Hybridized Education and the Emergence of Modern Islamic Authority: Dar al-'Ulum, Hassan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb

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A paper read at the Annual Meeting of the Middle East Studies Association
held in San Diego, California in November 2010

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Abstract: This paper argues that the hybridized education provided by Cairo's Dar al-'Ulum teacher training school was a key factor in the ability of some of its students – such as Hasan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb of the Muslim Brotherhood and Taki al-Din al-Nabhani of Hizb al-Tahrir – to establish themselves as leaders of major religious movements. It pushes forward scholarship on Islamic authority by arguing that Banna and Qutb should not be seen as 'lay intellectuals' because their education involved significant study of core religious disciplines. It shows how the mixed background in civil and religious educational traditions provided by Dar al-'Ulum gave them sufficient capital to establish themselves as authoritative social and religious leaders in the self-consciously modern world of the 1930s and 1940s efendi professional. This placed them in an ideal position to contribute significantly to the creation of new models for religious leadership and organization that specifically met the social, political and religious needs of efendis. Their hybridity not only enabled them to cross the sociocultural boundaries separating efendi from shaykh, but also to merge elements of each to create new ways of being religious. The examples they set as leaders paved the way for activists and intellectuals from future generations to claim Islamic authority without formal Islamic educational credentials, and demonstrates clearly the utility of hybridization in the construction of new forms of Islamic authority.

Keywords: Dar al-'Ulum, Dar al-Ulum, Islamic authority, Hassan al-Banna, Sayyid Qutb, Muslim Brotherhood, lay intellectuals, new religious intellectuals, sociocultural boundaries, boundary theory, education, hybridity, Egypt, twentieth century

A major focus of scholarship on twentieth century change in Islamic authority focuses on the rise of individuals whose main educational qualification was from a non-religious institution, individuals dubbed at times 'new religious intellectuals' or 'lay intellectuals', individuals whose rise has presented significant challenges to 'ulama around the world. These intellectuals have gained legitimacy as religious leaders despite having – by definition – significantly less training than ulamā in the traditional religious disciplines of textual transmission, interpretation and application.

This discussion of 'lay intellectualism' , while important and fruitful, risks obscuring key elements of the background and authority of individuals involved in the early development of this type of leadership, individuals whose education seems –

at first glance – to be primarily non-religious, but in fact included significant study of core religious disciplines.

I refer in particular to early Islamic leaders Hasan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb of the Muslim Brotherhood, both graduates of Cairo's Dar al-'Ulum, a higher school whose entrance exam required significant background in the Arabic and Islamic sciences traditionally taught as part of a formal religious education.

Their mixed background in both religious and civil educational traditions gave them the capital to be seen as authoritative in both the self-consciously 'modern' world of the 1930s and 1940s efendi professional, and the religious world of the Azhar shaykh. This placed them in an ideal position to contribute significantly to the creation of new models for religious leadership and organization that specifically met the social, political and religious needs of efendis. Their hybridity not only enabled them to cross the boundaries separating these two worlds, but also to merge them to create new ways of being religious. Their activities made it easier for activists and intellectuals from future generations to claim Islamic authority without formal Islamic credentials.

My portrayal of the wider context from which these leaders emerged builds on prior work, chiefly my detailed doctoral-dissertation study of Dar al-'Ulum and its graduates. It uses institutional records, rare published sources, and interviews, amassed and analysed over the past 4 years, to argue that Dar al-'Ulum performed important bridging and hybridization functions. The school was founded in 1872 to produce Arabic teachers for government schools, a mission it fulfilled until its merger with Cairo University in 1946. In contrast with other teachers, Dar al-'Ulum graduates had the strong Arabic and Islamic qualifications of Azhar shaykhs, yet had also been exposed to the 'modern' sciences studied in civil schools (history, geography, mathematics, chemistry, physics).

In the dissertation, I note that teacher training in nineteenth-century Egypt and France implied, to varying degrees, embodiment of the values, habits and disciplines that teachers were expected to pass on to their students. In the case of Dar al-'Ulum, however, this exposure to and embodiment of the ostensibly 'modern' values taught in the civil school system did not prevent the retention of significant ties to Egyptian and Islamic heritage. Dar al-'Ulum was not simply a school that produced purely modern colonial automatons, but a place that gave graduates the cultural capital to strike new balances between new and old practices, ideas and ways of thinking; it was a place where one could become both modern and religious.

