
In *Transmission of Knowledge in Medieval Cairo*, Jonathan Porter Berkey, as the title suggests, provides his readers with a descriptively rich social and cultural history of how Islamic knowledge was produced and transmitted in Mamluk Cairo (period covering roughly 1250–1517 CE). Berkey is building upon the work of previous scholarship in the field on the history of the madrasah as a medieval institution of higher religious education, and in doing so hopes to fill what he perceives to be a general lacuna in prior studies on medieval Islamic education; while there are a number of good scholarly historical studies on medieval Islamic education generally, and the rise of the madrasah specifically, the field “occasionally suffers from a tendency to treat developments in different Islamic societies as fundamentally comparable and interchangeable, although not in any rigorous comparative sense” (p. 14). As such, his study offers a more comprehensive circumstantial social and cultural history of Islamic education in Mamluk Cairo, a choice that is rather obvious, given that there is perhaps no comparable earlier period and locale with as much primary material at our disposal in terms of the endowment deeds (waqfiyyahs) of educational institutions and the scholarly biographies of contemporary historians.

Berkey chooses to focus on the social and cultural dimensions of medieval Islamic learning for a very precise reason, namely that a historical study of Islamic education that seeks to replicate the methodologies of Western medieval historiography in their emphasis on the centrality of studying “institutions and formal structures,” is likely to be less fruitful. In contrast to the medieval Europe, medieval Islamic education is characterised by the central features of “informality,” “informal processes,” “social networks,” and a fundamentally “personal system,” where, in the words of Tibawi, institutions are “guided by an elastic custom and not a rigid theory” (p. 17). This predominant feature of Islamic higher education ensures for Berkey that a study of the “informal processes” of instruction consisting primarily of
personal relationships is likely for the medieval historian of Islamic education to offer a significantly more liberating course of investigation (p. 20).

Berkey’s monograph follows a smooth progression, beginning with an introduction to his topic and a brief summary of the Mamluk social and political context, followed by chapters on the nature of Muslim instruction, the central medieval institution of the madrasah, the nature of scholarly patronage in Mamluk Cairo, and the final three chapters being dedicated to the education of comparatively less influential or marginalised social groups, the Mamluk military elite and women, and finally the urban masses more broadly.

Strikingly absent from Berkey’s introduction is any substantial discussion of methodology or the primary sources utilised for his study, beyond a few cursory remarks. Much of the chapter is instead devoted to laying the contextual groundwork for his study, consisting of introductory and summary remarks on the nature of the madrasah and higher Islamic learning, and the social and political context under the Mamluk regime. One is thus left to their own devices in searching through his footnotes and citations to get an idea of his primary sources and how they are utilised for his study. Furthermore, as he readily admits (p. 7, note 14), much of what he has to say in his introduction and the third chapter concerning the madrasah, the central institution of concern for his study, is taken directly from Makdisi’s seminal and groundbreaking work The Rise of Colleges.

To his credit, Berkey’s work is descriptively rich and comprehensive in giving us a day-to-day sense of how Islamic education took place in Mamluk Cairo and of how the various social classes, beyond the scholarly elite, participated in the transmission of Islamic knowledge. This richness is readily visible in the number of endowment deeds (waqfiyyahs) that have been consulted in reconstructing the complex structure of the institution of the madrasah and the hierarchy of paid positions that were in place to sustain it, addressing how the institution functioned in its social and communal context, how it was navigated by the scholarly elite and the commoners alike, how it was sustained largely through the generous patronage of the Mamluk military elite, and to what ends this patronage was employed.

In other respects, however, the relative laxity with which some of his sources are employed to reinforce certain narratives suggests that too much is being read into them, while the very nature of a few of his sources, upon which he heavily relies, leaves us with several unanswered questions. This tendency is further exacerbated by his failure to clearly define some of his most frequently recurring terms in describing the nature of medieval Islamic education. Prior to examining these sources, however, a brief overview of the
overriding assumptions undergirding his study may serve to better elucidate our discussion.

For Berkey, a number of prominent features may be said to characterise medieval Islamic institutions of higher learning, in contradistinction to the European system of knowledge production. While he presents no rigorous comparative study of contemporary educational developments in Europe, beyond very cursory generalised remarks, the predominant feature of “informality” reflected in the “absence of anything resembling a corporate ecclesiastical organization capable of owning, supporting, and perpetuating an institutional structure” (p. 12) within Islam constitutes the prism through which the majority of his sources are read and employed. As he is sure to press to his readers, “Islamic law allowed no corporate identity to any particular institution, and no formal degree system was ever established” (p. 16). This “informal” and highly accessible system, based on a “persistent priority given to personal oral contacts over institutional affiliations” (p. 157), Berkey concludes, led to the gradual blurring of the distinction between learning and simple worship (p. 217) and to an inevitably “less rigorous” (p. 206) form of education that has historically facilitated mass participation from a diversity of social classes in the transmission of religious knowledge, a dynamism and inclusiveness constituting traditional Islamic education’s saving grace as a civilizational achievement.

