

## CHAPTER NINE LEARNING IN SCHOOLS

*Leslie C. Moore*

### **Halima's School Day**

Six-year-old Halima sat at her desk, which she shared with another girl and two boys, and listened attentively to her first grade teacher, Mr. Garza. In a loud, clear voice, he began the language lesson, “Bonjour, Papa. Repetez?” Halima and most of her 150 classmates repeated loudly after him the first line of dialogue that he had introduced the day before: “Bonjour, Papa.” Mr. Garza said again, “Bonjour, Papa,” and the class repeated after him, “Bonjour, Papa.” Then Mr. Garza modeled the second line of the dialogue: “Bonjour, mon fils.” There was a second of silence. Mr. Garza prompted the class to speak, and several students (but not Halima) produced a repetition of the second line, “Bonjour, mon fils.” The teacher approved the repetition and then elicited more of the same: “Très bien. Encore? Bonjour, Papa.” The class practiced the two lines of dialogue under Mr. Garza’s direction for another 30 minutes, chorally, by row, by desk, and in pairs. On this day, Halima was not one of the children called on to perform the dialogue with a classmate at the front of the classroom. After the language lesson came a mathematics lesson, followed by recess, followed by a writing lesson. All the lessons were conducted entirely in French, while at recess children chatted and shouted in local languages, including Fulfulde, which was Halima’s native language and the regional lingua franca. At noon, it was time to go home. Another public elementary school used the same cinder-block classrooms in the afternoon.

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Halima walked the kilometer home with her big sister and two boy cousins. She had lunch and a short rest before heading to her Qur'anic school just down the street, around 1:30. Her teacher, Mal Buuba, was not at home when she arrived, but his teenage son was there to supervise the students. Halima took her *alluha* (a wooden tablet on which Qur'anic verses are written for a child to study) from where she had left it the evening before, leaning against the wall of the entryway of Mal Buuba's family compound. She sat down on the gravel-covered ground with her back against the mud wall, crossed her legs, lay her *alluha* on her lap, and resumed her study of the 108th chapter of the Qur'an. For almost two hours, she practiced her recitation of the *basmalah* (the brief invocation that precedes all but one chapter of the Qur'an) and the three short verses. She repeated the Arabic text over and over in a very loud voice, sometimes bent over her *alluha*, sometimes sitting up straight. Five other girls from the neighborhood sat along the same wall as Halima, and against the facing wall sat her two boy cousins (who were also in her first grade class) and four other neighborhood boys. Each child recited a different text in a loud voice. Whenever the volume began to fade, Mal Buuba's son commanded them in Fulfulde to recite "with force." At the sound of the call to the afternoon prayer, Halima and the other children stopped reciting, put away their *alluhas*, and went home. After dinner, Halima returned for the evening session, practicing her recitation for another hour and a half before the call to the night prayer signaled that it was time to go home and go to bed.

### **Anthropologists in Schools**

The scenes above were recorded in Maroua, Cameroon, in 2000. While they illustrate school experiences that are common in much of the world, they do not conform to current Western conceptions of school learning, and most educational researchers ignore such schooling practices and the settings in which they are prevalent. However, anthropologists have conducted many studies in such settings, and their work has expanded and deepened our understanding of how learning is conceptualized, organized, and realized in formal educational contexts. This chapter briefly reviews that literature before returning to the Cameroonian research, which will

serve as a case study of the application of anthropology to the study of learning in schools.

Rooted in the work of the 1930s and 1940s on enculturation in non-Western, nonindustrialized societies, the anthropology of education (also known as educational anthropology) emerged as a subfield in the 1950s (Singleton 1999). Much of the early work examined the transmission of culture in school and community settings (e.g., see Gay and Cole 1967; Modiano 1973; Peshkin 1972; Wolcott 1967; and other monographs in the Case Studies in Education and Culture series edited by George and Louise Spindler). In 1970s and 1980s, several ethnographic studies identified differences between “home” and “school” with respect to communicative patterns; cognitive and learning styles; and the values, beliefs, and identities associated with particular ways of learning and knowing (e.g., Au and Jordan 1981; Erickson and Mohatt 1982; Heath 1983; Philips 1983; Tharp and Gallimore 1988). These detailed accounts of home/school discontinuities were offered as (partial) explanations for the disproportionate school failure of ethnic and racial minorities and as arguments for changing the way learning environments were organized in schools. More recently, anthropologists have sought to understand how historical and political forces shape schooling processes; how learning and knowledge are defined differently across contexts; how and why school experiences vary across learners by social categories such as race, class, and gender; and how students and teachers exert their own agency as they appropriate school practices and create new ones by drawing on classroom and community traditions (for several case studies in this vein, see Anderson-Levitt 2003 and Levinson, Foley, and Holland 1996).

