

Islam and the Culture of Education

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I feel highly honoured to attend this august gathering of the Second Convocation of the Fountain University, Osogbo and deliver the Convocation Lecture. I have chosen as the topic of my speech: Islam and the Culture of Education, because we are in a citadel of learning set up by an Islamic society the Nasrullahil Fatih Society of Nigeria.

Islam by the testimony of its revealed and sacred texts calls for the pursuit of knowledge, and regards knowledge as the basis of human development and excellence.

The first revelation to the Prophet, may Allah bless him and grant him peace commanded him thus: "Read in the Name of your Lord Who created" [Qur'an, Al 'Alaq: 1]. This verse shows the lofty position of knowledge in Islam where the pursuit of the means to knowledge-acquisition rather than the end itself, which is knowledge, is worthy of being the first commandment given to the Prophet of Islam, may Allah bless him and grant him peace. The Prophet was not commanded to recite, even though in other verses of the Qur'an the command to recite was revealed, because recitation could be for the seeking of knowledge and for spiritual elevation and a rehearsal of the verses of the revealed text. Reading on the other hand, is the principal way within human endeavour to acquire knowledge.

The Prophet, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, commanded Muslims to seek knowledge. He said: "Seeking knowledge is an obligation on every Muslim".¹

Preference is given in Islam to a knowledgeable person over an ignorant one. Allah says in the Qur'an: "Say are they equal: those who know and those who do not know?" [Al Zumar: 9].

¹ Ibn Mājah, Muhammad bin Yazīd, *Sunan*, hadith no: 224. It is an authentic hadith narrated on the authority of Anas ibn Mālik. See the details of the isnād in Albānī, *Silsilah al Ahādith al Sahihah*, no. 416.

Knowledge is also regarded as the legacy bequeathed by all the Prophets of Allah, peace be upon them, as the Prophet was reported to be saying: "scholars are the heirs of the Prophets. The Prophets did not bequeath a heritage of gold and silver. They bequeathed a heritage of knowledge. Whoever acquires it, he has indeed taken a full portion (from the Prophetic legacy)"².

Man is regarded in Islam as being the vicegerent of Allah on earth. That is, he is on earth to execute the Will of God, and as such God subjugated all that is in the heavens and earth for him. Allah says: " And He has subjected to you all that is in the heavens and on earth, as from Him: Behold! In that are Signs indeed for those who reflect" [Al Jâthiyah: 13]. He has been bestowed with special favours from Allah, most significant of which stands him apart from the rest of creation, and that is the power of speech, which is an expression of intellect and knowledge. Allah says: "The All-Merciful. He taught the Qur'an. He created man. He taught him speech".

Man was declared worthy of vicegerency on earth on account of knowledge, which put him on a plane higher than the angels. The angels were asked to prostrate to Adam after the excellence of Adam in knowledge over them was manifested to the angels as has been clearly revealed in the opening verses of Suratul Baqarah.

From the fore-going we can see that knowledge in Islam is an end in itself and not just a means to an end.

Against this background of the position of knowledge in Islam, it is little wonder that Islam has promoted a culture of education and pursuit of knowledge from the early period of its history.

I will mention a number of traits in the history of Islamic civilization that are a clear manifestation of this culture of the pursuit of knowledge.

Promotion of Literacy: We have seen how the first revelation to the Prophet of Islam, peace be on him, was the command to read, which

² Abu Dâwûd, Muhammad bin Sulaiman, *Sunan*, hadith no: 3643 and Tirmidhi, Muhammad bin Isa, *Al Jami'*, hadith no: 2682. Ibn Hibbân, Abu Hâtim al Bustî has confirmed its authenticity.

denotes a clear recognition of the importance of literacy. Islam appeared at a time when the Arabs who formed the backbone of the first Muslim community were known as the unlettered people (Al Ummiyyun) because of their illiteracy. No sooner had the first opportunity presented itself in the history of the Muslim community than the Prophet, upon whom be peace, seized that opportunity to eradicate this serious deficiency. Abu Ubaid reported in his famous book *Kitaab al Amwaal*, that after the battle of Badr which took place during the second year after Hijrah, the captives who fell in the hands of the Muslims were asked to teach writing to the children of the Ansar, the Madinan Muslims, as their ransom for freedom.

