning of reading nationwide in Malian public primary schools, including at registered medersas.

touch on the impact of colonial schools in Mali, with their contrasting epistemology; and I trace the evolution of registered medersas in the postcolonial era. Second, I discuss the research methodology used in the PHARE study. Third, I present and analyze key features of the model of integration found in registered medersas in Mali today in light of both classical Islamic and Western educational epistemes. Fourth, I end with some concluding remarks on the significance of the integrated model in terms of (1) understanding Islamic schooling in Mali and the region, "in its own right and on its own terms" and (2) the potential for further regional expansion of educational quality and access.

Educational Epistemology in Islam

Origin and Types of Knowledge in Islam and the Purpose of Schooling

Islam and traditional Islamic schools expanded from Arabia across the African continent in the seventh, eighth, and ninth centuries CE. It is helpful to examine the origin and nature of knowledge underpinning these schools and their related pedagogical practices as well as the school structure and its relationship to communities and governing entities, because both are still present and relevant in understanding West African Islamic schools today.

In Islamic epistemological traditions, the conception of knowledge starts with God and God's revelation—the Qur'an—which was received by the Prophet Mohammed. Revelational knowledge is prioritized in education because "it comes directly from God, is unique in certitude, and has a fundamentally beneficial nature. . . . All true knowledge or science [from reason, experience, the world] should help us to understand and realize the meaning and the spirit of divine knowledge in its widest sense, for personal and social development" (Bin Omar 1993, 29). Hence, formal education in classical Islam began with the study of the Qur'an, to assist one to be closer to God, to learn to be human, and to better understand the world.[5] However, the Qur'an and other seminal documents in Islam also refer to knowledge that comes from human reason. This knowledge emerges when humans observe the physical universe, analyze human action and societies (both local and foreign) and study and learn from history (Husain 1979). Islam is quite clear that humans need knowledge derived from human reason to understand and interpret revealed knowledge and to help themselves live in the human world. In sum, God—the divine spirit—is the source of all knowledge, having created the world and human beings. From this it follows that knowledge is either divine in nature or a product of human reason and thus subject to error.

Since conceptions of knowledge and education/schooling are related, it is important to note that in classical Islamic thought, the school as an in-

[5] Husain (1979); Brenner (2001); Boyle (2004b); Hoechner (2011); Ware (2014); Launay (2016b).

stitution, particularly for young children, existed to promote awareness of God, develop piety, reverence and a sense of spirituality, show learners how to perform important rituals (ablutions, prayers), how to conduct themselves in society, and how to "be" in the world as good Muslims (Boyle 2004b; Ware 2014). There was no association of knowledge or the school as leading to employment or economic advancement.

Knowledge Methods: Teaching and Learning in Classical Islamic Schools

This brings us back to those early Islamic schools in West Africa, to pose the question of how learning of important knowledge, especially divine knowledge, was conceptualized and organized. Memorization has long been the "methodology" of Qur'anic learning. Children typically spent their early educational years memorizing some or all of the Qur'an, the word of God. It is true that in the early days of Islam, memorization was related to the preservation of the Qur'an in its exact form, as revealed to Mohammed (Boyle 2004b; Marshallsay 2012). Today, the Qur'an is written down, and there are recordings of it online, on TV, and radio; there is no danger of the words becoming mixed up or lost. Yet memorization has remained the primary method of Qur'anic learning for an important reason.

Memorization of the Qur'an is a distinguishing feature of Islamic educational epistemology because it allows the learner to embody divine knowledge. Qur'anic learning has long been associated with the embodiment of knowledge in comparative education literature (Brenner 2001; Boyle 2004b, 2006; Brenner 2007) and this notion is receiving renewed attention in the theorizing of classical Islamic educational practices in West Africa (Ware 2014; Launay 2016b). Qur'anic memorization—a difficult mental and physical endeavor—is undertaken for the purpose of engraving the sacred word on the person of the memorizer (Boyle 2006). By embodying the Qur'an, the learner can reflect on the deeper meanings of divine word over the course of a lifetime.

Likewise, and related to Qur'anic embodiment, research from Morocco shows that parents and communities believe that the embodied Qur'an provides protection for children against evil influences, even when they are very young and cannot understand its meaning. Further, as they grow, it acts as an internal compass, providing a point of moral reference for children (Boyle 2004b, 2006). Moreover, the act of memorizing the Qur'an demonstrated both physical and mental discipline, another factor associated with learning in Islamic traditions (Eickelman 1985; Brenner 2001).

