

How Is Islamic Knowledge Acquired in Modern Egypt? C Ulama, Sufis, Fundamentalists and Common People

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How Is Islamic Knowledge Acquired in Modern Egypt? *‘Ulamā*, Sufis, Fundamentalists and Common People

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1. INTRODUCTION

Islam, with more than eight hundred million believers and a history extending nearly one thousand four hundred years, is a civilization too great and profound for this writer, an anthropologist, to treat as a whole or to explain its “culturedness.” In this limited space, the best I can do is to sketch the ways Muslims living in a specific society at a specific period acquire Islamic knowledge. I hope that this essay will ultimately provide some useful suggestions for comparative study of civilizations. At the outset, I want to note that my primary concern is not so much with the case of the refined “culturedness” of literary men or intellectuals as with knowledge acquired by people in various social classes or strata and its significance in the society in which they live.

The following discussion mainly concerns the ways various types of Muslims have acquired Islamic knowledge in modern Egypt. Before embarking on the main topic, however, I would like to make some preliminary references to the issue of “culturedness” in Islam and to some essential general characteristics of Islamic knowledge.

As will be discussed in detail later, the language that has been deeply associated with Islam is Arabic. The Arabic language has a number of words which can be considered to imply “culturedness:” *thaqāfa* and *adab*, for instance. Let us examine the term *adab* here rather than *thaqāfa* which is usually translated in English as “culture.” F. Gabrieli remarks in his brief article in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* (new edition) that the word *adab*, which had a meaning of custom or habit in pre-Islamic days, attained delicately varied meanings with the evolution of Islam [GABRIELI 1960: 175-176]. First, emphasis was on the ethical and practical meaning of the word, and it meant courtesy, good upbringing, and so forth. Later, having

acquired an intellectual sense, *adab* came to imply what makes man courteous and urbane—that is, the sum of knowledge based on poetry, the art of oratory, the historical traditions, rhetoric, and so forth. It should be noted that knowledge in this sense was distinguished in principle from religious knowledge (*ʿilm*), which is to be discussed later. That is, *adab* was a concept not altogether secular but without marked religious implications.

The concept of this word was narrowed, however, after the *Abbasids*. It came to mean the knowledge necessary for specific functionaries such as secretaries and *viziers*. It was then further reduced to the knowledge of *belles-lettres*. The plural form of the word *adab* also implies literature now.

The concept of the word *adab* has been explained briefly as an example of Arabic words meaning “culturedness.” This is not sufficient for fully explaining the characteristics of Islamic “culturedness.” One would be required to compare one word with others that seem to have similar meanings, such as *thaqāfa*, for instance, in order to verify the similarities and differences existing between them. Furthermore, it would be helpful to refer to concepts that are in some sense opposite—namely, *fann* (craft or art) and *handasa* (engineering), for instance. References to contrasting notions would facilitate the needed definition of semantic boundaries between one and the other. In addition, for the complete study of Islamic “culturedness” it would be helpful to study in-depth the socio-cultural existence of “the learned men” whose roles in the society should change in accordance with political, economical and cultural circumstances around them. No further discussion on Islamic “culturedness,” however, is made in this essay, in order to proceed to a discussion of the ways of acquiring Islamic knowledge.

2. ORIGINAL IMAGES OF KNOWLEDGE IN ISLAM

Here are some episodes which pointedly demonstrate some of the essential characteristics of what we could call “Islamic knowledge.” Let us begin with the introduction and explanation of them.

It is said that in about 610 A.D., Muhammad, then a wealthy merchant in Mecca, often spent his time in a cave in Mt. Hira outside of Mecca meditating. His life had become increasingly ascetic. One night in the month of Ramadan the archangel Gabriel appeared to the terrified Muhammad, sending the first message of Allah; the message was to make the first five verses of the chapter XCVI in the present text of the Quran:

Recite: In the Name of thy Lord who created, created Man of a blood-clot.

Recite: And thy Lord is the Most Generous, who taught by the Pen,
taught Man, that he knew not.

[ARBERRY 1983: 651]

When I was a student in Saudi Arabia taking the elementary course of Islam, a Syrian teacher called my attention to the words “recite,” “pen” and “taught” appear-

ing in this part of the Quran. The very fact that these words appeared in the first Revelation from Allah, he said, was a proof of Islamic enthusiasm for learning and education. Truly "learning" and "men with knowledge" have been generally respected by most Muslim, as discussed below. The question is, however, what "learning" means in Islam and what kind of "knowledge" is valued in Islamic learning.

The Revelations from Allah, beginning with those five verses, were conveyed to people intermittently by the Prophet over the next twenty-two years of his life. His followers, for fear of letting the messages get lost and scattered, began compiling them after his death. The Quran, comprising the same 114 chapters as in the present day text, is said to have been completed during the reign of the third caliph 'Uthmān.