The second half of the dissertation examines how prominent graduates used their hybrid backgrounds to contribute in interesting and significant ways to the modernization of Arabic and Islam. The chapter on Islam not only discusses Banna and Qutb, but also Taki al-Din al-Nabhani, Tantawi Jawhari, and Muhammad Madi Abu al-Aza'im.

With respect to terms and categories, I use dualisms like shaykh/effendi, and modern/unmodern in the ways I see them referred to in my sources, whose reference to social categorizations is similar to that observed by Watenpaugh (in his discussions of wanting to 'be modern' in 20th century Aleppo) and Messiri and Ryzova (in their discussions of popular culture characterizations of shaykh and efendi in 1930s Egypt). The existence of categories, however, does not mean that boundaries between them

are impenetrable. My work on Dar al-'Ulum shows that regardless of rhetoric, in reality individuals and institutions frequently cross and straddle social boundaries in meaningful ways, and – occasionally – contribute to the shifting of these boundaries. Individuals rarely embody all of the attributes of one category, yet instead could be thought of as moving along a continuum or spectrum running between two categories.

This paper demonstrates that a detailed examination of the hybrid backgrounds of individuals like Banna and Qutb assists greatly in explaining how they –'modern' efendi schoolteachers – were able to establish themselves as leaders of major twentieth-century Islamic movements. On a conceptual level, it highlights the role played by education (and embodiment of the bodies of knowledge and habits taught in it) in the establishment of socially and religiously-authoritative leadership. It also discusses the impact and authority of individuals who can cross and straddle social boundaries, and the role these individuals can play in the shifting these boundaries.

First, I give an overview connecting education, capital and authority, next, I introduce the background and education of Banna and Qutb through their graduation at Dar al-'Ulum, and finally I discuss the utility of a hybrid education and boundary crossing in the establishment of new models for Islamic leadership and organization.

Authority and Capital

Knowledge and performance play key roles in the construction of authority, and they can be linked to education through the concept of capital.

Knowledge

First, as I have argued in detail elsewhere, all Islamic authorities must acquire and demonstrate that they have some sort of special knowledge about Islam.

Performance, Expectations and Capital

Performance is crucial because possession of Islamic knowledge is not a sufficient basis for legitimacy; a leader must be seen by others to possess it. A leader's embodied performance of knowledge and norms must meet (and is therefore limited by) the expectations of his or her audience, which means that legitimacy is amassed through a multi-dimensional interaction in which the speech, dress and conduct of the authority both influences and is influenced by those witnessing the performance, be they peers, students or the general public. If the authority's actions differ greatly from the expectations of this audience, then the leader's authority in that context diminishes. This dynamic is roughly similar to Bourdieu's concept of social capital – capital derived from two-way interactions between people, while the knowledge and norms that must be demonstrated can be seen as cultural capital, or that resulting from an individual's social position, experiences and education.

Education as the Route to Knowledge

Finally, religious education had long played a key role in claims to Islamic authority, especially those based on non-mystical sources of knowledge. Historically, scholars – the 'ulama – held a monopoly over claims to authority based on core Islamic texts, as it was they who devoted significant portions of their lives to

developing detailed methodologies for interpreting these texts, amassing past interpretations into schools of legal interpretation.

In the early twentieth century, education in the government's civil schools started to play an increasing role in claims to both membership and leadership in wider society. By this time, the cultural capital held by the shaykhs was no longer seen to hold the key to meeting European economic, political and social challenges. This crisis resulted in

- reformist strains of thought – including Salafism –,
- calls to reform the curriculum and structure of al-Azhar, and
- the founding of Dar al-'Ulum.

The changing authority of religious knowledge in wider Egyptian society left an opening for individuals who had the cultural and social capital to claim some degree of authority in both modern and religious contexts, and it is to notable examples of such individuals that I now turn.

Mixed Backgrounds, Mixed Education

Key to this ability to amass authority in both modern and religious contexts, therefore, is being able to demonstrate (embodied) knowledge (or cultural capital) in both of these areas. An education at Dar al-'Ulum was a major way (but of course not the only way) to gain the background necessary to do this. (In the questions, we could discuss other potential paths to a mixed background.)

Misunderstandings about the nature of education at Dar al-'Ulum seems to have contributed to lack of recognition of Banna and Qutb's connection with traditional Islamic studies in much contemporary scholarship.