It is important to note that memorization was not (or rather was not meant to be) the methodology of all learning (Husain 1979); it was reserved for the word of God, precisely so that the word could be embodied. Learning from human reason occurred through observation, hypothesizing, experimentation, pursuit of the arts (beauty), and shared expression. Not all knowl-

edge in Islamic education was or needed to be embodied, and there was and still is overlap between post-Enlightenment Western and Islamic epistemes in terms of learning from reason.

In addition to using memorization as a "technology" of learning, classical Islamic schools also used other teaching methods, in particular, modeling. I have argued (2004b) that learning in classical Qur'anic schools (whether long ago or in the present) constituted a form of "legitimate peripheral participation" (Lave and Wenger 1991) in local, national, and global Muslim communities of practice because children observed and internalized rituals and behaviors through their school experience, moving from the periphery toward the center in terms of learning to be Muslim (Boyle 2004b). The day-to-day pedagogical techniques used in classical Islamic schools were varied and loosely structured. Students worked in mixed age groups, moved forward in their studies by demonstrating mastery of a verse or a text (not through examinations), and generally proceeded at their own pace with their studies. Failure was not a notion that was invoked, and students left school at varying points depending on their life circumstances, proud they had some formal study.[6] At higher levels, students studied with their teacher(s) almost as apprentices; often, students would leave home to study with a teacher in another village or city, after they had learned what their local master had to offer. Finally, classical schools also explicitly taught children certain skills, such as how to perform proper ablutions and prayers as well as writing skills in Arabic (to copy Qur'anic verses) and reading in Arabic.[7]

In sum, learning in Islam is a nuanced concept, encompassing ideas of memorization and embodying knowledge; observation and imitation (i.e., movement from the periphery toward the center of Islamic practice and the Islamic community); discipline, through memorization and through religious observance; and the development of certain skills to support knowledge acquisition and learning, such as religious ritual practices and Arabic reading and writing. At higher levels, the ability to reason was modeled through learning circles (*halaqa*), a common practice of the Prophet Mohammed in the early days of Islam.[8]

Autonomy and Accountability: Classical Schools and Community Relationships

Scholars, such as Wagner, have written about the school/community relationships as well as the autonomy of the classical Islamic school in terms

[6] Wagner and Lotfi (1980); Wagner (1989, 1991); Boyle (2004b); Launay (2016b).

[7] Wagner and Lotfi 1980); Eickelman (1985); Wagner (1989, 1991); Easton and Peach (1997); Boyle (2004b); Hefner and Zaman (2007); Marshallsay (2012); Ware (2014).

[8] Regarding ability to reason, see Eckelman (1985); Boyle (2004b, 2006); Ware (2014); Launay (2016b). Regarding learning circles (*halaqa*), see Husain (1979); Wagner and Lotfi (1980); Wagner (1991); Bin Omar (1993); Boyle (2004b); Gunther (2006); Brenner (2007); Marshallsay (2012); Ware (2014).

of administrative structures and regulation by authorities (1980, 1991). Both are reflective of educational epistemologies in Islam. In terms of autonomy, classical Islamic schools were not under any civil authorities, until the colonial period, and operated with a great deal of local autonomy. They were generally lean institutions, with a master (engaged by the community, typically), operating in a small space, either provided by the community or in the master's home (also often supplied by the community). There were generally no frills, no grand administrative structures, no desk and chairs, no blackboards, and no books, except the master's library and/or copies of the Qur'an supplied by parents or community members. Even at higher levels, classical schools were lean institutions with little or no bureaucracy and no formal relationships to civil authorities. They might receive donations from wealthy patrons.

Classical Qur'anic schools were generally community-established, and community members supported the school, and the master, with in-kind contributions of housing, food, livestock, and so forth. Hence, there was a reciprocal relationship between the school and the community. The schools were responsive to community needs and rhythms, operating at hours that accommodated parents whose children needed to work with them on farms, or in shops or in the home (Pollack 1983; Wagner 1989; Boyle 2004b). While the master had complete authority over the school, he was also accountable to community members for how the school was run, and he was often called upon to perform community functions—recite at funerals, at the mosque, lead prayers, possibly write or read letters for illiterate community members—for which he might receive a small payment. School masters were held in high esteem in communities and consulted on important community matters.