Non-Muslims tend to regard the Quran as Muhammad's creation. To many of them the examination of its content means the analysis of his ideas. Muslims would never accept such an attitude toward the Quran. To them the Quran is nothing but the record of the Revelations from Allah, the Almighty. Accordingly, it is the one and only absolute Book which reveals the truth of the universe in the perfect form. They consider the study of the Quran to be the most essential for Islamic learning. This book is the original point from which some branches of Islamic knowledge develops.

The Quran has a number of characteristics. The most important of all is the fact that it is written in Arabic. The Quran itself says "the Manifest Book is written in a clear, Arabic tongue" [ch. XXVI., ver. 195]. Even today the only authentic Scripture of Islam is considered to be that written in Arabic, whereas any translation of this Book in another language is considered a commentary on it. In that sense the translated version is nothing but a "secular book." The fact that the Quran is written in Arabic is, in a strict sense, however, a mere phenomenon happening in the human world. The following passage from the Quran shows that the original text of Allah's Revelations was a tablet existing in the heavenly world beyond human history: "—it is a glorious Quran, in a guarded tablet" [ch. LXX-XV., 21-22]. The language used in it is not human language but rather "some primordial language" [IZUTSU 1983: 21].

Recorded and compiled as a holy Scripture in Arabic, the Quran has other characteristics. The Quran, more accurately *al-qur'ān*, originally meant "what is to be recited." It is the book to be recited aloud rather than read silently. Naturally, Muslims prefer listening to beautiful recitations of the Quran, skillfully performed by a famous reciter, to reading it silently, examining the meaning and content of the text. This is why the traditional learning system of Islam includes the art of recitation (*qirā'āt* and *tajwīd*) as one of its important subjects besides the semantic interpretation of the Quran (*tafsīr*) [GRAHAM, 1985]. Known as the people of the Book, Muslims are generally seen to be associated with "literal cultural tradition." We should not forget, however, that they put equally great emphasis on the significance of "oral" communication represented by the recitation of the Quran.

In fact, the very first occasion when the Divine Revelations were received by Muhammad suggests the prototype of the Muslim tradition respectful of listening to the sound rather than reading the letters of the Scriptures. When the angel appeared to Muhammad, ordering him to recite, he supposedly answered he could not read. As a matter of fact, in the authorized doctrine of Islam the Prophet is considered to have been illiterate. It appears somewhat paradoxical to have the "illiterate" Prophet conveying the sacred "Books" to people.

Now, some of the issues essential to the examination of Islamic knowledge have been introduced.¹⁾ To sum up, they are: (1) the emphasis on the pursuit of knowledge or learning in Islam; (2) the importance of the Book of the Divine Revelations written in Arabic, the Quran, as the source of Islamic learning; (3) two aspects of the Quran as the Book to be interpreted and as to be recited; and (4) the fact that the Divine Revelations as the origin of the Holy Book were conveyed by the illiterate Prophet to the followers through oral communication. Based on these issues, the next part of this essay describes the Islamic knowledge acquisition in Egypt after the nineteenth century. Assuming several types of Muslim, it chiefly refers to various ways of acquiring the Islamic knowledge, needed to be a "good believer."

3. MUSLIM INTELLECTUALS AND THE COMMON PEOPLE IN THE EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY

It is generally said that the modern age began in Egypt with the seizure of power by Muhammad Ali (1805) after his display of control in the turmoil following Napoleon's invasion in 1798. By adopting boldly modern, Western achievements into the various sectors of Egyptian society including military, administrative, industrial, and educational institutions, Muhammad Ali and his successors forced the Egyptian nation to become incorporated completely into the modern world system.

Between the 1820's and 1830's when the reign of Muhammad Ali had almost been established, an Englishman named E. Lane lived in Cairo for about five years in total, producing an encyclopedic ethnography of the life of the Egyptians. His book is a very convenient reference source for the lives of intellectuals and common people living in a time when Cairo still retained much of its medieval atmosphere [LANE 1978, originally 1836].

According to Lane, those boys who intended to devote themselves to any of the learned professions pursued courses of Islamic studies in the mosque-college Al-Azhar in Cairo [ibid.: 211-215]. Founded in the tenth century, the Azhar was a renowned institution of higher education as well as a great religious authority in the Sunni-Islamic world, providing a great number of religious intellectuals and scholars to it. About 1800 students, including 300 blind students, were said to be enrolled in the mosque-college at the time of Lane's stay in Cairo. They were not only Egyptian but also foreign students from various countries. The subjects of

study there included Arabic language, Islamic theology, the commentary of the Quran and the *Ḥadīth* (Traditions of the Prophet Muhammad), and the Islamic law (*Shariʿa*), etc.. Other subjects, arithmetic for instance, were also taught in connection with the study of Islamic law. Algebra was taught for calculating the Islamic calendar which decided the times of prayer.