At the time Banna and Qutb entered Dar al-'Ulum -- Banna studied from 1923 to 1927, and Qutb from 1929 to 1933 -- all applicants had to demonstrate significant knowledge of the traditional Islamic and Arabic sciences taught in religious institutions, because Dar al-'Ulum's entrance exam tracked fairly closely what was studied at al-Azhar. In general, it required applicants to demonstrate their proficiency in Arabic syntax, grammar and rhetoric through dictation, composition, and recitation from memory of the Quran and the Alfiyya of Ibn Malak, from which they would have to derive and apply grammar rules. They also had to demonstrate

- their knowledge of legal sciences in sections on logic, theology, and jurisprudence;
- their command of basic arithmetic;
- they understanding of what was considered common knowledge.

The examinations were generally weighted towards Arabic and Islamic subjects. (In 1906, they received 61% of total points, with 18% on common knowledge/modern subjects, 12% on handwriting and 9% on arithmetic.)

So, while neither Banna or Qutb had spent time at al-Azhar or a similar institution, they would not have been able to enter Dar al-'Ulum without demonstrating significant knowledge of key subjects studied at these institutions.

An examination of Banna and Qutb's autobiographies sheds some light onto how they might have mastered this knowledge without years of study in a formal religious institution.

Banna's early education was split between the religious and civil school systems. He studied for several years in an engaging kuttab, then switched to a local government-run primary school, and finally studied at a regional primary teachers school in Damanhur. His religious ties were further enhanced by experiences with the Hasafiyya Sufi Brotherhood, and his involvement with small-scale activist Islamic welfare groups that encouraged 'proper morality' within the local community. His father was a shaykh who had studied at the Ibrahim Pasha mosque in Alexandria and was something of an independent Islamic scholar; yet he was also a watchmaker by trade and started to sell gramophone records soon after records produced in Egypt appeared on the market.

Qutb spent even more time in government schools, studying at the elementary and secondary school levels. But his interest in Islamic studies comes through reasonably clearly in his autobiography, even though he wrote it in a period he would later describe as being one of atheism. He discusses memorizing the Quran and organizing competitions with individuals from the local kuttab to show that civil school students were not deficient in this regard, and being interested enough in traditional Islamic disciplines to seek out lessons from travelling Azhar preachers. It is unclear, however, the extent to which he engaged in organized independent study of specific books and topics, an activity that plays a key role in the education of other individuals with mixed backgrounds such as Ahmad Amin.

Studying at Dar al-'Ulum further enhanced Banna and Qutb's mixed backgrounds (just as it introduced civil subjects to students with more traditional religious backgrounds), as they studied both the traditional Arabic and Islamic sciences long-prized by the 'ulama, and subjects such as mathematics, history, geography and science. Most importantly, they were exposed to the standards, habits and disciplines inculcated in the rest of the civil school system, and upon graduation were able enter the world of the efendi government employee.

The curriculum that Banna and Qutb were likely to have followed – there were several in use at this time -- prescribed approximately one-third of their time for the traditional Arabic and Islamic sciences that were studied in al-Azhar, and approximately two-thirds of the time for new, 'modern' subjects. (32% versus 68%)

This ratio, however, understates the religious qualifications of graduates. It needs to be seen in the context of the heavy weight placed on Arabic and Islamic subjects in the entrance exam. The extent to which students entering by exam were building on prior knowledge is demonstrated by the contrast between this programme and the curriculum followed by students entering from the Dar al-'Ulum preparatory school. Students in this school would have spent more of their pre-Dar al-'Ulum class hours on mathematics and other modern subjects than students who studied only in religious schools, and as a result spent 72% of their time on Islam and Arabic, and only 28% of on modern subjects.

In short, graduates of Dar al-'Ulum in the 1920s would have studied the Islamic and Arabic sciences that form the basis of 'ulama authority before and during their time at Dar al-'Ulum.

Crossing Boundaries and Establishing New Forms of Authority

Banna and Qutb (and their successors) established themselves as religious authorities using the same general mechanism used by the 'ulama for centuries: they embodied knowledge mastered through study in ways that met the expectations of peers and the general community.

Because of their education at Dar al-'Ulum, however, they had a much wider range of cultural capital on which to draw. They had sufficient religious knowledge to speak authoritatively about key subjects, to use the language, comportment and style of the 'ulama, yet – like all Dar al-'Ulum graduates after 1927 – they lived as efendis and understood the very real social and economic challenges faced by this group in the 1930s and 1940s, especially their struggle to 'be modern' without completely abandoning past ideas and traditions.