Colonization and the Introduction of "Western" Epistemes in Education

Colonization introduced a new type of schooling into many countries that heretofore had only Islamic schools. As the French were concerned about Islam as a political force, they monitored classical schools and even set out to offer limited alternatives, especially for the children of notables (Kelly 1984; Brenner 2001, 2007; Ware 2014). In West Africa, the French even called some of the schools they established "French Medersas" (Brenner 2001, 2007), although the institutions bore little resemblance to a traditional medersa, aside from the inclusion of Islamic subjects, and tended to look more like a public school from France, albeit with fewer subjects and less rigor (Kelly 1984). Colonial schools were generally established in order to teach selected pupils French or English, both of which had become administrative languages in the region and in so doing, they often taught, directly and indirectly, of the superiority of European education, culture, and society. Qur'anic memorization was derided as stultifying and uninspiring, but in

actuality it was misunderstood by colonizers and thus mischaracterized (Boyle 2004b).

These colonial schools were bureaucratized in many ways, organized into grades rather than mixed age groups, with pupils sitting in rows at tables; assessment was examination-based and students were expected to study and learn at a uniform pace. The schools were foreign, run by colonial governments and unconnected to communities, who generally did not trust them. Although Muslim parents across the region tended to adhere to traditional Islamic education in Arabic, colonial schools ultimately changed the ethos as well as the form of schooling in the region. Western-looking schools became associated with economic advancement—that is, graduates found positions in the French and British colonial administrations and, as colonization ended, in the newly formed national governments.

Integrated and Government-Registered Islamic Schools in Postcolonial Mali

In postcolonial Mali, local French colonial schools became the basis of the public school system. Between 1960 and 1968, the Malian government created a network of Franco-Arabic schools. Arabic was included as a subject in response to Muslim parental concerns (Brenner 2007) about the public schools and a loss of religious identity. However, French was still dominant in the curriculum of the Franco-Arabic schools, despite parental preference for Arabic. Thus, private medersas, offering secular subjects taught in Arabic, proliferated in Mail under the entrepreneurial spirit of reform-minded Muslim educators and intellectuals, who felt that classical Islamic pedagogy and the sequencing of subjects needed to be updated. They drew on the more "Western" models found in the public schools and integrated "secular" subjects from the official government curriculum, while keeping the religious ethos and content. In these schools, children learned Arabic through immersion in the medium, as well as through study of Arabic as a language, much in the same way children learn French when they go to Malian public schools.

In Mali at that time, there were no standards or regulations for these private schools; thus, they varied greatly in terms of curriculum, teaching, and school organization. By 1985, in an effort to introduce some educational oversight into the private religious school sector, all known medersas (e.g., those Islamic schools offering secular subjects) were officially declared to be subject to the authority of the Ministry via governmental decree 112 (MEALN 2010, 10). This decree was the beginning of "registered" medersas. Whereas Islamic schools were traditionally free of bureaucratic structures, registration with the Ministry brought with it growth in support, regulation, and supervision from the Ministry, as well as the loss of some autonomy.

Today, the Malian Ministry has an Arabic section formed specifically to advise registered medersas. Diplomas from registered medersas are recog-

nized as credentials within the Ministry system; indeed, a baccalaureate in Arabic exists. There is now an official curriculum for medersas developed by the National Centre for Education and distributed by the *Centres d'Animation Pédagogique* in 2003 (MEALN 2010), which is to be followed by all registered medersas. Arabic section inspectors visit registered medersas, albeit infrequently, to ensure compliance. To train teachers to use the medersa curriculum, the *École Normale Superieure* (higher teacher training college) offers diplomas in Arabic teaching. The Teacher Training College of Hegire even offers a course of study to prepare student-teachers to teach at registered medersas (MEALN 2010).

Finally, registered medersas are now regularly counted in ministry statistics. The Ministry publishes school statistics in the official statistical yearbooks according to four school types: public, private, community, and medersa. Registered medersas are not folded in with private or community schools (MEALN 2014) but maintained as a separate category, suggesting they do occupy a unique, hybrid role.

Research Methodology

The Mali USAID/PHARE program was implemented nationwide from 2008 to 2012. The medersa study within the project examined aspects of the educational services provided by these school, in order to better understand their needs and support their teaching of "secular" subjects, especially reading in French. The study was designed and implemented by PHARE staff (including the author) working for a US-based NGO and the Ministry.[9]

Sample

In 2009, there were 1,058 government-registered medersas in Mali, serving 240,579 pupils (MEALN 2009a). Mali has 15 educational zones (*Académies Régionales de l'Éducation* in French), which are further divided into educational districts (*Centre d'Animation Pédagogique* in French). From 14 of the 15 *Académies*,[10] the research team purposefully selected a sample of districts to participate in the study, based on the following criteria:

[9] The report resulting from the study is titled "The Medersas of Mali: Organisation, Administration and Pedagogy" and can be retrieved at the Development Experience Clearinghouse (http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/pa00j2rb.pdf). The report contains all of the study instruments, as part of the annexes. Authorship of all project products was generally attributed to the MEALN to ensure the latter's ownership of and buy-in to the results of the project work. Data from the study are available for review from Education Development Center Inc. (EDC), the nongovernmental organization contracted by USAID to implement the PHARE project. The author of this article (formerly of EDC) designed the PHARE medersa study, which was conducted with the support of the US Agency for International Development (USAID). The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of USAID or of the government of the United States.