Those boys, equipped with the elementary level of Quran recitation, and reading and writing of Arabic acquired at elementary schools (*kuttāb*) in villages and towns, came to Cairo to continue an advanced course of study. Most of them lived in a dormitory (*riwāq*) appropriated to them, receiving a daily allowance of bread. Since no modern educational system was yet established, there was no definite curriculum for graduation from the mosque-college. After attending some lectures given in some places in the mosque for several years, some became *qāḍī* (judge), *imām* (prayer leader) at mosque, or school teacher back in their native villages or towns; others entered into non-religious jobs such as a trader or scribe. The few remained to study in the Azhar, receiving *ijāza* (license of giving a lecture) at the end of their study and finally becoming scholars there, who had a right to give a lesson to the students. These people were generally called *ʿulamā*.

The *ʿulamā* make up one type of Muslim intellectual. Being the plural form of an Arabic word *ʿālim* (a man who studies), the word implies, in general, scholars with wide and deep knowledge of Islam. The knowledge is based on Arabic, theology including the commentaries of the Quran and the *Ḥadīth*, and Islamic law.

The *ʿulamā* in the Azhar in Lane's days did not receive salaries. Except for those having inherited great property, they earned their living by teaching privately, copying books, etc.. Some received financial assistance from rich supporters. Some recited the Quran at various ceremonies for their livelihood. The position of the *ʿulamā*, as Lane comments, seemed to decline in Cairo after the invasion of the French army. Nevertheless, they remained generally respected by the commoners of Cairo as those who had acquired literacy in Arabic and mastered the Quran and the *Ḥadīth*, the ultimate sources of Islamic legitimacy.

A fact should be noted in relation to the issue of the "illiterate Prophet" mentioned earlier; literacy was *not* a requirement for being qualified as *ʿulamā*. As the before-mentioned enrollment in the Azhar shows, a significant proportion of Muslim students and intellectuals in those days were blind. They were illiterate in the sense that they could not to read and write. Nevertheless, they were gifted with such remarkable memory that they learned by heart not only every word of the voluminous Quran and the *Ḥadīth*, but also a great number of commentaries and exegeses concerning these holy books. Their preachings, which were delivered to people at religious meetings and ceremonials, were enlivened by opportune quotation of sacred texts and witty expression of their ideas. They could be persuasive enough to win the respect of the audience.

Demanding intellectuals to acquire some "art of memory" is not a unique tradition of Islam [cf. EICKELMAN 1985: 61-62]. Yet, in the Muslim world polished recitation was esteemed as highly as the comprehension of the text; that is, Muslims

laid great emphasis on oral communication. Their emphasis on this mode of communication probably served to reduce literacy to a position of relative unimportance. Possibly, that was one of the reasons why the religion of the Holy Scriptures produced so many great sightless *‘ulamā*. Other factors may have contributed to this phenomenon: the pre-Islamic, Arabic tradition of poetic oratory and the Arabic concept of culturedness implied by *adab*, which put emphasis on refined oral literature as mentioned above.

The *Sufi* or Islamic mystic has often been characterized in conventional studies on Islam as a type of Muslim opposite ideologically to the *‘ulamā*, the stubborn guardian of “orthodox” Islamic knowledge. Supposedly with its origin in Iraq in the eighth century, Sufism was an activity that aimed ultimately to reach spiritual unity with Allah through peculiar rituals. In contrast to the *‘ulamā*’s strict adherence to the Holy Law, which prescribed Muslim’s “proper” behaviors totally, the *Sufi* greatly respected the inner faith of individuals. They led ascetic or spiritual lives, observing their own peculiar rituals. Their too liberal attitude towards Islamic law sometimes invited vehement denunciation by some of the rigorous *‘ulamā* who were connected with political authority. Ultimately, some Sufis were even executed as heretics.