Anthropologists of education have illuminated the social organization of schools and classrooms, the values and beliefs that inform schooling and those that are meant to be formed by schooling, and the meanings and consequences of schooling and school practices for individuals and communities. Their studies vary in their relative focus. Some focus on the school and/or the community as a whole in order to understand the complex interplay of policies, values, curriculum, and pedagogy (e.g., Coe 2005; Lomawaiama and McCarty 2006). Others focus on the interactions between teachers and students and among students, locating learning in these culturally organized encounters (e.g., Anderson-Levitt 2002;



Figure 9.1. Classroom in northern Sudan (V. Blaha photo)



Figure 9.2. Classroom in northern Sudan (V. Blaha photo)

Schieffelin and Gilmore 1986). And some studies focus on individuals, whose lived experiences and personal narratives are mined for insights into how they participate in and make sense of schooling (or not) (e.g., Cheney 2007; Stambach 2000). Holistic and comparative in perspective, anthropological studies explore how the practices and values of schooling relate to and often conflict with those of other domains of community life. Thus, schools are studied as sites of cultural reproduction and of cultural contact and change.

Many anthropologists have documented the kinds of schooling practices described at the beginning of this chapter. Rote learning and the (nearly) exclusive use of languages that children do not understand well are early and persistent features of schooling throughout the non-Western, nonindustrialized world (Lancy 2008, 313–23). Many scholars have identified these practices as important factors in the low rates of school achievement and completion typical of public schooling in much of the developing world (Anderson-Levitt 2005; Barnett 1979; Bolin 2006; Goody 2006; Hollos and Leis 1989; Hornberger and Chick 2001; Jul 2008; Kulick 1992; Moore 1999; Nash 1970; Watson-Gegeo and Gegeo 1992). The prevalence of rote learning and its persistence in the face of reform are interpreted by many of these scholars as an adaptation to educational policies that privilege the “national” language (often the language of the former colonizers) and to severe underresourcing of many public schools that has led to overcrowded classrooms, students without textbooks or other materials, and teachers with insufficient training and school language proficiency. While rote learning in public schools is seen by anthropologists as symptomatic of structural problems, rote learning in Qur’anic schools is often described as integral to the tradition (e.g., Eickelman 1985; Fernea 1991; Mommersteeg 1998; Moore 2008; Santerre 1973), even in communities where reform in pedagogy, curriculum, and patterns of participation had occurred or were under way (e.g., Boyle 2004; Brenner 2001; Gade 2004).

### **Cameroon Field Study of Children in Schools**

Rote learning is discussed in many anthropological studies of schooling, but few researchers have given it close analytic attention.<sup>1</sup> In my own research, I have sought to understand the organization and significance of

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rote learning in public and Qur'anic schooling in the Fulbe community of Maroua, Cameroon. My study expands the discussion of home/school discontinuity in two ways. First, I systematically compared two schooling traditions in a single community.<sup>2</sup> Second, I integrated the ethnographic, historical, and interactional discourse analytic approaches that have characterized different strands of anthropological studies of schooling. I worked closely with seven young Fulbe children to document their experiences in their schools and homes (for an example of child-centered ethnography of schooling, see Cheney 2007). I contextualized microanalysis of video-recorded interactions in a holistic study of the community to illuminate the structures of everyday interactions as cultural arrangements, shaped by and in turn shaping community beliefs and values (for a discussion of microethnography, see Philips 1983; Schieffelin and Ochs 1995; also see chapter 10, this volume). I further situated my analysis through broader study of the history and politics of the region, the nation, and the two schooling traditions (for examples of the historical-ethnographic study of schooling, see Coe 2005 and Stambach 2000).

For centuries, rote learning has been part of the educational experience of children around the world. It is foundational to the traditional pedagogies associated with many religious movements (Wagner 1993). Common to all of these traditional pedagogies is the ideology that the achievement of verbatim oral mastery of sacred texts through rote learning is an appropriate and effective way to instill religious orthodoxy and good moral character. Jews memorize Hebrew texts (Drazin 1940), Catholics (pre-Vatican II) memorize Latin texts (Nash 1968), Muslims memorize Arabic texts (Bray 1986), and Hindus and Buddhists memorize Sanskrit texts (Dreyfus 2003). In these traditions, recitation and memorization of sacred texts are valued as acts of piety, discipline, personal transformation, and cultural preservation, whether or not the individual understands the literal meaning of the text.