[10] The *Académie* of Kidal was not included because it had only two medersas at the time that the sample was selected, according to MEALN records, and sending research teams to Kidal was costly and potentially dangerous due to unrest.

- Those with the greatest numbers of medersas;
- Those accessible to the researchers, without exposure to undue hardship or danger;[11]
- Proportional geographic representation; and
- "Proportional representation across linguistic groups" (e.g., selecting districts that represented the diversity of Mali's many languages and ethnic groups) (MEALN 2010, 13).

Selected districts were home to 885 of the 1,058 medersas registered with the Ministry, or 83 percent of the total population in Mali. Within districts, medersas were randomly selected for participation in the study. The final sample contained 98 medersas, representing 9 percent of Ministry-registered medersas nationwide.

Data Collection

The project trained 18 data collectors, all of whom spoke Arabic, French, Bambara, as well as at least one other local language.[12] PHARE led a 9-day training on how to use the study instruments, which included school-based practice with them. In this article, I rely primarily on interview and focus group data and a school director questionnaire. Classroom observations and resource checklists rounded out the instruments. Specifically, the data that inform this article include:

- Seventy-two parental focus groups (group numbers ranged from approximately 5 to 10 parents per group. Mothers were underrepresented overall, due to their work in the home and attitudes that favored male participation in "public" events.)
- Ninety-eight school director questionnaires (including proprietors);
- Thirty-six medersa proprietor interviews (36 schools had proprietors who were not also school directors);
- Eleven Islamic religious leaders (*'ulema*) interviews. (These were drawn from the national associations that govern and influence the medersa sector, such as the medersa teachers' union, the Arabic section of the Ministry and others).

The interview protocols for proprietors and *'ulema* contained from 20 to 30 open-ended questions and generally took from 30 minutes to 60 minutes. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and translated into French. For the

[11] Transportation was challenging in Mali, even for local data collectors, and there was some conflict in the North at the time of the study

[12] Although not an official language, Arabic is fairly widely studied in Mali, and scholars often get master's degrees in Arabic from universities in the Middle East.

parental focus groups, data collectors used a protocol with approximately 15 prompts. One data collector facilitated the discussion, and a second took extensive notes on the discussion. The interview and focus group data were coded and analyzed in 2010 using Nvivo 9. These qualitative data were re-examined and additional coding added using Nvivo 10 in 2016–17. Finally, all school directors completed an extensive questionnaire, focusing on their school, the populations it served, enrollment patterns, as well as their own attitudes and beliefs relative to education. Questionnaire data were analyzed in 2010 using SPSS software. Informed consent was given for all data collection activities.

Overlapping and Blended Epistemologies in Mali's Registered Medersas

I present findings from the PHARE research as follows: (1) Knowledge, choice, and purpose of schooling; (2) learning and accountability in the registered medersas; and (3) autonomy of operation. Each category demonstrates some overlap and/or blending of Islamic and Western educational epistemologies.

Knowledge, Choice, and Purpose of Schooling

The inclusion of "secular" subjects (i.e., knowledge) in the curriculum was a critical factor for parents in making the choice of a registered medersa to educate their children. The medersas in this study reported teaching Arabic, Islamic studies, French, social studies, mathematics, and science. The use of Arabic, the language of the Qur'an, as the medium of instruction was also important. In the course of one interview, an *'ulema* told us that he saw the future of Islamic education as rooted in the registered medersas, and that he thought that local Qur'anic schools (which focus only on memorization of the Qur'an) would one day die out, a surprising statement from an Islamic thought-leader in Mali. He said:

> In my opinion, Qur'anic schools are becoming less and less popular; there is less interest in them; in our time you could count up to 1,000 students, but today, if French is not taught in your medersa, it is difficult to have even 300 students. Before, parents sent their children so that they would understand the religion. But today, these children have become their parents' responsibility because they cannot find work. I can use myself as an example: I had nine classrooms built, and we taught religion here; then there came a time when my medersa had a very low enrollment. When I held consultations with parents, I realized that it was time to change our teaching practices and to add French to enable the students to have a way forward in their lives. Since that change, I often have to refuse students [because all of our places are taken].