Nevertheless, Sufism itself never disappeared from the Muslim world. On the contrary, it became so influential that Sufi Orders (*ṭarīqa*) began to be organized in many regions in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries; these organizations often were led by powerful Sufis and mobilized a great number of adherents, many of whom consisted of common people in towns and villages. Newly established Sufi Orders became organizations of Islamic learning, in which respectable Sufi shaikhs taught basic Islamic creed to followers who had been relatively ignorant about it. In addition, some Sufis who were considered to have mystic power (*baraka*) bestowed by Allah to perform miracles were greatly admired by the common people, who sought their help to obtain such worldly benefits as cure from disease, success in business and so on. Adoration of these individuals, in some cases, grew to become so-called saint worship, one of the hotly discussed issues in the field of anthropological study of Islam. I prefer to call it a “folk belief in Muslim saints” rather than “saint worship in Islam,” because it has generally been held that the only subject for a Muslim’s worship (*‘ibāda*) is Allah. Few enthusiasts of this practice would use a term such as “saint worship (*‘ibāda li-l-walī*).” Renowned reformist *‘ulamā* like Ibn Ṭaymīya and ‘Abd al-Wahhāb vehemently criticized some forms of folk belief in saints as a potentially dangerous tendency towards polytheism. These folk beliefs are presently strongly attacked by fundamentalists, the ideological successors to those reformists.

Whatever their status in Islam, Sufism and folk belief in saints were extremely popular in Egypt when Lane lived there. He referred in his writing [1978: 229–249, 436–462] to the anniversary birthday festival (*mawlid*) of the Prophet and his families and of Sufi saints such as Aḥmad Badwi of Tanta in Lower Egypt. He also described the activities of the four major Sufi Orders (namely, *Rifā‘īya*, *Qādirīya*,

Aḥmādiya and *Burhāmīya*). His description enables us to obtain glimpses of Egyptian society in those days, when Sufism flourished among the common people.

In contrast with the *ʿulamā*'s emphasis on knowledge obtained from books, the Sufi respected mystical experiences given by *dhikr* (repetition of names of Allah or certain formulas) or other rituals. The easy diffusion of Sufism to the illiterate public can be attributed to Sufi religious practices like these. Supposedly, the primary concern of the *ʿulamā* was to obtain formal knowledge (*ʿilm*, the root of this word being the same as *ʿulamā*) by studying the Holy Scriptures. The great Sufi, even if they did not ignore the significance of the books, placed relative importance on mystic intuition (*maʿrifā*) which, they thought, was endowed directly by Allah through some mystical experience [NICHOLSON 1914]. This contrast shows that the knowledge the *ʿulamā* and Sufi pursued differed in this sense as well.²⁾

Our discussion so far, however, has stressed too greatly the differences between the *ʿulamā* and Sufi or saint. They were less in opposition than it might appear. Influential *ʿulamā* headed Sufi Orders in many areas of the Arab world.³⁾ Lane also depicts in his book a scene in Cairo in which passengers gathered around an Azhar shaikh passing along the street to receive his blessing, as if he had been a saint [LANE 1978: 215].

It is noteworthy in this context that the *ʿulamā* were only those who had acquired more than a certain level of Islamic knowledge (*ʿilm*), whereas the Sufi could be anyone ranging from the most reputed scholars to the uneducated or the illiterate; they comprised a wider variety of social classes. Meanwhile, not only the learned *ʿulamā* and the honorable Sufi but also even some idiots and lunatics could be regarded as saints if they were not dangerous to society [ibid.: 229–230]. This means that high-level literacy or remarkable memory, which was a prerequisite to become *ʿulamā*, was not a requirement for joining a Sufi Order or being respected as a saint. A few learned members notwithstanding, the majority of members of Sufi Orders seemed to be illiterate commoners. The fact that the illiterates were organized into Sufi Orders and learned elementary tenets to become, at least from their point of view, true Muslims may be considered one general trend in Islam from the middle ages to early modern times.

Through attending lectures at the Azhar, and learning to comprehend the Scriptures, the *ʿulamā* could fully acquire Islamic knowledge, that is *ʿilm*. On the other hand, the Sufis, and especially the common people who were their most prominent members, gained their Islamic knowledge through experiences in religious ceremonies and oral communication with the leaders (shaikhs) of the orders to which they belonged. Their religious knowledge was based not upon reading impersonal books but upon listening to human speech. Islam could never be revealed to them until it was spoken by the shaikh in person. This direct and personal relationship may have provided one of those emotional foundations on which faith in saints developed. It is this faith in saints that some *ʿulama* have criticized as personal worship that is a form of polytheism.

What did the Quran, the text of sacred Revelations, mean to the common peo-

ple, then? Even they would learn by heart some chapters of the Quran that were recited in daily prayers. Some merchants and craftsmen may have received fairly advanced Islamic education. More generally, however, most illiterate commoners, most of whom were members of one Sufi Order or another, were neither capable of understanding the content of the Quran accurately nor reading the text in proper pronunciation. (There is considerable difference in grammar and pronunciation between the standard Arabic of the Quran (*al-'arabīya al-fuṣḥā*) and the colloquial dialect employed by people in daily conversation (*'ammīya*.) Thus, it is possible to assume that the idea of the Quran as a book to be properly read and recited had little significance for those ordinary people. All they could do was to listen to renowned, professional recitations of the Quran, at occasions such as feasts and funerals. Still, it would be too much to assume that the Quran had nothing to do with commoners' lives. The Quran could play an extremely important role in their lives not as a book to read but as a sacred Scripture; it functioned as a charm.