Built on the foundations of religious education, secular schooling around the world also entails rote learning (Wagner 1983). The recitation and memorization of Greek and Latin texts constituted a large part of curricula in European schools for hundreds of years (Carruthers 1992; Cubberley 1922; Nash 1968). Until the late 1800s, European and North American pedagogical practice stressed textbook memorization and strict discipline, with the former believed to be an important mechanism for

instilling and maintaining the latter (Ariès 1965; Cubberley 1922). Rote learning fell out of favor in the West during the 20th century with the advance of the progressive education movement, which stressed learning through doing and methods that encouraged experimentation and independent thinking by learners (Hori 1996). Rote learning came to be characterized as bad for children's creativity, understanding, and enjoyment of learning. Yet it remains a part of schooling all over the world, especially in East Asia (Ho 1994) and among religious fundamentalists in the United States (Wise and Bauer 2004).

### Two Schooling Traditions

At the start of this millennium, Qur'anic school and public school in Maroua, Cameroon, were two very different educational institutions, each with its own long and distinct history and tradition of pedagogical practice. The Fulbe established the first Qur'anic schools in northern Cameroon after their jihad of the early 19th century, and Maroua quickly became a center of Islamic education that attracted the sons of the Muslim elite from all over the region (Santerre 1973). The first Western school in Maroua was opened in 1918 by the French colonial administration, and the sons of Fulbe aristocrats were recruited (with limited success) to attend the school in preparation for colonial service (Tourneux and Iyébi-Mandjek 1994). Much changed in Cameroon in the years since the first schools were founded, but the two schooling traditions endured, and Fulbe children participated in both in increasing numbers (Seignobos and Nassourou 2000).<sup>3</sup>

The first several years of Qur'anic schooling were dedicated primarily to the reading, writing, reciting, and partial memorization of the Qur'an in Arabic, which was a sacred language in this community but not one used for everyday communication. The primary lesson objective was the faithful—that is, verbatim, fluent, and reverent—recitation of the text by the novice without assistance. Accurate reproduction of Qur'anic texts was the goal, while comprehension was not. Halima, for example, spent several hours mastering the recitation of four lines from the Qur'an, but the meaning of the text was not explained to her, nor did it occur to her to ask for explanation. Correct rendering of the sounds of the Qur'an constituted the essential first layer of understanding of the sacred text. Subsequent

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layers of understanding were reserved for the learner who had “finished his Qur’an,” that is, recited and written the entire Qur’an without error. A learner might take anywhere from three years to a lifetime to achieve this, and most Maroua Fulbe never did (Santerre 1973).

Public schooling in Cameroon had a structure of cycles, examinations, and diplomas derived from the French educational system (Capelle 1990). The overarching goal of the early grades was for the child to grow accustomed to the school environment and the French language. In the first two or three years, most instructional time was spent on learning to speak, read, and write French, since the vast majority of children came to school with little or no proficiency in French. In language lessons, children repeated utterances modeled by the teacher; copied texts the teacher had written on the blackboard; and memorized songs, poems, and dialogues. Because French was both the target language and the language of instruction, lessons in any subject (civics, hygiene, mathematics, national culture) were conducted in much the same way as language lessons. For example, during the math lesson that followed Halima’s language lesson, she and her classmates repeated over and over the addition equations modeled by the teacher, just as they had repeated lines of dialogue. The official expectation was that children develop a basic level of generative competence in French over these first years of schooling; that is, they should come to understand simple French utterances and express themselves simply in French (Ministère de l’Education Nationale 1998). However, most students who started public school in Maroua left school before achieving this level of competence (Iyébi-Mandjek 2000).

In Qur’anic and public schooling, nearly all instruction was in a second language, and second language learning was believed to entail two intertwined processes: the formation of good linguistic habits and the transformation of heart and mind. Teachers in both kinds of school believed that students developed morally and intellectually through the memorization of high-quality linguistic material under the guidance of an expert. For Muslims, the best material was the Qur’an, which was believed to have the power to transform those who committed it to memory (cf., Gade 2004). Similar ideologies have informed French-language instruction in Africa since colonial times. An African became “civilized” (*évolué*) in part through learning French, that is, by acquiring the habits of rational speech

and thought—“the French clarity” (*la clarté française*)—that was modeled in the texts they learned by heart (Dauzat 1949).