There is much to unpack in this statement. This was not a wistful or sad statement; it was a statement of the facts relative to running a business and

ends with a successful outcome: more applicants than places. The assertion that Qur'anic schools, the bedrock of Islamic education through the ages, are declining in popularity does not seem to signal alarm but rather changing times and (1) the need for an earlier introduction of "secular" knowledge, (2) an adaptation of the form of instruction, and (3) newer and expanding views on the purpose of schooling. These issues are discussed below.

Choice and knowledge.—First, the 'ulema quoted above points out that parents want some choice in terms of what their children are studying, and that they speak with their wallets to exercise choice: if there is no French, there is reduced enrollment. Parents and 'ulemas expressed expanded views of essential knowledge—that is, the inclusion of foreign language, math, and science, and so forth. Further, they expressed no sense of contradiction about their expanded views. This is likely because classical Islamic epistemology also focused on human knowledge. Parents want secular subjects introduced to children at a young age, which suggests that they do not want knowledge acquisition to be exclusively Qur'anic in these schools. In fact, parents are not bothered by the fact that the Qur'an is not the exclusive focus of study in the early years of education, as it is in classical Islamic education. Registered medersas do include Qur'anic memorization as a subject (along with other religious subjects), and if parents want their children to devote more time to memorization, they can send them in the evenings or on weekends to classical Qur'anic schools, which are still found in most towns, villages, and cities in Mali.

Hence, a desire for the inclusion of "secular" subjects as topics of study earlier on in the study cycle (i.e., at elementary or primary levels), without abandoning religious study and in particular some Qur'anic memorization, can be interpreted in light of the Qur'an's directive that all male and female Muslims must seek knowledge (Marshallsay 2012). The following parental quotes are indicative of the responses we received across all of the focus groups:

> I register my child in the medersas so that he is not illiterate like me because I did not go to school; this way [at the medersa], he will master the two languages at once [Arabic and French].

> The reasons that led us to include our children in the medersa are for the children to have knowledge of the Islamic religion, and mastery of French at the same time.

Of further appeal, the inclusion of secular subjects has not overwhelmed the schools' attachment to an Islamic educational epistemology focused on spiritual and social development and discipline. Parents expressed a general concern about educational quality in public schools, particularly as it affects children's behavior, and felt the medersa better served them in terms of fostering proper Muslim conduct and discipline:

> They [our children] did not receive a good moral education [in public schools] because before [they went to the medersa] they did not properly greet their parents, but now they do so every morning; they did not pray, but now they do; this is good conduct.

Another parent explains his choice of the registered medersa thusly:

> Yes, I think that children receive a good education, and this is clear to see. They are reviewing their lessons properly; they behave well, and they respect the old people in the village.

And

> Yes, this medersa meets our expectations for our children, because I observe my child at home reading what he has learned at the medersas and observe his way of understanding things; his behavior is good and I know that the children [in the medersas], they push themselves better than students in public schools.

There were also expressions of a larger vision: the ability to meet life's challenges and be successful in life.

> The reason for me [for selecting a registered medersa] is that we cannot solve our problem without knowledge; and the child should be prepared for the future through mastery of Islam.

> We want our children to have success in life and be saved in the afterlife.

Parental responses align with the Islamic educational epistemology of cultivating self-discipline and self-control, while also focusing on the inclusion of secular subjects.

The purpose of schooling.—The 'ulama quoted above on registered medersas being the future of Islamic schooling in Mali alludes to the more Western conceptions of the purpose of schooling, which parents, and even 'ulama such as himself, now hold. He expressed an instrumental view of why parents favor the inclusion of secular subjects at an early age for their children: these subjects facilitate or increase the likelihood of the child finding work as a graduate or young adult. Children who cannot find work when they grow up become "their parents' responsibility," meaning that parents must support them. Parents now see schooling as both a source of Islamic learning and a source of skills for employment:

> We have expectations [for our children] after their education, whether they become physicians or preachers, because science is a means to a goal.

> I want my daughter to be a teacher, after she is married.

> Our expectations in terms of training our children they can have knowledge of Sharia, have a good education, and shun the state of illiteracy that they see around

> them in the village; whether they are good teachers or preachers, we expect that they will be able to make a living easily in the future.
>
> I register my children in the medersas from love of religion and for the child to take responsibility for himself [i.e., find work to support himself].

Another parent was more direct on this point:

> I like the French in the medersas because it facilitates obtaining work.