Their ability to assert authority in a wider range of situations – specifically on both sides of the boundary drawn between new and old, in both the world of the efendi and the world of the shaykh – enabled them to respond to the concerns of the age and their peers, and forge ways of being both modern and religious.

Banna is best seen as an activist leader with a strong interest in Islamic education and revival, much of which was targeted at the urban efendiyya. Banna's authority rested both on his hybrid education at Dar al-'Ulum, and factors such as previous experience in government schools, family ties to religion, and his continuing connections with Sufi and Islamic welfare groups. His speaking style was charismatic and he was comfortable preaching in a wide range of venues, which aided his efforts to reach out to new audiences in coffees shops and other non-religious public places. He appears to have been an inveterate networker, reaching out to 'ulama and community leaders, and actively participating in other Islamic groups.

As an authority, Qutb was more of a public intellectual than a grassroots activist, as shown by the form taken by his initial public forays into the religious realm – a series of journal articles in 1948 followed by his book Social Justice in Islam. Prior to establishing himself as a Muslim public intellectual, he had built a reputation as a literary critic, author and intellectual, and it is likely that his efforts to enter the Islamic sphere were aided somewhat by his prior reputation and his longstanding links with publishers and editors. While he joined the Muslim Brotherhood in the early 1950s and was in charge of their outreach literature, his lasting legacy is found in his many books on Islam, especially those completed in the late 1950s and 1960s.

The social and cultural capital held by Banna and Qutb enabled them – and by extension the Muslim Brotherhood – to better address the needs and concerns of modernizing Egyptians. Social justice and reform – crucial issues for both the rising middle classes and the poor – were key themes throughout. Implicit in many of their arguments and activities was an opposition to western influence

- politically (in the form of occupation and imperialism),
- religiously (in the form of missionary activities), and
- to a certain extent culturally (for instance, with respect to the changing prominence and roles of women).

This ability to meet the expectations and needs of a wide audience enabled them to merge the 'modern' and 'religious' to promote new ideas, practices and politics, and

to build new institutions. One of the major contributions of the Muslim Brotherhood, founded in 1928 by al-Banna, to the development of new forms of Islamic organization was its transformation of Islam from a set of religious practices into an all-encompassing ideology that could be mobilized in support of social, political and economic change. It spread new ways of practicing Islam and interpreting Islamic texts. Its educational activities significantly increased the access of Egyptians to Islamic study – ranging from the most basic instruction in how to live "properly" as a Muslim in the modern world to more advanced study of the Quran and other Islamic texts, often with the aid of manuals written in clear, accessible language.

Banna and Qutb as individuals and the Brotherhood as an organization significantly increased the public profile of Islam in modern Egyptian social and political circles, and – perhaps most importantly for the rest of this panel – paved the way for further change in these areas, both by setting an important precedent for non-mystical authoritative leadership from outside of the 'ulama, and by setting up supporting structures such as educational and publication opportunities. Their work took advantage and furthered the acceptance of Salafi tenets allowing reinterpretations of Islamic source texts without reference to past scholarship, making it easier for lay individuals to contribute.

Moving Boundaries

Finally, it should not be surprising that individuals and organizations who cross or straddle boundaries were at the forefront of developing new ways of combining modernity and religion.

Literature on boundaries and hybridization asserts not only that boundary-straddling and boundary-crossing occurs and is meaningful, but also that it is intrinsically unstable and represents a situation that must, in the long term, be resolved. Homi Bhabha notes that hybridity is a difficult situation to maintain, and that the act of crossing boundaries represents a challenge to the composition of the groups that they delineate. Mary Douglas' Purity and Danger explains that individuals who do not fit inside established boundaries threaten the status quo, leading to pressure for them to conform fully to one of the two categories; in some circumstances, however, their differences result in shifting of the boundary in question, changing the status quo such that it incorporates the individuals, organizations or activities that previously did not fit.

In this light, Banna and Qutb's crossing and straddling of social boundaries can be seen not only to develop novel forms of Islamic leadership and practice, but also to contribute significantly to larger processes of social change and the increasing integration of Islam into modern social, political and economic life.

While it would be extremely difficult to prove that a hybrid background was the sole or primary cause of the emergence of Banna and Qutb – and subsequently the 'new religious intellectuals' – that the background of such important early leaders included significant training in traditional disciplines demonstrates clearly the utility of hybridization and the resulting wider ranges of cultural capital in the construction of new forms of Islamic authority.