Qur’anic schooling was believed by Fulbe to provide children with a complete socialization (“*une formation totale*”) (Adama and Amadou 1998; Santerre 1973). Some Qur’anic teachers provided instruction in the basic tenets of Islam (e.g., monotheism, Mohammed’s status as the final prophet), and a few supervised children’s daily prayers. However, Qur’anic school was not only about studying the Qur’an, learning to pray, or learning the basic tenets of the faith. Instilling discipline, respect, and self-control is described as one of the primary goals of Qur’anic school throughout the Muslim world (Bray 1986; Musa Ahmed 1996; Sanneh 1975). According to Tourneux and Iyébi-Mandjek (1994), Qur’anic schooling in Maroua had as its principal objective not the teaching of knowledge, but the inculcation of the values of Muslim society (see also chapter 11, this volume): faith in God, respect for authority and hierarchy, the primacy of the spiritual over the temporal. It was about learning how to *be* Muslim and Fulbe, identities that were considered nearly one and the same.

Like Qur’anic schooling, public schooling was intended to promote and guide children’s intellectual, social, and moral development. The child was expected to develop an objective understanding of the world, an individual self-concept, and a Cameroonian identity (Ministère de l’Education Nationale 1998; UNICEF 1993). In both colonial and post-colonial times, public schooling has sought explicitly to promote supra-ethnic identity and to change mentalities from “traditional” or “tribal” viewpoints, which were regarded as impediments to social and economic progress, to more “modern” outlooks and conceptions of the world that favor development. (For an account of how “traditional” culture was used in schools to promote a national identity, see Coe 2005.) Many scholars have argued that the explicit goal of changing mentalities of both colonial and postcolonial educational systems veiled other goals: to train the population for acceptance of and participation in the market economy and the authority of the state apparatus (Atangana 1996; Martin 1982).

Fulbe participation in public schooling was very low until Cameroon’s Fulbe president was succeeded in 1982 by a Christian southerner, who ended preferential treatment of Fulbe within the state power structure (Iyébi-Mandjek and Seignobos 2000). At that time, Fulbe authorities

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began to encourage rather than discourage participation in public schooling, and Fulbe enrollments grew (Santerre 1982b; Tourneux and Iyébi-Mandjek 1994). Fulbe children who attended public school also attended Qur'anic schooling, and such "double schooling" was considered by many to be problematic. Non-Muslim public educators and researchers argued that Qur'anic schooling interfered with students' social, cognitive, and linguistic development by teaching children a passive, nonanalytic learning style and an ethnocentric and superstitious worldview (Santerre 1982a; Tourneux and Iyébi-Mandjek 1994). Many Fulbe claimed that public schooling interfered with children's social, moral, and spiritual development. Time spent in public school was time not spent studying the Qur'an or learning tasks and responsibilities from one's father or mother. Even parents who sent their children to public school expressed concern that children learned things at school—*nasaaraaji* ("things of the whites/people from elsewhere")—that were counter to the norms of Islam and Fulbe culture (Santerre 1982a; Tourneux and Iyébi-Mandjek 1994). Despite the widespread perception of conflict between the traditions, many people noted that there were similarities. As one mother in my study said, at both schools "children have to pay close attention, work hard, and memorize what they need to know."

### **Rote Learning Reconsidered**

In Qur'anic and public schools, rote learning dominated. The primary objective of nearly all lessons was the verbatim memorization and error-free oral rendering of a text in a nonnative language. To this end, teachers modeled speech, and children imitated, rehearsed, and performed it from memory, with little or no comprehension of its meaning. In the course of my comparative study of public and Qur'anic schooling in Maroua, I came to reframe rote learning as guided repetition, a complex and context-sensitive practice for teaching and learning (Rogoff et al. 2007). I identified four phases in guided repetition activities—modeling, imitation, rehearsal, and performance—each of which entails particular rights and obligations for both teacher and student. The guided repetition model emerged from my data analysis, as I came to recognize that public and Qur'anic school activities shared not only the same basic lesson objective but also the same

overall sequential structure (for international comparisons of lesson structure, see Alexander 2000 and Anderson-Levitt 2002).