The choices that parents make about schooling reflect a newer and more Western view of its purpose, associating it with employment and economic growth, while not abandoning classical ideas of the school as a site of gaining Islamic knowledge.

Learning and Accountability in the Registered Medersas

The choice of a registered medersa is linked to expected outcomes for which the school is accountable to parents and communities. The most commonly mentioned things that parents wanted from the school were (1) demonstrated student knowledge of French/science; (2) the ability for students to continue their schooling (and ultimately find productive work); (3) demonstrated knowledge of appropriate Muslim behavior in social contexts, including discipline, piety, and religious observance.

In terms of the first point, 85 percent of registered medersa school directors from the study reported that their institution followed Mali's official curriculum for registered medersas. This was further confirmed by the fact that only 21 percent of the district Ministry Arabic supervisors reported that they had to remind teachers to follow it (MEALN 2010). This is an important point of accountability for parents, as the Ministry's medersa curriculum has specific time allocations for all secular subjects (i.e., French and science), along with time for religious instruction. Moreover, regarding point 2, because of their status within the Ministry, registered medersas are accountable for setting children up to continue their education in secular subjects, whether in the public or medersa sector, because their credentials are recognized by the Ministry, allowing for transferability across medersas and the public schools.

In terms of learning outcomes, parents frequently compared their students positively with public school children, as discussed above, in terms of discipline and comportment. However, even in terms of academic performance, parents agreed that:

> Children have a good level [academically] if we look at the rate of admission to the CEP.[13]

[13] Those who pass the first cycle primary leaving examination.

> Yes, the children receive a good education in the medersas; we see that if we make a comparison with other children [in the public schools].
>
> For me, I can say they have a good level because most of them speak French.
>
> Yes, we believe that this medersa will meet our expectations, and the proof is that children have a good level of education, they behave well, especially girls,[14] and if one makes a comparison between students in medersas and other children [not in the medersa], ours were found to be fine.

Overall, parents did cite some standard metrics, such as admission to the next level of schooling, grades, and the ability to speak French to support their assertions that medersas did result in demonstrable academic achievement. Reports from external measures, such as the *Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA): National Baseline Assessment in Mali* (2015) and the *Evaluation initiale des compétences fondamentales en lecture-écriture basée sur l'utilisation de l'outil EGRA adapté en Français et en Arabe au Mali* (2009), actually showed reading levels to be low across the board and showed little difference in reading outcomes by type of school (MEALN 2009b; USAID 2015). What is significant is that parents, many of whom have been disappointed by the public schools, perceive medersas as more accountable for academic outcomes and are willing to invest their money in this educational alternative.

Accountability is part of the discourse within Islamic educational epistemology, in that schools were traditionally community established and supported and thus accountable to communities. The payment of school fees by parents changes this equation a bit, in that the transactional element of accountability was less explicit and direct in classical schools.[15] Further, the term "accountability" is a prominent part of the discourse on schooling in Western countries. Nonetheless, I posit that accountability was a part of the

[14] It is also interesting to note that medersa enrollment was strong for girls as well as boys, according to the PHARE study. The PHARE study reported that on average there were 244 pupils per school, with an average breakdown of 135 boys and 109 girls; girls constituted 42 percent of the medersa student population on a national level, although this average masks some regional variation. However, girls' average enrollment reached or exceeded 40 percent of in 9 of the 14 educational zones in the study, and in the five remaining zones, female enrollment did not drop below 30 percent. While not the topic of this article, the PHARE data suggest that the educational environment and/or gender dynamics within medersas are generally welcoming of girls and acceptable to their parents; this topic bears further investigation.

[15] Regarding school fees, the amount charged varies from region to region. Fees in Bamako were the most expensive, and those in Tombouctou were the least expensive. What was clear is that fees were the most important source of operating capital: school directors/proprietors reported that over 75 percent of their operating budget derived from fees. Some school directors/proprietors reported that their schools received contributions from alumni both inside and outside of Mali; some also reported receiving donations from Islamic charities operating in Mali. Fees were generally not prohibitive as directors/proprietors also stated that their schools generally served low-income families and communities. It is also important to note that medersa teachers were not well paid earning "on average, 23,602 FCFA per month [then equivalent to about $46.70], which is less than the minimum guaranteed interprofessional salary (SMIG), set at 28,460 francs per month" ($56.36) (MEALN 2010, 48). Teachers' median salary was 25,000 FCFA per month (slightly less than $50), which means that 50 percent of teachers in registered medersas earned less than the minimum wage.

overall ethos of classical Islamic schools, often couched in terms of learning relationships,[16] which were reciprocal as well as mutually binding and accountable.

