

Learning Before Schools: Education, Memory, and Distributed Knowledge Ecologies in Pre-Oil Arabia

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ABSTRACT:

In this work, modernization narratives that depict pre-oil Arabia as being educationally marginal prior to the establishment of centralized schooling (during the 20th Century) will be challenged. The article will return specifically to Najd and the Hijaz to argue that during the 18th-20th centuries, there were pedagogical ecologies that developed across Arabia in dispersed settings, such as households, mosques, manuscripts, kuttāb schools, pilgrimage routes, apprenticeships, trade networks and oral performances.

The shift in this work is from a bounded institutional approach to education to a distributed social ecology of education that combines mobility, memory, manuscript culture, religious authority, and everyday practices. To understand this, the study draws on Arabic chronicles, travel accounts, memoirs, biographical literature and scholarship on Islamic pedagogy and literacy which posits this relationality between oral and textual practice rather than a sequentially. Overlapping pedagogies emerged with the processes of recitation, memorization, commentating, copying and teacher-student relations, which resulted in the authoritative nature of knowledge.

Furthermore, it will be contended that educational modernity accomplished more than just the spread of education in Arabia. Instead, it reimagined what has traditionally been understood as education. Processes such as memorization, oral genealogy, apprenticeship, domestic pedagogy, and poetic transmission became more and more marginalized within historiographies that were developed on bureaucratic schooling and institutional archives.

Keywords: Arabia; education; literacy; manuscript culture; Islamic pedagogy; Najd; Hijaz; mobility; memory.

Introduction

Narratives of absence have largely influenced histories of education in the Arabian Peninsula. Prior to the formation of centralized education systems in Arabia during the 20th Century, Arabia was viewed as a place of educational marginality, low literacy levels, limited institutions, and disjointed intellectual life (Al-

Rasheed 2010, 58–79). In such discourses meaningful education was to be achieved by means of standardized curricula, state interventions and bureaucratic schools.

This work will take the stance that this is a false representation of pre-oil education in Arabia. Education was not absent from societies in this region, but they maintained rich and socially

diffused educational systems, associated with family, mosques, kuttāb schools, pilgrimage networks, trade routes, workshops, poetic gatherings, and educational mobility. Education was not only located in a bounded institutional space but also in a broader ecology that involved memory, manuscript culture, religious legitimacy, apprenticeship and oral performance.

This work makes a strong claim that modernity remade what education used to be, rather than simply positing the existence of education prior to the institution of schooling. Processes like recitation, memorization, commentary, manuscript copying, apprenticeships, oral genealogy and domestic pedagogy were illegible to the institutional forms that made learning visible and administrative calculable in modern educational systems (Foucault 1977, 135-169).

The author's attention is drawn to the Hijaz and Najd between the 18th and early 20th century to present two important arguments. To begin with, Arabia's educational life was more shaped by oral and written pedagogies coexisting than by formal institutions and these processes, such as the memorization of the Qur'an, the commenting on it and its recitation, copying and the formation of relations between teacher and pupil, led to interrelated modes of teaching knowledge that made it socially meaningful (Ong 1982, 31-77). Secondly, these pedagogical developments were shaped by mobility, pilgrimage circulation, ecological conditions, kinship organization and by uneven urbanization. While cosmopolitan educational contexts related to the Ottoman and Indian Ocean intellectual worlds were championed by Hijaz, Najdi learning relied on mosque-based pedagogy, authority from kin, and localized scholarly transmission.

This study is not only a valuable addition to the literature in education history, Middle Eastern social history and literary anthropology, but also a significant attempt to recalibrate the study of Arabian education from a "mere precursor" to modern education systems to a more dynamic "distributed knowledge ecology."

Historiography and Theoretical Framework

Islamic studies have long been subject to research that indicates a learning outside of the formal walls of today's schooling. For example, George Makdisi and Jonathan Berkey revealed that Islamic pedagogy was largely reliant upon decentralized educational networks that were structured around mosques, commentary traditions, memorization, and teacher-student relationships as opposed to standardized educational systems (Makdisi 1981, 140-175; Berkey 1992, 45-77).

However, Arabia has its own educational system. Populated with sparse settlement, pilgrimage circulations, ecological constraints, tribal mobility and uneven urbanization, learning approaches were different, shaped into new forms that deviated from the institutional settings in Istanbul, Cairo and Damascus.

Brian Street's distinction between "autonomous" and "ideological" models of literacy are referred to in this article. In the autonomous model literacy is defined as a neutral technical skill that applies to all social outcomes. The other extreme is the ideological model, which posits that literacy is always involved in socially situated moral, power and authority relationships (Street 1984, 1-25). This distinction is a big deal in the Arabian world, where the ability to read and write is a key part of religious respectability, commerce, genealogy, and community standing.