In both schooling traditions, the perceived appropriateness of guided repetition was rooted in similar ideologies of child development and learning. Parents, Qur'anic teachers, and public school teachers all described children in early and middle childhood as excellent and eager imitators and memorizers. Learning through imitation, repetition, and memorization was believed to be well suited to a child between age 6 and puberty, for his or her memory was still clear of distractions and highly impressionable. Parents and Qur'anic teachers spoke of the "virgin memory" (*taaskaare wuule*) of children of this age, while public school teachers referred to their minds as *tabulae rasae*. Skills and knowledge—or bad habits and incorrect understandings—acquired in this period were believed to be more likely to take root and endure than those introduced at a later age. Thus, according to Qur'anic and public educators, guided repetition was the right approach at the right time.

While guided repetition was used to teach Fulbe children both Qur'anic recitation and French oral expression, it was accomplished in different ways and for different reasons. Some differences were obvious. For example, in Qur'anic school, children learned to recite a sacred text, the faithful reproduction of which was not just the lesson objective but also the long-term educational goal. French language lessons, on the other hand, revolved around the animated performance of a mundane conversation, a carefully selected and scripted subset of linguistic forms, the mastery of which was intended to project the child into generative competence in French. Other differences were less obvious but proved more illuminating. Close, comparative analysis of these two guided repetition activities revealed distinctive interactional patterns in these two activities, and these patterns could be linked to the very different ways of being in the world that children were expected—or at least hoped—to learn through Qur'anic and public schooling.

### **Distribution of Authority**

One of the most important dimensions of difference concerned the distribution of authority to teach. In both schooling traditions, the teacher

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was the primary modeler and, in the immediate environment, the highest authority on how a text should be rendered. The teacher enlisted the help of children in both settings, but in different ways. Interviews with teachers and parents revealed that these differences in how and how much authority was allocated to children to function as peer teachers (see also chapter 8, this volume) were related to participants' beliefs about how children learned, how the text should be treated, and how participants should relate to one another.

In the public school classroom, any student was a potential modeler. While the teacher often relied on a few students he knew to be more capable (many of these children were repeating the first grade), any child who volunteered to model was likely to be given the opportunity to do so. Moreover, children were frequently asked to assess the renderings of other children and to identify and correct errors. The teacher allocated the authority to model, assess, and correct on a turn-by-turn basis. Transcript 1 (table 9.1) illustrates some of these practices.

Public educators believed that children were more interested in other children than they were in the teacher and that teachers should capitalize on this interest. Having peers provide modeling, assessment, and correction was considered good pedagogical practice because peer talk was assumed to be more salient and more memorable for children. Moreover, teachers' elicitations of peer correction and assessment were designed to introduce an element of fun and/or competition and to get children to use French for authentic communicative purposes, both of which were believed to be motivating for children. Practices of distributing authority were also informed by an ideology of equality and equal access. I was told by several teachers that all children were potentially good students and competent speakers of French, and that it is up to the teacher to bring out that potential in each and every child by giving multiple opportunities to play different roles, including that of an authority on academic correctness. (For an analysis of similar evaluation practices in Japanese classrooms, see Benjamin 1997.)

Qur'anic teachers and parents saw no place for peer teaching in the transmission of Qur'anic knowledge. Sacred knowledge and the authority it bestowed were the result of years of devout study (Eisemon 1988; Riesman and Szanton 1992); thus, the role of expert could not be transferred from day to day, much less turn by turn. Good instruction entailed the

**Table 9.1. Transcript I: Rehearsal of Dialogue 6 Le cadeau**

1	S:	BONJOUR MON FILS J'AI UN CADEAU POURQUOI? Hello my son I have a gift why?
2	T:	((snaps head up from looking at book))
3		UN CADEAU POURQUOI? A gift why?
4	T:	C'EST COMME ÇA? Is it like that? ((makes sweeping gesture with right hand))
5	Class:	NOOOON Noooooo
6	T:	((smiling)) ALORS, C'EST COMMENT? So, how is it?
7	Ss:	[ J'AI UN CADEAU POUR TOI.   I have a gift for you. 
8	Ss:	[ BONJOUR MON FILS J'AI UN CADEAU POUR TOI.   Hello my son I have a gift for you.
9	T:	((smiling)) VOILA. C'EST ÇA. There. That's it.
10		BONJOUR MON FILS J'AI UN CADEAU POUR TOI. Hello my son I have a gift for you.