The promotion of literacy was further strengthened by the command of the Qur'an to put in writing commercial transactions between contracting parties be they small or big. Allah says: "Do not be slack in writing down the transaction, whether small or large, including the time of payment" [Baqarah: 282]. From the time of this command onwards written evidence was regarded as admissible evidence in adjudications and this created a strong impetus for literacy at an early age in the history of Islam.

The Arabs were a people that relied on the faculty of memory to keep records of their heritage and knowledge, which included their ancestral lineages and the thousands of stanzas of their poetry, which they were able to commit to memory from hearing at one sitting. The market of Ukaz in Mina during the last days of the annual pilgrimage season was an occasion for the poets to present their poetry and compete with each other in the art of eloquence. Recitals of their literary production were committed instantly to memory. During the early period of Islam the early Muslims, most of whom were Arabs, were transformed into a literate community keeping written records of their language and heritage and creating a civilization one of whose hallmarks was the literary culture. This transformation was achieved through the promotion of literacy at an early period in the history of the Muslim community.

Culture of Knowledge Transmission: The Prophet has described the message with which he was sent as 'guidance and knowledge'. He said in the hadith reported by Bukhari (hadith no.79) and Muslim (hadith no. 6093): "the similitude of what Allah has sent me with of guidance and knowledge is that of a heavy rainfall...". In the Islamic tradition, the transmission of that knowledge is the essence of the office of Prophethood. The transmission of knowledge is a process that institutionalises and promotes a culture of education in a community. This process started quite early in the history of the first Muslim community and was sustained throughout its history to create an elaborate culture of education.

During the fifth year of his thirteen years in Makkah after his Messengership, the Prophet Muhammad, peace be on him, took the house of Al Arqam bin Abil Arqam as a gathering place for imparting the knowledge revealed to him to his followers. After the Hijrah, the migration to Madinah, among the first community activities the Prophet did was the building of the mosque, which served not only as a place of worship, but a centre for the transmission of knowledge.

The process was not limited to the creation of these centres for the transmission of knowledge. The company of the Prophet and his gatherings wherever he went was part of the knowledge transmission process. His wives used to be the reference point for matters related to marriage and family, because of the knowledge they acquired on account of keeping close company of the Prophet in his household. When A'isha was asked on the practice of wiping over leather socks when performing the ritual ablution she referred the questioner to Ali bin Abi Talib saying: "go to Ali bin Abi Talib and ask him, he knows more about that than me, because he is always with the Prophet, peace be on him during his journeys". Abu Hurairah became the reporter of the highest number of traditions and reports from the Prophet, peace be on him, on account of his keeping the Prophet's company whenever the Prophet, peace be on him came out of his house for the four years that he stayed with him.

This tradition of knowledge transmission had a multitude of effects in instituting a culture of education in the Muslim community, among the prominent ones were:

Creation of the Scholar Class: The direct impact of the knowledge transmission process was the creation of scholars, '*ulama*' who have throughout the history of Islam held a high station in society. They have been described in a prophetic tradition as the heirs of the Prophets. They held no political power, but the political class looked up to them for legitimacy and acceptance. The first generation of scholars were the companions of the Prophet, peace be on him, who were trained and educated by the Prophet himself, peace be on him. They in turn continued the process by educating the next generation and the process continued in that manner. A prophetic tradition has alluded to this process where it says: "Listen and learn, and others will listen and learn from you, and others too will listen and learn from the ones who listened and learned from you". Ibn Hibban reported it.

The scholar class was not a closed group. There was an educational mobility that allowed free flow into the class irrespective of gender, age or social status. The wives of the Prophet, peace be on him, went down in history among famous scholars of the first generation. In subsequent times, books on the biographies of scholars always contained a section on women scholars.

Freed slaves became famous scholars especially in the second generation giving them a position of esteem and respect. One of such freed slaves was 'Ata bin Abi Rabah. He was a former black slave and became one of the most famous scholars of Makkah and the Hijaz during the second generation. When he visited the Umayyad Khalif Abdul Malik bin Marwan during the Hajj season, the Khalif stood up to receive him and sat him down with himself on his elevated seat and asked him to present his request. None of his requests was personal and when the Khalif insisted that he asked something for himself he said he had no need from a created being and the Khalif said: whoever wants to see true honour and leadership let him look at this. Many of the other big cities of the early caliphate had freed slaves as their famous scholars.