Another important framework to take into account here is Walter Ong's work on orality. For oral societies, as Ong points out, processes like memorization, recitation, repetition and embodied transmission are important (Ong 1982, 56-98). But in the Arabian case, clear dichotomies between oral and literate cultures are complicated. Significantly, manuscript use did not lead to the disappearance of oral transmission and writing did not supplant memory. Instead, there were layered oral-textual pedagogies of memorization, recitation, copying, commentating, and manuscript circulation.

This conclusion is corroborated by research studies on manuscript culture. For instance,

Brinkley Messick (1993) and Muhammad Qasim Zaman (2012) note that Islamic learning was more dependent on the commentaries, the proximity of teacher and student, the circulation of manuscripts, and the alteration of authorization than impersonal educational institutions.

Accordingly, this paper views education as a distributed ecology of transmission that sees religious, practical, moral and social knowledge and experience not only in the narrow sense of an institutional category of mosques, but also in households and workshops and in mobility networks.

Sources and Methodology

A necessary imbalance in the evidentiary base for pre-oil Arabian education exists. There are not at present many archives in relation to formal education, especially in non-Hijaz regions, and the materials that do survive largely reflect a male religious scholarship. Therefore, the current work is a synthesis of different types of evidence.

The first of these consists of Arabic chronicles, biographical literature, in particular the Najdi historical works (*Unwān al-Majd fī Tārīkh Najd*, by Ibn Bishr), and recent photographic works by Arabian scholars.

The second group of texts are travel writing or official descriptions, by Charles Doughty, St. John Philby, and J. G. Lorimer. These resources can be used to help reconstruct aspects of settlement, literacy, mobility and pedagogical practices, but must also be understood in a critical way, as they are based on external and often colonial viewpoints.

Philby's descriptions of Najdi social and religious life depict elementary education as a kind of

teaching that was conducted in mosque-centered instructional environments, thereby establishing the fact that the elementary education was highly dependent on memorization and recitation (Philby 1922). Similarly, in his description, Doughty emphasizes the role of memorizing and reciting the Qur'ān as a group, and reciting it orally (Doughty 1921). These accounts are important not to be understood as an ethnographic neutrality but rather are useful in presenting education to the outside viewer.

The third type concerns memoirs and literary reminders from the Hijaz. Muhammad Husayn Zaydan's memoirs provide valuable insights into the significance of *kuttāb*'s education in Medina. His narration refers to a pedagogical context in which, among other factors, recitation, memorization, writing boards, correction, and repetition are important factors in daily learning in elementary school. This is not a division between oral and text-based practices but rather a combination of memory, inscription, voice and discipline whereby they form a unified pedagogical process.

The fourth category mainly concerns manuscript collections, archives of the mosques, waqf records, as well as digital collections that are held by various institutions such as the Qatar Digital Library, the King Abdulaziz Foundation (Dārah), and the British Library.

Methodologically, this work combines historical analyses, textual interpretations, oral-tradition analyses, and comparative educational anthropology, rather than looking for formal educational institutions. It brings to life, in turn, broader “learning ecologies” that entail memory, mobility, literacy, labor, social authority, and manuscript circulation.

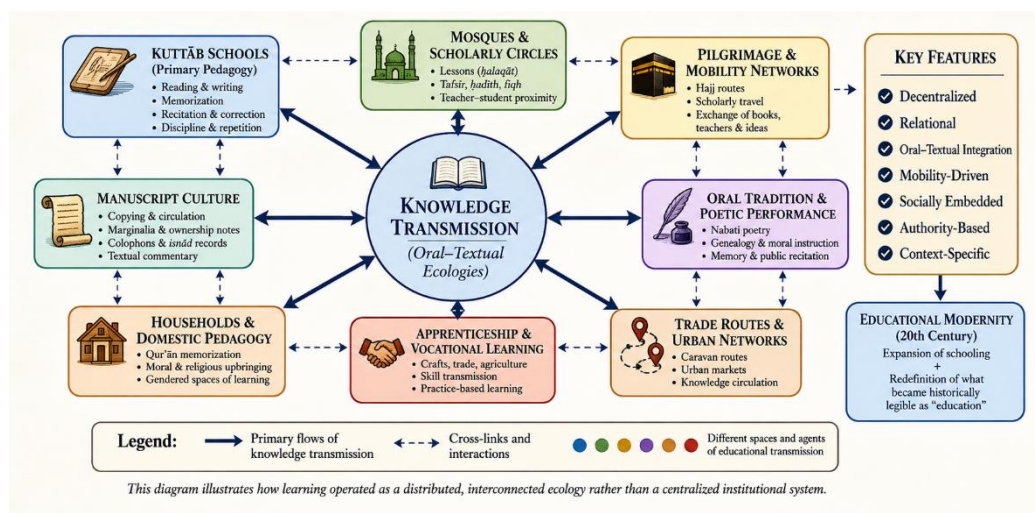


Figure 1: Education is distributed and interrelated in pre-oil Arabia. Knowledge was not limited to being transmitted via centralised institutions, but via mosques, kuttāb schools, households, pilgrimages, manuscript networks, apprenticeship, and oral performance systems.