S = Student, T = Teacher, CAPS = loud, *italics* = emphasis

reverent and individualized transmission of Qur'anic texts to the novice by someone with the religious knowledge and authority to do so. In many schools, a few students who were older and more advanced in their studies were designated as assistant teachers, and they were authorized to supervise children as they rehearsed, to correct their errors, and to administer punishment. Other children were not allowed to occupy themselves with the learning of their peers, although they often did when left unsupervised. Children were still learning the Qur'an and still learning to treat it with proper respect. But there was a significant risk that, either by mistake or by design, a child might model an incorrect rendering or fail to correct an error made by another child.

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**Table 9.2. Transcript 2: Modeling Imitation of Verses 1–4, chapter 102 At-Takathur**

1	T: Alheekum takasuru	5	T: Hatta zurtumin maqaabira
2	S: Alheekum takafuru	6	S: Hatta zurtu min makaabira
3	T: <i>Alheekum takasuru</i>	7	T: Kalla sawfa taalamuuna
4	S: Alheekum taka(s/f)uru	8	S: Kalla sawfa taalamuuna

To recite the Qur'an incorrectly was to turn it into something different from what was revealed to the Prophet by God. Thus, in principle, any error had to be corrected for the sake of the reciter, for anyone listening, and for the Qur'an itself. Teachers usually responded to children's recitation errors by rendering the whole verse as it should have been recited, with no particular emphasis on the error, as transcript 2 (table 9.2) illustrates (I provide no translation of the Arabic because neither teacher nor student understood its meaning).

Qur'anic teachers never imitated a child's error, unlike public school teachers, who routinely did so (as in line 3 of transcript 1). Other children sometimes did this, but only when unsupervised, for a teacher would have punished such blasphemous behavior.

### Outcomes of Learning by Heart

In the two schooling traditions, different moral and intellectual outcomes were desired, and guided repetition was accomplished in culturally specific ways. Qur'anic schooling was meant to socialize children into reproductive competence in Arabic and into Fulbe and Muslim values of self-control, respect for religious authority and hierarchy, and submission to the word of God. The practice of guided repetition in Qur'anic schools emphasized strict discipline, the authority of the teacher, and reverent renderings of the text. These ways of producing and relating to Arabic texts were essential to competent participation in many community activities, including prayer, religious ceremonies, and healing practices (Moore 2008). Public schooling was meant to create Cameroonian citizens, individuals who could speak and write and think in French as was required in the social, civic, and economic activities of a modern, democratic nation-state. Guided repetition as practiced in the classroom was characterized by more peer interaction, liberal manipulation of the text, and greater fluidity in the roles of expert and novice.

Participation in both Qur'anic and public schooling entailed the use of a nonnative language, and guided repetition was believed by teachers and parents to be essential to second language learning despite its low yields in both kinds of school. In the first few years of Qur'anic schooling, children were expected to learn to reproduce Arabic texts orally and without comprehension, and nearly all Fulbe children learned to do this, albeit at highly varying rates. Some stayed in school long enough to learn to transcribe Arabic texts. A very few "finished their Qur'an," pursued advanced studies, and learned to understand Arabic. Advanced Qur'anic textual knowledge and communicative competence in Arabic were highly valued in the community, and high achievement was widely believed to be God given, a sign of blessing. However, a student who stopped after memorizing a few chapters of the Qur'an was not considered a failure because he had learned as much as he needed to function as a Muslim in the eyes of the community.

In public schooling, the official expectation was that children would quickly learn to understand and express themselves in simple French. However, only a small minority of Mr. Garza's students achieved this level (including Halima and another of the seven focal children in my study), and most who did were in the first grade for the second or third time. Teachers expected such outcomes in classrooms that were overcrowded with children who had little or no prior experience with French, so they focused on teaching as many children as possible to produce French forms correctly and in ways that were appropriate for the ongoing classroom activity. Maroua teachers described these pedagogical goals as both realistic and foundational to all subsequent French language development and academic achievement more generally. Teachers knew that most children would not build on this foundation enough to complete elementary school, but that did not diminish their belief in the value of guided repetition.

### **Repetition and Change**

Understanding that schooling practices are not only culturally and historically rooted but also dynamic is key to an anthropological perspective on learning in schools. Throughout this chapter, I have used the ethnographic past because schooling traditions, like any other tradition, are not static. The educational landscape in Maroua might already be quite

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different from what I found at the turn of the millennium. Change was in the air when I did my fieldwork, and people's accounts of and responses to change provided additional insights into their ideologies concerning children, learning, and schools.