"The most esteemed of all '*hegābs*' (or charms), writes Lane, is a '*mus-haf*' (or copy of the Kur-ān)" [LANE 1978: 249]. According to Lane, it was not necessarily a complete copy of the Quran but a piece of paper inscribed with the certain verses from the Quran that was esteemed as an effective charm [LANE 1978: 250]. He refers to a Muslim practice of charming away sickness. The most appropriate mode was, according to Lane, to "write certain passages of the Kur-ān on the inner surface of an earthenware cup or bowl; then to pour some water" and when the writing was washed off and dissolved in the water, to let the patient drink the water [Lane 1978: 256-257]. Such a practice may not be peculiar to Muslim society. It should probably better be regarded as an example of popular belief in a mystic power of letters, which we could easily find in many of the cultures in the world. It should be just pointed out here that the practice appears to have been the means by which the written Quran was closely related to the lives of the common people in the nineteenth century Egypt.

4. EMERGENCE OF FUNDAMENTALISTS IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

As has been discussed so far, "intellectual" in early nineteenth century Egypt meant those who had studied at the Azhar. This tradition had probably been unchanged since medieval times.

Eager to establish Egypt as a modern state, Muhammad Ali and his successors eventually came to attack the religious men. They confiscated *waqf* (religious endowment), the financial basis of the Azhar, intervened in its administration as well as its curriculum, and founded a centralized *'ulamā* organization under government control. Some measures were taken for Sufi Orders as well; help was given to establish a centralized organization under the Bakri family, which finally succeeded in organizing the Supreme Sufi Council. All these measures may be regarded as efforts to strengthen state control over the traditional religious powers.⁴⁾

Tightening control over traditional, religious men—*‘ulamā* and Sufi—Muhammad Ali and his successors founded institutions for advanced secular (European style) education that had modern, Western curricula. Representative of them in the domain of the humanities was the *Dār al-‘ulūm* founded in 1872 [AROIAN 1983]. In 1908 Egypt's first university was founded, private at the start but nationalized in 1925 (presently, Cairo University). Some higher educational institutions of medical, military and agricultural science and engineering had been already active. These non-religious institutions enabled the state to break the Azhar's monopoly in supplying intellectuals. They tried to train "modern" intellectuals and create elites free from traditional religious education. As a result, a conflict between traditional Muslim authority and secular modernists began to take clear shape around that time.

The government policy achieved its aim to a considerable degree; the new institutions produced a class of people called *effendi* that was equipped with a modernist ethos. According to Messiri's excellent study, the *effendi* were highly educated bureaucrats and professionals, symbolized a modernist ideology and life-style. They preferred Western-style suits and *ṭarbūsh* caps to the traditional *gallabīya* worn by common people; their ideal life-style was that of the foreigners from European countries (*khawāga*). This new type of intellectual began to appear among government officials, doctors, engineers, lawyers and teachers. The traditional, religious education given at the Azhar alone would never have produced people with a modernist ethos.

Interesting enough, though, a curious paradox emerged from this situation. In 1928 an Islamic fundamentalists' group called Muslim Brotherhood was founded under the charismatic leadership of Ḥasan al-Bannā in the city of Ismailiya. This is a group we cannot ignore in examining the Islamic fundamentalist movements not only in Egypt but also in other Muslim countries in the twentieth century. Its ultimate objective was to revive the Islamic community in Egypt which seemed to members of the Muslim Brotherhood to be moving more and more toward a modernized, Westernized, and secularized state. Because it had a strong anti-modernist, or more accurately, anti-secularist ideology, the Muslim Brotherhood has generally been thought to be led by reactionary traditionalists. In contrast to this commonly held image, many of its earlier leaders, including al-Bannā himself, were in fact the graduates not of the Azhar but of modern, higher educational institutions. Moreover, many of them chose to wear Western-styled suits and *ṭarbūsh* like the *effendi*, instead of the *gallabīya* worn by conservative Azhar scholars and the common people. Al-Bannā himself, as well as the influential ideologue Sayyid Quṭb who was sentenced death by the Nasser government, and others were graduates of *Dār al-‘ulūm*. In addition, Ḥasan al-Huḍaibi, the second leader of the group, who succeeded al-Bannā after his assassination, was a lawyer, having studied modern law, not *Sharī‘a* (Islamic law).⁵⁾