Educational Ecologies in the Hijaz

The Hijaz was also an area with a high concentration of educational institutions prior to the advent of centralized schooling, and Mecca and Medina were sacred cities, centres of learning, and regional crossroads, connecting Arabia with the educational geography of the Ottoman Empire and Indian Ocean region.

Educational life was formed by various spaces of education within the commercial and religious life. This included mosques, Kuttāb schools, endowed teaching positions, manuscript copying, and scholarly households that were all linked together, forming interwoven educational ecologies which mediated the social and material transfer of knowledge.

Usually, children began their education by memorizing the Qurʾān and they were taught the basic skills of reading, writing and grammar in local kuttāb schools. Later they would go on to study groups in mosques.

The works of Muhammad Husayn Zaydan explore kuttāb education in Medina and preserve the sensual texture of education in a unique way. Elementary education was organized daily around writing boards, recitation, repetition, memorization and correction. Movement, sound and discipline repetition on the other hand, were essential parts of learning.

Such activities were so important as they rejected distinctions between “oral” and “literate” learning. The kuttāb worked with repetition of oral-textual material, not the acquisition of abstract literacy.

The mosque became a dynamic center for intellectual activity where recitation, manuscripts, commentaries and academic standing converged. In the 19th Century, the Haram Mosque was a hub for education and scholarly exchange in Mecca, linking local knowledge with broader Islamic intellectual networks.

These circulations were amplified by pilgrimage. Books, educational strategies, legal disputes, academic connections, along with pilgrims, was carried around the Islamic world through the Hajj routes (Ho 2006, 44–71). So, the Hijaz was a place of sanctity, as well as being an intellectual hub of Islamic learning.

Education in Najd

Despite the fact that Najd possessed fewer urban institutions and surviving archives than the Hijaz, one should not assume that this reflects a lack of education. The Najd education system revolved mostly around mosque-based schooling, family networks, travelling study, scholarly households, and localized religious authority.

It can be seen from the biographies of the Najdi academics that all of them followed a common educational path: first memorizing the Qur'ān, then studying with local scholars and then travelling to al-Ahsa, Iraq or the Hijaz for further study. The scholarly legitimacy was less dependent on certificates of institutions than on chains of education recognized by community reputation.

At the time of his study with his father, the teachings of the young Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab point to the importance of household education in the Najdi societies. In the same way, 'Abd al-Rahman al-Sa'di memorized the Qur'an at a young age and studied jurisprudence, hadith, grammar, and theology with local masters who had intellectual connections with extensive networks throughout Islam.

This educational environment continued to revolve around the mosque. Study circles, combining leadership and public religious officials with educational elements of recitation, law, language, and theology, led to learning in many Najdi communities.

In a reading against chronicle's archive, educational life becomes most apparent, as in a reading of Ibn Bishr. Rarely, if ever, does education become an independent institutional category. Instead, the word memorizing, travelling for studies, the interpretation of laws, and the descent of scholars from teachers remain part of the political and genealogical story itself (Ibn Bishr 1982, vol. 2, 45–47).

Importantly, Knowledge had the power to acquire relationally. That is, it was about the teaching of what by whom, where transmission was supposed to happen, and public acknowledgment of transmission.

Oral Tradition and Manuscript Culture

Though orality was an important part of the educational process in pre-oil Arabia, one should not fixate on orality alone because other modes of pedagogy were also important: recitation, memorization, copying, commendation, listening and the circulation of manuscripts.

As mentioned earlier repetition, recitation, correction and embodied performance were key in the teaching of the Qur'an. Students were required to listen, repeat, memorize and apply knowledge. Poems, legal forms, genealogies and tribal histories also relied on mnemonic practices for their transmission.

Poems in particular were important in education. The preservation of tribe repute, moral instruction, historical memory, and ancestry, through performance and repetition, was the domain of Nabati and classical Arabic poetry. Oral poetry recitation became a social repository, and a transferable collective memory from one generation to the next.

Similarly, genealogical expertise was very important too, and prestige, alliance, inheritance and political legitimacy were all based on genealogical status. It was transmitted in the community through ongoing oral transmissions and not only in written archives.