At the time of my study, there was a growing movement to “modernize” Islamic education in the region. Innovations included collective instruction, instruction in nonreligious subjects, and teaching Arabic both in and out of the context of the Qur'an using techniques that resemble those used to teach French in the public schools. In interviews, Fulbe expressed ambivalence about or even opposition to these innovations. A common objection was that collective instruction could not assure the mastery of each text by every child before the next text was introduced, thus putting some children at risk of reciting with error. Another widespread concern was that treating Arabic “just like any other language” and teaching it to young children who had not yet memorized the Qur'an effectively desacralized the language of the Qur'an and undermined the development of respect for the “Word of God” and the social order in theocratic Fulbe society.

Public education was also undergoing “modernization” at the turn of the millennium. In 1997, Cameroon's Ministry of Education introduced “the new pedagogical approach” (*la nouvelle approche pédagogique* or NAP) (Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale 1998). Reformers criticized the transmission models that dominated Cameroonian education, claiming that practices such as rote learning inhibited the development of creative and critical thinking, skills that were necessary for the individual's—and the nation's—successful participation in the modern world (Macaire 1993; Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale 1998). NAP was a more constructivist approach, with the teacher acting less as the source of all information and more as a guide for the student. Maroua teachers considered NAP inappropriate for the early grades (and the rest of the elementary cycle, according to some) because children were not believed to have sufficient competence in the linguistic and behavioral codes of the classroom to take so much responsibility for their own learning.

Another change in progress during my fieldwork was the emergence of guided repetition as a new practice for leading children into the telling of Fulbe folktales (Moore 2006). In addition to telling folktales to an audience of women and children, expert tellers (usually older women) were

explicitly teaching folktales to children, and children were using guided repetition among themselves to teach and learn folktales. Child–child folktale socialization often gave rise to stories that did not fully conform to conventions of the oral tradition, such as blending two or more folktales into one, or including real people and places and modern elements like motorcycles. Moreover, such interactions often took place during daylight hours, a violation of the traditional restriction that folktales are told only at night. Several older children told me that they had taught and learned folktales at Qur’anic school when the teacher was not present, and such sites of clandestine peer socialization may have been where the diffusion of guided repetition into the folktale domain began.

The emergence of this new model of folktale socialization was contemporaneous with increased participation by Fulbe children in Qur’anic and public schooling,<sup>4</sup> and it seems likely that there was a relationship between these trends. It may be that Fulbe women, concerned that children busy with their studies were no longer immersed in folktales as in the past, began using a familiar and effective practice for teaching other kinds of oral texts to prevent the loss of the folktale tradition. The innovative use of guided repetition for teaching and learning folktales may have also reflected shifting beliefs and expectations among adults and children regarding the role of younger children in language-centered activities. In guided repetition interactions with adults and with their peers, young children took more vocal, active roles in an activity in which formerly they had played a more passive role until puberty or later. Thus, the folktale tradition was being both sustained and transformed by guided repetition, as children assumed new roles and created new narratives.

### **Comparing (Learning in) Schools**

This chapter opened with a description of the kind of school day that is experienced by millions of children around the world, the sort of schooling practice that is widely deplored but poorly understood by Western researchers and educational reformers. In my study of Qur’anic and public schools, I sought to understand how and why rote learning was done in these two distinct cultural contexts where teaching and learning occurred mostly in nonnative languages. From my ethnography of schooling in this community came the concept of guided repetition. This

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concept helped me recognize and analyze similarities and differences between the two schooling traditions with respect to teaching and learning practices and the ideologies that informed them. This, in turn, helped me understand the significance of rote learning in this community, its staying power in the face of reform efforts and low educational yields, and its diffusion beyond the schools. In its different forms, guided repetition was believed to play an essential role in children's development of skills and orientations that were fundamental to being and becoming Fulbe, Muslim, and Cameroonian.

