

Kuttāb
(111568)

CHAPTER 21

Primary Schoolteachers between *Jidd* and *Hazl*: Literary Treatment of Educational Practices in Pre-modern Islamic Schools

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This study focuses on representations of elementary schoolteachers (s., *mu'allim*) and their educational practices as they are transmitted in literary sources. Although very different in content, aims, and tone, the sources of a legal and literary nature each reflect, in their own way, the practices and the habits connected to primary education. Both can give interesting glimpses into the way primary schools worked in the Islamic tradition, and thus contribute to a better understanding of the practices and customs of everyday life at the *kuttāb* (elementary school, or Quran school). Our article aims to link the two types of sources and to place at their intersection the jocular representation of some schoolmasters' practices in the pre-modern period. In fact, literary sources and anecdotes, in particular, show a certain correspondence between the shortcomings the *mu'allims* are accused of and the obligations they must abide by, as described in the sources of a legal and normative nature. Our hypothesis is that the literary treatment of the image of schoolmasters and their educational practices, when compared with norms and good practices recommended in the non-literary sources, is in great part grounded in the process of parody, consisting in a nearly systematic reversal of the duties prescribed to elementary schoolteachers, especially their duty to teach the sacred text and the fundamentals (writing and reading), and to engage in pious and respectable conduct. In other words, literary texts are a reflection of reality, and their parodic representations are grounded in the gap between (good) theory and (bad) practices. In so doing, we assume that primary school education is characterized by a remarkable continuity; this explains the rather long period covered by the sources we take account of. The corpus will include two kinds of texts, narratives selected from *adab* works and texts with a legal and prescriptive orientation. Only material concerning the elementary education of "common people" will be taken into consideration; stories, anecdotes, and general passages pertaining to, or representing, princely and royal education will not be considered, on the basis that these show traits specific to a limited and very elitist milieu. Private tutors were also well-known scholars. As

al-Jāhiz clearly says, princely education was entrusted to prominent personalities, like al-Kisā'ī or Quṭrub, who have nothing or very little to do with the average *mu'allim*, and who are clearly separate from the lowest ranks of the educator's craft.¹

1 Elementary Education in the Arab World: An Overview

Compared to the rich primary and secondary literature covering principles and practices of higher education (i.e., education following the *kuttāb's* stage) in the Arab world, the qualifications and activity of the primary schoolteacher (*mu'allim*, *mu'addib*, etc.)² and the educational principles and practices of the primary school (*kuttāb*, *maktab*)³ seem to have received little attention. The conditions and practices of primary education in the Islamic world have been summarized by Goldziher (he is still the more specific scholar on the topic), and, more cursorily, by Munir-ud-din, Tritton, and Shalaby.⁴ More recently,

1 Al-Jāhiz, *Bayān* 1, 250–252.

2 In the chapter on elementary school training Munir-ud-din (Munir-ud-din, *Muslim education* 40–51) also deals with terminology. He says that the teacher was called *mu'allim* (which was also applied as an honorary title to the very first teacher in the respective branches of knowledge), *mukattib/muktib* (always used to mean a teacher in an elementary school), and *mu'addib* (normally used for a tutor, primarily a private appointment). His observations are based on the status of scholars depicted in the reports and biographies contained in *Tārīkh Baghdād* of al-Khaṣīb al-Baghdādī (d. 463/1071), and therefore contain terms specific to his milieu. Lane, *Manners* 66, attests to the extensive use of the word *faqīh*, and the term is also extensively used in al-Ḥanafī's *Nuzhat al-udabā'* (see below), which could hint at the Egyptian origin of this anthology.

3 Munir-ud-Din, *Muslim education* 41, observes that *kuttāb/maktab* seem to be used interchangeably for elementary school, but in the sources there is some evidence of controversy regarding the name. Al-Mubarrad prefers *maktab* (noun of place), whereas *al-kuttāb* refers to the students of such an institution, as attested in *Lisān al-'Arab* and *Tāj al-'arūs* (see also Shalaby, *History* 18). Salmān al-Fārisī (d. 36/656) reports having attended a Persian *kuttāb*, which would be the first attestation of this word. Among the sources consulted, *maktab* seems to be used mostly in the Egyptian ones (e.g., al-Haytamī summarized in Jackson, *Discipline; al-Ḥanafī, Nuzhat al-udabā'*).

4 Goldziher, *Education*, is the only one who focuses his attention on elementary schools; others, like Munir-ud-Din, Tritton, and Shalaby, only dedicate minor sections of their studies to the subject. Some interesting remarks on elementary education, in the larger frame of educational theories, can be found in Rosenthal, *Knowledge* 290–293. In the same chapter the author also makes some interesting remarks on the influence of the Greek tradition on education in Islam. Cf. Rosenthal, *Knowledge* 284–289. Cook and Malkawī, *Classical foundations*, also provide useful materials (Arabic texts and English translations) on educational theories and practices, some of them relevant to primary education.