Autonomy of Operation

As discussed above, registered medersas in Mali were originally private schools used to being unregulated that have chosen to offer a government-approved program of secular subjects and thus move into the regulatory orbit of the local, regional, and central ministry (Brenner 2001; Boyle 2014). Indeed, Islamic schooling up to the twentieth century has been relatively bureaucracy-free.[17] Loose networks of traditional Islamic scholars/teachers "oversaw" the schools at a macro level (Easton and Peach 1997) and certainly debated matters of subject content, ethics, behavior, and religious practice, but they were still autonomous leaders of their own schools. Because of this unique history, the regulatory environment medersas operate in essentially mirrors that of a typical of US charter schools or perhaps that of a government religious school in England or the Netherlands, where the school is public but also independent in many ways. This situation, in turn, allows registered medersas to operate with significantly more autonomy than regular public schools in Mali, which are still bureaucratic, top-down entities—still centrally managed, not particularly efficient, and not as deeply rooted in communities and community life (Brenner 2007; Boyle 2014).

The data indicate that in Malian registered medersas, school directors (principals) have a tremendous amount of decision-making power over almost all aspects of the school, including the hiring of teachers and the allocation of resources within the school—in contrast to the lack of power of Malian public school directors. This level of school autonomy is very much in line with the model of classical Islamic education. To illustrate, 24 of our 98 school directors came to their position by founding a school; they were not appointed by a government official. When a school proprietor did not want to be the director onsite of his/her school, s/he appointed a school director with no government regulation or oversight; this was the case for 19 of the respondents. In other cases, the community nominated the school director (19 directors reported coming to their post this way). What does seem clear from table 1 is that the Ministry still plays almost no role in appointing medersa directors.

School directors reported themselves as the main and final decision makers regarding the business of the school and very few cited others as implicated in medersa management, as table 2 indicates. What is interesting

[16] Wagner and Lotfi (1980); Pollack (1983); Spratt (1984); Easton and Peach (1997); Brenner (2001); Boyle (2004b, 2006); Butler (2006); Gunther (2006); Brenner (2007); Ware (2014); Launay (2016b).

[17] Pollak (1983); Wagner (1989); Easton and Peach (1997); Brenner (2007); Boyle (2014); Ware (2014).

TABLE 1
WHO MAKES THE DECISIONS IN THE MEDERSAS?

	$N = 98$	%
School directors	82	83.7
School proprietors (owners)	7	7.1
School management committee (CGS)	4	4.1
Parent association (APE)	2	2.0
Community members	1	1.0
Teachers	1	1.0
No response	1	1.0
Total	98	100.0

SOURCE.—Author, using data from MEALN (2010, 30).

to note is that the Ministry-mandated school management committee (including parents, community members, and teachers) played a lesser role in decision making than the school owner or the community. Parents also confirmed that the school director was chief decision maker in the school.

This situation very much mirrors that of classical Islamic schools, where schools operated in close proximity, literally and figuratively, to their communities; the school director ran the school with no interference from civil authorities, although with some community input and consultation. Indeed, the 'ulama quoted above mentions that when his enrollment dropped, he consulted parents on what they wanted and then implemented reforms based on their feedback.

Registered medersas have had to cede some autonomy to become registered. This does not seem to be a problem, however, since it responds to parents' demands for "secular" knowledge/subjects, especially French, but does not seem to have changed the schools' character or essential mission. Even with the ceding of some autonomy, registered medersas are not carbon copies of public schools in part because they retain the decentralized autonomy so integral to an Islamic philosophy of education and are still quite free of bureaucracy.

TABLE 2
OTHER ACTORS IMPLICATED IN THE MANAGEMENT OF THE MEDERSA

	$N = 98$	%
No other persons	72	74
Director of study (head teacher)	2	2
Teachers	9	9
Medersa proprietors	3	3
Members of the school director's family	4	4
Association or community members	5	5
No response	3	3
Total	98	100

SOURCE.—Author, using data from MEALN (2010, 30).

Conclusion

Registered medersas in Mali expose children to Islamic and Western knowledge, which are both important to parents and not contradictory to what they see as a good education. Registered medersas still facilitate Qur'anic memorization, although not as an exclusive pursuit in the early years of formal education. In this sense, the notion of embodying divine knowledge is somewhat reduced so that other areas of learning can be included. The schools do retain a focus on learning to be Muslim and manifesting Muslim behavior in daily life, on discipline and self-efficacy, on piety and religious observance. Parents and 'ulema seem to have accepted the notion that education is for more than spiritual development—it is also for economic advancement. Although knowledge has been resequenced from how it would be presented in a classical medersa and the pedagogy, excepting Qur'anic memorization, seems to derive from Western ideas on bureaucracy, efficiency, and "mass education," parents see enough of an Islamic orientation within the schools to be satisfied. Further, they do not see an emphasis on comportment, behavior, discipline, religious practice, and spirituality in the public schools.