Many activists in various militant groups which emerged in Egypt in the 1970's and 1980's were fundamentalists with academic training in modern, secular, higher

educational institutions. The analysis by Ibrahim, an Egyptian sociologist, of two militant groups shows that many of their leaders and activists received advanced degrees in sciences such as medicine, engineering and agriculture at the modern universities, not the Azhar [IBRAHIM 1980]. The analysis of the members of *Munazzamāt al-jihād* arrested for the Sadat assassination (Figure 1) also reveals the striking fact that the overwhelming majority of them had received higher education, with those graduated from the faculties of medicine, science and engineering

Figure 1. Membership List of *Munazzamāt al-Jihād* (the organization accused of the assassination of Sadat)
Source: the Al-Ahram (May 9, 1982)

a) Classification by occupation

1) University affiliated (incl. faculty member, student, graduate)	116
2) Junior college student (incl. graduate)	11
3) High school student (incl. graduate)	20
4) Other student (incl. graduate, school not identified)	5
5) Doctor & pharmacist	7
6) Engineer	8
7) Teacher	16
8) Military and policeman	11
9) Government, company employee etc.	16
10) Printer, journalist, bookstore employee and interpreter	8
11) Merchant	17
12) Craftsman	16
13) Farmer	6
14) Laborer and driver	15
15) Unemployed	7
Total	279

(23 in hiding of 302 listed)

b) Classification of university students by department

1) Engineering	23
2) Business and Economics	18
3) Medicine	15
4) Science of agriculture	11
5) Education	11
6) Literature	7
7) Sciences	7
8) Theology (incl. Arabic linguistics)	6
9) Law	5
10) Veterinary science	3
11) Archaeology	2
12) Pharmacy	1
13) Military engineering	1

being particularly pre-eminent. Only a few had educational backgrounds in religion-related departments at the Azhar. It is noteworthy that institutions founded for the purpose of training youths to be intellectuals with a modernist ethos have produced militant muslim fundamentalists, while conservative Azhar-educated people are critical of, or at least relatively distant from, their movement. This paradox deserves careful examination. In examining it we should take into consideration many elements in modern Egyptian history, including political, economic, social and cultural ones. I introduce the following hypothesis to explain this paradox and to relate it main subject of this essay, the acquisition of Islamic knowledge.

Generally speaking, education as a system includes not only training in the basic arts of reading and writing but also instruction in how to read given texts, that is how to choose the right interpretations. Students are also instructed in the preparation of examination papers, essays and theses. These instructions help students acquire the techniques necessary to write and read texts acceptable to the academic establishment. In short, they are thoroughly trained to master a certain method of dealing with texts. Conversely, any method other than that is eliminated as an "error" or a "heterodox" one. The elimination of various methods other than an accepted or orthodox one limits the range of interpretations to a degree set by the system. In Sunni Islamic tradition, for instance, *bāb al-ijtihād* or "the door of independent judgment in a theological question" is said to be closed. There, *ʿulamā* must accept it as an indisputable premise that the orthodox interpretations of the Quran and the Hadīth have already been established by great scholars of old days, with no room for new interpretations. In this case, educational activities that provide students with orthodox knowledge could limit their development of otherwise possible intellectual perspectives.

Today, as in the past, traditional Islamic education is given in the system with the Azhar at its top. Indeed, it may be an overstatement to say that those having received modern, secular, higher education have nothing to do with Islamic learning. But in fact they try to keep their intellectual development relatively separate from religious tradition. How do they deepen their knowledge of Islam then, if they take interest in it as well as in the modern subjects of their specialty? Without frequent contacts with the *ʿulamā*, they must initiate religious study by themselves. Fortunately, their "literacy" enables them to comprehend some parts of the sacred Scriptures and commentaries. Certainly, self-learned text reading may cause a certain amount of confusion and "misunderstanding." But it is characteristically free from some of the restrictions of traditional interpretation of the sacred texts of Islam. Moreover, readers equipped with some knowledge of modern science can take the present political, economic, social and technological state of the world into account so that they can see their Islamic faith in a broader perspective. Their independent study of Islam may result in new interpretations fundamentally different in some important respects from the traditionally established ones. Hence it is not illogical to assume that the new interpretations of Islam can lead to new political and religious movements generally called "Islamic fundamentalism."

An interesting fact in relation to this phenomenon is that some secularly educated youth have shown a strong concern with Sufism since the 1960's and 1970's [cf. BERGER 1970: 76-78; GILSENAN n.d.: 243-250]. Their own peculiar understanding of religion seems to have led them to choose a return to Islam. In contrast to fundamentalists who advocate militant activism in political affairs, those leaning toward Sufism are inclined to a more contemplative world of mysticism. However, highly-educated Sufis tend to regard the fervent popular belief in saints held mostly by the illiterate or near illiterate as a kind of superstition outside of Islam. Their contemptuous attitude toward the folk belief in Muslim saints is said to cause some discordance with respect to the popular belief in miracles supposedly performed by saints. This phenomenon presumably corresponds to the vehement denunciation of the popular belief in saints by fundamentalists who have almost the same social and educational background as the "new Sufis."