There was also great significance given to manuscript culture. Copying texts finally became a pedagogy in itself. Ownership notes, manuscript marginalia, and corrections marked the migration of texts, the way that they were copied, and how they found their way into educational chains (Messick 1993, 108–143).

Moreover, calligraphy teaching in Medina also illustrates the interaction of text and embodied learning. Students weren't just learning what texts said, they were also learning how knowledge is presented on a page. The reed pen therefore, was utilized as a practical tool and a symbol of academic discipline.

The Arabic evidence points to several models of “oral literacy” that involve reciting, memorizing, copying, commenting and circulating the manuscript.

Trade, Mobility, and Apprenticeships

In pre-oil Arabia, educational life was about much more than just religious settings. Structured transmission systems were of great importance for trade, for craft apprenticeships, and for pastoral expertise.

Young creatives learned skills in weaving, carpentry, construction, metalwork and animal care through repetition, observation, and supervised practice. Children not educated in classrooms, but in markets, workshops, caravans, farms and homes.

Furthermore, a merchant's child was not only expected to learn mathematics and literacy through abstract textbooks but also involved in business activities every day. Commercial literacy was thus the product of ingrained economic practice.

Furthermore, mobility in itself was also an important educational tool, as caravan routes and pilgrimages enabled travelers from the Peninsula to become acquainted with languages, technologies, legal systems and educational networks outside the Peninsula.

Oral instruction, specialized maritime literature and apprenticeships were means of passing on learning in areas around the Red Sea and Arabian Gulf that were largely dependent on wind, stars, routes and seasonal patterns.

The illustrations above dispel the stereotypes of pre-oil Arabia as an isolated, or intellectually barren, region. Long before the creation of centralized educational systems, the Arabian society was an active part of regional and transregional knowledge worlds.

Gender and Domestic Pedagogy

The history of women education in pre-oil Arabia is difficult to reconstruct since there are few archives that focus on female scholars and public religious institutions. But there are some evidence that women were used in home teaching.

Often it was the mothers and grandmothers and female reciters who gave practical training, moral guidance and Qur'anic instruction to girls in the home. Domestic pedagogy was in the form of memorization, oral poetry, storytelling, manufacture of textiles, administration of the household, and moral teaching.

Architecture is reflected in the lack of visibility of women's educational experiences. Most of the knowledge transfer among females was in a

domestic environment, resulting in few written records.

But household pedagogy was important in any case; it had an impact on language development, behavior, moral discipline, memory and practicality long before children were in the mosque circle or join the emerging schools.

Future research is recommended to incorporate oral history, family papers, and material culture into the topic to enhance the discussion of women's roles in education in Arabian society before the advent of oil.

Discussion

They illustrate the importance of distributed systems of transmission in pre-oil Arabia's education rather than central systems. Teaching was conducted in many settings, such as family, mosque, workshop, literary gatherings, caravan, manuscript traveling, and pilgrimage networks.

Teleological histories of educational modernity are undermined by the Arabian case. The standards were altered by educational modernism and not just by substitution of the education for something else.

Nonetheless, Historians had to carefully consider prioritizing state education and bureaucratic archives, or they might have ended up confusing archival legibility for educational reality. Many pedagogical practices that were important in Arabian society, such as memorization, oral genealogy, apprenticeship, domestic instruction, recitation, and poetic transmission, came to be increasingly hidden, as they were not recorded in the institutional format of contemporary states.

The Arabian case, therefore, questions the idea of regional backwardness as well as makers' assumptions that historians use in defining education.

It should be emphasized that there was no succession of oral and textual practices. Instead, they developed layered pedagogical ecologies, which comprised of mobility, memory, manuscript circulation, commentary and embodied authority (Street 1984, 95-127; Messick 1993, 108-143).

Prior to the advent of oil, education was a dispersed social ecology entangled in labour, trade, mobility, memory, religion and everyday life in Arabia.

Conclusion

In pre-oil times, however, there was no lack of education in Arabia. Instead, many pedagogical forms of educational historiography were rendered illegible by focusing upon institutional education as opposed to dispersed modes of transmission.

Knowledge diffused across Najd and the Hijaz through mosques, houses, manuscript networks, pilgrimage practices, apprenticeship systems,

trade practices, and structures of mobility related to memory, authority and religious life within interrelated pedagogical structures.

Therefore, the non-modern history of education in pre-oil Arabia cannot be said to be inherently absent. Instead, it centers on an alternative education organization that incorporates a complexity only discoverable when education is considered outside of the institutionalized environments of contemporary schools.

In recovering these educational ecologies, we can enlarge Arabian historiography and expand the conceptualization of education, literacy and knowledge transmission in the premodern world.

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