Parents using registered medersas are also satisfied with their schools because they see evidence that the schools are accountable for student behavior, that is, discipline and proper Muslim behavior in terms of social relations and learning across all subjects but particularly secular subjects. Moreover, registered medersas do not cut them off from the benefits of operating under the Ministry system in terms of exams, transferability, future education, professional training, and so forth. This is another way in which the school is accountable to parents and students—students can continue their education outside of the medersa track if their parents desire, particularly if registered junior secondary and secondary medersas do not exist in their immediate environment. Registered medersa credentials are recognized and accepted in schools across Mali.

Finally, a state of deregulation, largely inherited from the values and operational modalities of classical Islamic schools, is a big part of how and why registered medersas operate with a good deal of local autonomy, mostly concentrated in the person of the school director. Muslim countries like Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, and Egypt run large, educational systems that teach both secular and religious subjects but retain few of the distinguishing characteristics of Islamic education, such as independence from government authority, local control, decision making, and a lack of bureaucracy. Being able to maintain a significant degree of autonomy is an important element in how Malian medersas integrate the government's regulatory presence with classical Islamic conceptions of the school.

Figure 1 lays out a model of integration for registered medersas in Mali, which captures the framework, features, and anticipated outcomes relative to these schools, to better enable us to understand them in their own right.

Finally, registered medersas in Mali also demonstrate that a school in the public sphere can be accountable to parents in terms of goals such as academic achievement and Islamic behavior and provide a model for how Ministry schools (i.e., public schools) might also be able to operate with a light, or lighter, touch from central authorities, as opposed to the existing heavy and top-down bureaucracy and decision-making model found in public schools. This could be a significant advance in increasing school enrollment and educational quality in a country struggling with both of these challenges.

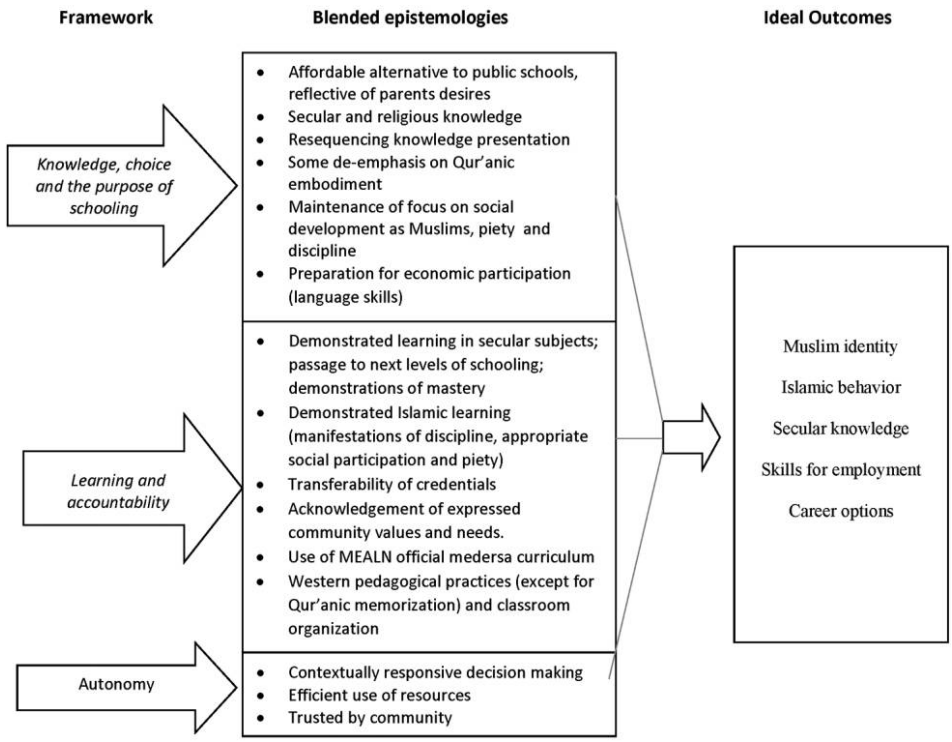

FIG. 1.—Model of integration for registered medersas in Mali

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