The phenomena discussed so far can be summed up as follows. Up to nearly the middle of the 19th century in Egypt, "intellectuals" meant those educated at the Azhar mosque-college. In modern times, however, the foundation of a number of "modern," higher educational institutions gives rise to "secular" intellectuals outside the Azhar Islamic tradition. Many of the modernist intellectuals positively regard Western thoughts and ideologies, including socialism, Western values, and Western life-style. Ironically, some of those modernists or *effendi* have become radical Islamic fundamentalists aiming to realize a Muslim community (*umma*) based on the thoroughgoing application of Islamic law; and some of them resort to a type of Sufism. In any case, the Azhar monopoly in supplying intellectuals has disappeared in modern Egypt. Traditional intellectuals, namely the *ʿulamā* of the Azhar, have become the target of criticism from both secular (modernist) and religious (fundamentalist) sectors. Undeniably, their position in society has fallen somewhat as a consequence.

Finally, as for common people, their lives appear to have become less religious as a whole, compared to Lane's time. None can deny that a process of secularization has gradually permeated many aspects of Egyptian life since Muhammad Ali's reign. Those who used to perform *dhikr* and listen to religious chants now spend a night enjoying disco dancing or popular music. A general decline is noted in most Sufi Orders [GILSENAN 1973]. Yet, particularly after being defeated in the third Middle-East War in 1967, advocates of Islam as the basis for national identity have increased in number among the Egyptian Muslims. Presently, a variety of rituals are said to be performed much more fervently than in the days of the Nasser administration. The so-called Islamic revival is a phenomenon in which the common people are also involved in various ways [cf. SIVAN 1985: 130-152].

In spite of a continuous effort to expand the public educational system, modern Egypt is still burdened with a high rate of illiteracy. Though the rate tends to be lower among the younger generations, more than one third of the population between ages ten and fourteen is estimated to be illiterate. This age group shows the lowest illiteracy rate (Figure 2).

Figure 2. List of the Illiterate, Near-literate and College Graduates* by Age

1) Age	2) No. of Illiterate (%)	3) No. of Near-literate (%)	4) No. of College Graduates (%)	5) Total
10~14	1,776,514 (36.29)	1,955,494 (39.95)		4,894,667
15~19	1,817,203 (45.64)	436,414 (10.96)		3,981,508
20~24	1,564,243 (51.02)	425,397 (13.88)	71,973	3,065,641
25~29	1,543,497 (57.70)	461,007 (17.23)	149,133 (5.57)	2,675,063
30~34	1,281,817 (60.47)	393,372 (18.56)	107,049 (5.05)	2,119,924
35~39	1,335,763 (65.21)	387,982 (18.94)	76,256 (3.72)	2,048,515
40~44	1,266,888 (67.53)	373,320 (19.90)	49,258 (2.63)	1,876,072
45~49	1,035,392 (68.00)	329,687 (21.64)	31,206 (2.05)	1,523,443
50~54	1,054,953 (72.44)	267,672 (18.38)	22,080 (1.52)	1,456,394
55~59	625,612 (70.24)	174,049 (19.45)	14,379 (1.61)	890,633
60~64	749,690 (77.51)	145,596 (15.05)	10,146 (1.05)	967,176
65~69	393,523 (77.31)	78,623 (15.45)	5,036 (0.99)	509,018
70~74	356,833 (81.95)	51,544 (11.84)	2,906 (0.67)	435,453
75~	289,501 (80.99)	37,455 (10.48)	2,712 (0.76)	357,402

6) Source: *Census 1976* (in Arabic) published by CAMPUS in 1978.

* Four more categories, namely "elementary school graduate," "lower than junior high school level," "junior high school graduate level" and "higher than junior high school level and lower than college graduate level," listed in the original source are omitted here.

Accordingly, "near-literate" in this table is assumed to imply a very low level of literacy, lower than an elementary school graduate.

Little has changed with respect to the importance of oral communication in learning about Islam. Yet, a change has occurred in the medium through which people may acquire a knowledge of Islam. Common people used to learn of Islam through the speeches of a shaikh with whom they kept close personal contact. They saw the shaikh in person when they received Islamic teachings in their homes, coffee shops, *dhikr* gatherings, or in mosques. But today the situation has been profoundly transformed. Now electronic devices such as radios, television sets and cassette tape recorders are available among most of the common people in towns and villages. More often than not, they turn them on for amusement. Still, some television preachers are very popular. The Friday sermons given by famous shaikhs, some of whom are critical of government policy, are recorded in mosques, and the cassette tape copies sell well in shops [SIVAN 1985: 133, 135].