Examples are Sulaiman bin Yasar of Madina, who was among the seven famous Madinan scholars of the second generation; Hasan al Basri of Basra, Makhul of Syria, Tawoos of Yemen, Maimun bin Mahran of Anatolia, Dahhak bin Muzahim of Khorasan and Yazid bin Abi Habib of Egypt.

The highest ranks in the bureaucracy and not only the religious and legal professions in Muslim societies were open to scholars. The fewer number of reciters of the Qur'an in most parts of the Sokoto caliphate compared to the Bornu Kingdom in pre-colonial times has been explained as based on the fact that knowledge of the religious sciences, especially Maliki jurisprudence, was the basis of qualification for appointment to state offices rather than memorization of the Qur'an.

Establishment of the School System – the Madrasah: The mosque was established at an early period in the history of Islam as indicated earlier. The mosque served as the precursor to the Madrasah school system in the Islamic educational culture. It served as the medium for the transmission of both general and specialized fields of knowledge in the Muslim community. At an early period the Madrasah system evolved which started with the *Kuttab*, the elementary school for children both boys and girls that taught them the Qur'an and the rudiments of reading and writing. Then there were the *'ilmi* schools, the more advanced ones. In the early periods these madrasas were located in the mosques, but as time went on they were built in different locations, but mostly around the mosques. For example when in the Ottoman Empire, Mehmed Al Fateh built the famous Fatih mosque in Istanbul between 1463 and 1470 he established around it the eight famous madrassas known as the *Semaniye*.

All cities in the history of the Muslim community boasted of schools. Baghdad that served as the capital of the Caliphate for the longest period in the history of Islam established two famous schools that were to grow into global universities. These were the 11th century Nizamiyah College established by the vizier Nizam al Mulk, and the 13th century Mustansiriyyah College which used to offer free tuition, medical care and room and board.

The Fatimids that ruled North Africa, Syria, Palestine and parts of Arabia and Yemen found the al Azhar University in 972 which became one of the leading universities of the world making scholars flock to it in Cairo. The development of the University has been sustained through the centuries to this day.

Scott in his *History of the Moorish Empire in Europe* recounts the situation of schools in Muslim Spain where he says: "There existed knowledge and learning everywhere except in Catholic Europe. At a time when even kings could not read or write, a Moorish king had a private library of six hundred thousand books... the Moorish city of Cordoba had eight hundred public schools, and there was not a village with the limits of the empire where the blessings of education could not be enjoyed by the children of the most indigent peasant... and it was difficult to encounter even a Moorish peasant who could not read and write".

Transformation of Cities into Centres of Learning: Another impact of the tradition of knowledge transmission was the transformation of cities into centres of learning and the establishment of new centres. Makkah and Madinah were the oldest cities in the history of Islam. This position made them the prime cities of learning dispatching scholars to all nooks and corners of the caliphate and receiving caravans of students and scholars who came for the acquisition and exchange of knowledge. In the early history of Islam new cities were found that became centres of knowledge. Among the new cities that were founded at the early period of Islamic history there was Basra, Cairo (founded as Al Fustat before being changed to Cairo by the Fatimids), Qayrawan and Baghdad, all of which became global centres of learning in the Muslim. One of the styles of Muslim historiography was writing books on the educational activity in famous centres of learning. The scholars of hadith paid special attention to this method of keeping historical records because of the importance of ascertaining physical encounter between a transmitter and the one from whom he transmitted his hadith narration, in order to establish the authenticity of chains of narrations. These records are a good source of the educational history of the Islamic community. They compile the records of every scholar that lived in or visited the centre,

the scholars he met and the students who learnt from him, and a sample of his transmissions and productions. The most famous of these compilations are: the history of Baghdad, history of Damascus both of which are still extant, and the history of Nishapur which is lost. Records of other centres, like Egypt, Yemen, Isfahan and Jurjan (Karkan) in modern Iran and Wasit in Central Iraq, though shorter in volume are also extant.

Caravans of scholars, students, scribes and copyists went back and forth between these centres of learning, and the practice of travelling in search of knowledge from the centres became a custom of students and scholars. There is a famous hadith which states that a time will come when people will hit the belly of their camels in search of knowledge, but they will never find a scholar as knowledgeable as the scholar of Madinah. The hadith is widely believed to be a prophecy referring to Imam Malik, the Madinan scholar and founder of the Maliki School of fiqh.