In examining the double schooling experience of Halima and her peers in Maroua, we find similarities in practice and ideology between two kinds of schooling that are often contrasted as Western versus non-Western, modern versus traditional, secular versus religious (for a critique of these dichotomies, see Stambach 2004). Both Qur'anic schooling and "Western-style" schooling have spread all over the globe, bringing with them cultural constructions of learning in/and childhood that differed from many practices, values, and beliefs of the communities in which such schooling was adopted or imposed. These schooling traditions have created a "more uniform experience of socialization than in the past" (Anderson-Levitt 2005, 998), but at the same time, schooling is experienced, appropriated, and transformed in different ways in different cultural contexts (Anderson-Levitt 2003). In studying both uniformity and variation in the organization and meaning of schooling cross-culturally, anthropologists have provided important insights into schooling and school learning as social and cultural processes and increased our understanding of how children become cultural beings through their participation in schooling. These contributions come not only from the production of rich ethnographic accounts of a particular kind of schooling in particular communities at particular times, but also from comparisons across individuals, time, space, and schooling traditions.

### **A Note on Methods**

In my study, I combined ethnographic study of the schools and the community with a video-based longitudinal case study design. The study built on my previous work in the region as a researcher (1996 and 1999) and as a Peace Corps volunteer (1992–1994), as well as the extensive research

conducted by other scholars on the Fulbe and their language, northern Cameroon, and public and Qur'anic schooling in the region and beyond. In Maroua, I did many hours of observation in both types of schools, as well as participant observation in the homes of Fulbe friends and acquaintances. I hung out with the public school teachers during recess and grading periods. I consulted with local healers who used Qur'anic texts in their remedies. I attended sermons by local Muslim scholars, and I sat in on classes at the provincial Teachers' College. I participated in and documented school events like Youth Day and religious celebrations such as the Feast of Ramadan. I collected secular and Islamic educational materials that were locally available, including textbooks, teachers' guides, local school district reports, booklets on Islam, and audiotapes of sermons by well-known Muslim preachers.

As exhaustive and exhausting as this list of research activities may seem, the case studies were the most labor-intensive part of the study. I tracked seven 6- to 7-year-old Fulbe children over the course of their first year of public school, video recording them at monthly intervals at public school, Qur'anic school, and home, for a total of 90 hours. I also collected, photographed, or photocopied writings and drawings produced by the focal children during this period. Three Fulbe research assistants and I transcribed the video recordings, working first from audio lifts and then working with the video to refine and annotate the transcripts. Once video data collection was complete, I conducted interviews and video playback sessions with public and Qur'anic teachers, Islamic scholars, public education officials, and family members of the focal children. These sessions (which were audio recorded and transcribed) resulted in further annotations of transcripts and a collection of community members' metadiscursive remarks on home and school practices.

Making sense of all my field notes, transcripts, photographs, photocopies, and video and audio recordings was a long process that began in the field and, in fact, continues to this day. As I reviewed my transcripts and video, I created collections of what looked like the "same thing," be it a phase of a lesson or an error correction strategy. After grouping sequences that seemed to be instantiations of the same phenomenon, I sought to identify the features that made me judge them as similar, and this process led to refinement of my categories. The process of creating collections and refining my categories enabled me to identify patterns in

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pedagogical practice in public and Qur'anic schools, as well as the ideologies that informed them.

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## Notes

1. Notable exceptions are the cultural psychologists Scribner and Cole (1981a, 1981b), who worked in Liberia and Daniel Wagner (1993), who worked in Morocco.

2. Davis and Davis (1989) discuss but do not compare in detail the two types of schooling.

3. There have been no surveys to provide exact numbers on Fulbe participation in public or Qur'anic schooling, in Maroua or elsewhere in Cameroon, and it is not possible to determine this simply by looking at enrollment lists. In a survey of 140 Muslim parents in Maroua, Tourneux and Iyébi-Mandjek found that 100 percent sent their children (boys and girls) to Qur'anic school, 84 percent sent their boys to primary school, and 67 percent sent their girls to primary school. All Fulbe participants in my study asserted that Fulbe were participating more and more in public schooling, as did officials in the schools and in the provincial and division offices of the Ministry of Education. Participants also maintained that more Fulbe boys and girls attended Qur'anic school and for longer than in the past. Seignobos and Nassourou's (2000) count of Qur'anic schools in Maroua showed that the number had increased significantly since Santerre's (1973) study.

4. Judging by participants' retrospective self-reports and the absence of any mention in the extensive work on Fulbe folktales in Cameroon (Baumgardt 1988; Baumgardt and Goggo 2000; Eguchi 1984, 1993; Noye 1971, 1976), I conclude that guided repetition seeped into folktale socialization in the 1990s.

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**Part III**  
**LEARNING CULTURAL MEANINGS**