The direct, face-to-face communication of Islamic teachings of the past has been replaced by indirect communication through the mass media. The products of technological innovation have thus effected a transformation in the popular means of acquiring Islamic knowledge, an interesting issue worth examining in detail.⁶⁾

5. SOME VIEWPOINTS FOR COMPARISON

In the preceding sections we have discussed the various methods by which

modern Egyptian Muslims have acquired Islamic knowledge. Our primary concern has been the transformations in these methods. Our argument relates mainly to the changes in the educational system, providing us with some material for comparative study, in keeping with the general theme of this symposium.

The relationship between the Azhar and modern educational institutions in Egypt exemplified the conflict between traditional (religious) educational systems and modern (secular) systems of schooling. This conflict has been a serious problem not only for Egypt, but for most modern countries. One of the few exceptions seems to be Japanese society: Japan has suffered comparatively little from this problem. In the state-led, modern Japanese educational system after the Meiji Restoration, modernization was generally a synonym for Westernization, a situation that seems to have remained largely unchanged through the present day. However, some problems including Japanese nationalism and so-called State-Shintoism, which achieved its heyday of power during World War II, have been left unanswered and must be examined carefully.

Another problem is related to the high illiteracy rate in Muslim societies; as discussed above, it has created some degree of discrepancy between educated and common people in the understanding of the Quran. Japan, with its high literacy rate, almost equaled European countries in literacy in the nineteenth century as R. Dore [1965] has pointed out. With a current literacy rate of more than 99%, Japan has no intellectual stratification based on literacy. Presently most Japanese show little interest in oral communication arts such as oratory. Written communication, especially silent reading, tends to be emphasized.

Some issues are uniquely Islamic: the peculiarity of the Quran as a book, for instance. Many studies of the Holy Books of various religious traditions have been conducted. Most of them have been primarily concerned with the theological or the exegetic studies of the Scriptures. Few have referred to the social and cultural significance of the Scriptures as "communicating apparatus" or to the educational system through which the messages written in the Holy Books are taught and transmitted from generation to generation.

Finally, the differences and similarities between two media of communication, written and oral, present an interesting issue for further study. Formerly most of the targets of anthropological studies were so-called non-literate societies. In those societies oral communication played an extremely important role for transmitting the natives' basic, and sometimes esoteric, knowledge to youth. Recently, however, literate societies have been of interest to some anthropologists, who have discussed the effects of written communication systems on them. [cf. GOODY 1977; STREET 1984]. Yet, there are still many problems to be examined carefully in the study of literate societies. They include the structure of coexistence between written and oral communication, differences between the highly literate and the illiterate in their conduct and perceptions of the world, and the intellectual stratification of society. Examination of these matters would help clarify the social and ideological meaning of literacy in literate societies. These would seem to be extremely in-

teresting subjects, considering the fact that the very "writing" of ethnographic text has become an issue in recent anthropological work [cf. CLIFFORD & MARCUS 1986], and that the use of the written word as an apparatus of communication makes an interesting theme in the comparative study of civilizations.

NOTES

- 1) Concerning the various incidents that have been considered "historical facts" regarding the dawn of Islam, there are many essentially different opinions: some say, for instance, the first Revelation is indicated in ch. LXXIV, Ver. 1-7 of the Quran; the others believe that Muhammad was literate to a limited degree [cf. WATT 1961]. This essay follows the opinion held by Muslims in general. I think that the best way to understand Islam as a social phenomenon from an anthropological point of view is to respect first the ideas of its followers in order to grasp the world as it is held by Muslims themselves.
- 2) Modern science imported from the West is also translated in Arabic by *ilm*. For example, sociology is *ilm al-ijtimāʿ* and the faculty of sciences, *kulliyat al-ʿulūm*, (the plural form of *ilm*). In senior high school (*thanawī*), the course of sciences is called *ilmī* and the course of liberal arts, *adabī*, both being the adjective forms of *ilm* and *adab* (the word examined at the beginning of this essay) respectively.
- 3) On Egypt in the 18th century, see A. L. Al-Sayyid Marsot [1972: 150]. On rural society of Upper Egypt in the 19th century, see Seichi Kobayashi [1985] and on modern Cairo, see Yasushi Kosugi [1985: 984].
- 4) See B. Dodge [1974], D. Crecelius [1972], F. de Jong [1978], etc.
- 5) For a more detailed analysis of Islamic fundamentalist movements in modern Egypt, see Kazuo Ohtsuka [1985].
- 6) On the significant role of overseas news broadcast through the radio and the cassette tape of Khomeini's speeches in Iran Revolution, see Morio Ohno [1985: 81-85].

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