Compilation of Knowledge: The practice of compiling knowledge in writing was one of the traits of the culture of education in the history of Islam. This practice started with the compilation of the Qur'an which was done a few years after the death of the Prophet, during the caliphal rule of Abubakr the first caliph. Recording of the Qur'an in parchments and shoulder blades of animals occurred during the lifetime of the Prophet and under his guidance by notable scribes among the Prophet's companions. Two copies of the Qur'an written during the time of Uthman the third caliph, about twenty years after the death of the Prophet, peace be on him, are still extant in Istanbul, Turkey and Tashkent in Uzbekistan.

In the same vein the sayings and practices of the Prophet peace be on him, the hadith, were being recorded during the Prophet's lifetime by some companions who did not want to rely on their powerful Arab memory for the preservation of knowledge. Notable instructions of the Prophet, peace be on him, like his directives to the emirs of Yemen on charity and judgements regarding blood money and other aspects of

governance and his sermon during the farewell pilgrimage were all put in writing.

This practice which started early in the history of Islam created a passion for committing knowledge to writing especially with the belief in Islam that one way through which good actions of an individual continue proliferating even after his death is through the knowledge he left behind benefitting people. This includes the books not necessarily authored by him but even those left behind by him as a bequest.

This in turn led to the establishment of libraries and the first libraries to be established in the Islamic civilization were in the mosques. Then other public libraries were also established especially in schools. According to M. H. Morgan in his book *Lost History, the Enduring Legacy of Muslim Scientists, Thinkers and Artists*, there by the 13th century in Baghdad 36 public libraries and 100 booksellers. In 15th century Ottoman Turkey Mehmed Al Fateh endowed a library for each of the eight Semaniye schools he built around the Fateh Mosque besides a separate general library.

Private libraries also became common place. They were established by the members of the ruling families and the nobility, both men and women, as well as wealthy scholars. The 10th century library of Al Hakam II, the second Umayyad Caliph of Cordoba, Spain, was one of the largest libraries of the world housing over 400,000 volumes.

Nearer home, there was the famous Umar Falke collection, which was acquired by the Herskovits Library of Africana of the Northwestern University. Umar Falke (died 1962) was part of the merchant-scholar class that was a feature of the history of Islam in the West Africa. He was a student of the famous Kano scholar Mallam Muhammad Salga. The collection had 3323 items.

Most libraries in the history of Islam contained religious books especially the libraries affiliated to the mosques. But there were other libraries established to promote scientific and technological inquiry, like the Dar al Hikma, which was a state library established in Cairo in the year 1004, which attracted scholars from throughout the world, with its collections

completely at the disposal of all readers including members of the general public (see Nancy Spiegel: *Medieval Islamic Libraries*: <http://news.lib.uchicago.edu/blog/2011/04/14/library-history-and-architecture-medieval-islamic-libraries/>).

Learning from Other Civilizations: Learning from other civilizations was another trait that influenced the development of a culture of education in the history of Islam. Wisdom is the object of the long-cherished wish of the believer and wherever he finds it he takes it, as the famous saying goes. No individual, group or civilization can lay claim to a monopoly of knowledge. Throughout the history of Islam, Muslims learnt from different civilizations, and the object of learning covered all fields with the exception of course of the religious beliefs and actions in which the Prophetic legacy has been and still is sufficient for them.

The Muslims during the time of the Prophet learnt the war tactics of the Persians through Salman the Persian, one of the Prophet's companions. They also abolished the custom prevalent among the Arabs of preventing pregnant mothers from suckling their babies based on what they observed from the Romans.

Islam came in contact with the Byzantine and Persian civilizations early in its history, precisely during the first generation of Muslims. With the literary tradition and the quest for knowledge already institutionalized during this period, many texts of the classical knowledge that had been translated from Greek into Syriac by Nestorians and other Syriac scholars living in Syria and parts of Persia were translated into Arabic by the Islamic world. In 832, the Abbasid Caliph Al Ma'mun established the House of Wisdom fashioned out of the model of the Persian Academy of Gundeshapur in present-day Khuzestan province of Iran, which translated Greco-Roman-Byzantine knowledge into the Pahlavi tongue. The House of Wisdom translated these classical works to Arabic.

Based on these translations, scholars in the Islamic world especially in Baghdad developed scientific knowledge and took it to greater heights. They made important advances in mathematics, physics, alchemy, astronomy and medicine. Al Khawarizmi of Uzbekistan was among the

scholars that stayed in the House of Hikmah. He developed the method of algorithms century used in mathematical calculations in the 9th. Ibn al Haytham (known in the West as Alhazen d. 1087) wrote a book on optics that was regarded as a great stepping stone in the history of the scientific method and in the history of optics. The books written by these and other scholars in the Islamic world were later translated from the Arabic language to Latin and they still mark a great contribution of the Islamic civilization to Medieval Europe.

Economic Support for Education: Another trait that featured in the history of Islam and contributed in no small way to the development of a culture of education was the economic support given to the development of education. Islamic teachings place charity made for the spread and support of education as one of the best acts of charity because its benefit spreads far and wide and outlives the benefactor. In a hadith, the Prophet, peace be on him said: "When a son of Adam dies, rewards for his good actions are cut off except through three avenues: a pious offspring praying for him, knowledge that is beneficial or a subsisting charity". Muslim reported.

Based on these teachings the practice of endowments (waqfs) became wide spread in the history of Islam, where they are regarded as subsisting charity and bequests of beneficial knowledge. The practice started during the life of the Prophet and his companions and it has contributed in a great way in the development of education.

Successive Muslim states in history have supported education through the building of schools, colleges, universities, libraries and research institutes. The House of Wisdom in Baghdad served as a research institute. The Azhar University, the Zaytuna and al Qayrawan of Tunisia, the Qarawiyyin in Fez, Morocco were all mosques and institutions of learning set up by respective Muslim states.

Private individuals also gave this support through the establishments of waqfs, endowments, to sustain the institutions of learning and support the teachers as well as the students. Pashas, members of the ruling

class, ulama, sultans and others all took part in founding madrasahs and supporting them.

The Ottoman historian Halil Inalcik (pronounced Inaljik) wrote that “the medrese, both in the pre-Ottoman and the Ottoman period, was an institution supported by a wakif (endowment), and was usually one component in a complex of mosque, hospice, and other charitable institutions. The mutawalli of this complex entrusted to the muderris the funds allotted to the medrese; the muderris was responsible for selecting students, for disbursing these funds to students and servants and for the general administration of the medrese. Thus a medrese was a self-governing unit within a wakif, itself an autonomous institution.” (The Ottoman Empire, the Classical Age, p 169).

For the funding of all these services, and also for building and supporting libraries, enormous endowments were made. In Sicily under Islamic rule there were over 300 elementary schools all of them built by endowments and funded with waqf revenues for payment of teachers and school supplies.

Education is the second biggest recipient of waqf revenues after the mosques in Islamic history. The practice was so wide spread that it was estimated that one third of land in Turkey is awqaf. (Monzer Kahf, *Waqf and Sustaining Economic Development*. See also an inventory of Ottoman Turkish Documents on Waqf property in: [http://www.imir-bg.org/imir/books/Inventory_Waqf_\(orig\)1.pdf](http://www.imir-bg.org/imir/books/Inventory_Waqf_(orig)1.pdf)).

The provision of awqaf has been observed as the reason for the independence of Muslim scholars from rulers based on the economic independence provided to them by the endowment funds that place them outside the control of rulers. It also contributed to reducing the socio-economic differences of the society by allowing members from the poor classes of the society who have the merits but not the means, to pursue education to the highest level and thus find an opportunity for social mobility.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I have presented the traits that illustrate how Islam has promoted a culture of education. I also highlighted how the history of Islam gave a practical expression of that culture. This shows the importance of human development in Islam.

The degeneration that beset the Islamic civilization especially in the field of education in modern times is attributable to Muslims as individuals and nations. It has nothing to do with the world-view of Islam, as Islam is by its nature and influence a religion that promotes the culture of education.

Recent developments among countries and societies in the Muslim world are showing positive signs of improvement in human development, key to which is education. Six out of 10 countries of the world that registered the fastest progress in human development index (HDI) are Muslim-majority countries. They are: Oman, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco, with Oman being the fastest.

The establishment of the Fountain University by Nasrullahil Fatih Society of Nigeria 'NASFAT' is an example of going back to a revival of that culture of promoting education which we saw in the history of Islam and the role of private individuals and organizations in that.

Thank you for listening.