In terms of his descriptive vocabulary, no words are as forcefully invoked as the idea of a “persistent informality” in characterizing Islamic higher education. Yet what is precisely meant by this description? Is he simply hinting at organic patterns of instruction that were developed communally and gradually over time or is he suggesting a sense of unconfined arbitrariness and subjectivity where a great deal of Islamic education was left to the vagaries and proclivities of individual scholars and their immediate circumstances? How may we distinguish what is formal from what is informal? Is the defining line simply the existence of an “institutional degree” program or a precisely fixed curriculum of study? Or is the presence of an institutional corporate identity the definitive marker of formality? Finally, how may we understand the descriptive adjective “nonsystematic” in relation to this informal system? Is it merely employed as a synonymous variant of “informality” or does it have a more precise connotation?

In shoring up his evidence for the informality and personal nature of Islamic education, where “institutions played no actual role in Islamic education” (p. 16), such that the madrasah constituted simply one of several existing forums of instruction, albeit an important one that was typically endowed with generous funding for students and professors, Berkey argues
against the tendency to reify the *madrasah* as a clearly defined institution. As he suggests, borrowing from the remarks of others, since Muslim historians and chroniclers “applied Arabic architectural terminology very loosely to particular buildings,” this would imply that “a universal definition of the *madrasa* is, perhaps, impossible to identify” (p. 16). Thus a typical educational institution may consist of a *masjid, jāmiʿ, khānqāh*, or a *madrasah*, yet the educational activities that took place within all these were often indistinguishable. As concrete evidence of the terminological “uncertainty” that Muslim chroniclers and biographers experienced in describing institutions, in al-Maqrizi’s (d. 1442) topographical history of Cairo, the institution established by amir Aššām al-Nāṣirī in 1345-46 is called a *jāmiʿ*, while his younger contemporary Ibn Tighri Birdi (d. 1470), an equally important historian, calls it a *madrasah* (p. 49). Similarly, while the endowment deed of the famous Ashrafiyya built in 1426 refers to it as a congregational *jāmiʿ*, the institution clearly functioned as a *madrasah* and a *khānqāh* (p. 47-8).

Berkey spends several pages detailing an ostensibly rampant terminological uncertainty among Muslim scholars and the deeds of endowment for various institutions, only to conclude that this “apparent confusion of terms should be viewed through the lens of that flexible personal system” (p. 50). However, such a hasty conclusion is hardly warranted, and as is often the case, the simplest explanations are usually the most accurate; as the institution of the *madrasah* continued to grow in importance over the course of the Mamluk period and as Sufism continued to develop into a more organised and socially recognised aspect of Muslim educational and cultural life, the institution also began to adapt into more complex structures meeting a variety of social and religious needs, serving simultaneously as a congregational mosque and a Sufi convent in many instances. This is hardly a surprising development given the history of the mosque as a natural public setting for Islamic education, the equally important value placed on the same fields of traditional Islamic knowledge by Sufi practitioners, and the practical reality of needing to congregate several times a day in a public space for prayer, among other factors. Thus, to suggest that Muslim chroniclers reflected a level of uncertainty in defining these multifaceted institutions as evidence against any tendency to reify them is to argue that these scholars were unaware of the multiple functions that these institutions served and to employ the evidence in a rather unwarranted manner.

In arguing for the strictly personal nature of Islamic learning, where “a student’s authority derived from that of his teacher, and not from the venue in which his education had transpired,” such that “no institution, not even the
madrasa, could ever establish a monopoly over the inculcation of the Muslim sciences” (p. 50). Berkey marshals an impressive array of evidence from the remarkably diverse endowment deeds of different institutions across the Mamluk period. Given that the benefactors of these educational endowments, the majority of whom were from among the Mamluk elite, functioned with near total independence in stipulating the precise conditions of their deeds, a wide range of diversity in how these institutions were to be established and the various functions and positions they were to entertain is readily visible from the surviving deeds. While the few highly prestigious and much better funded institutions established by more prominent amirs or sultans tended to offer far more generous salaries and stipends to their professors and students, affording them with larger libraries and even hostleries, many smaller institutions by contrast, some of which were established by private individuals, served as less rigorous educational venues with a greater emphasis placed on group devotional and religious activities. As he points out, the level and quality of education provided by these endowment deeds was so diverse that some institutions dating from the end of the Mamluk period that were specifically known as madrasahs went as far as making “no provisions at all for classes in any of the religious sciences” (p. 17ff).

There is no denying, as Berkey has amply illustrated, especially in his analysis of the Mamluk elite’s role in the transmission of knowledge, that institutions were endowed by benefactors for a variety of motivations and included a variety of functions, many of which were not strictly academic. It is also a truism that the transmission of classical Islamic education rested very heavily on the authority of the scholars and the highly personal bonds formed between professors and their students over years of intimate companionship (ṣubḥah) and study. This is not to say, however, that the institutions played no role, albeit perhaps a more indirect one, in regulating the overall quality of Islamic education, and this is especially true of the more prestigious and generously endowed institutions of higher Islamic learning, which typically attracted the most serious scholars and students who were seeking to specialise in their fields. As Berkey himself has had to attest, many of these institutions had very specific stipulations to ensure that they maintained a higher quality of instruction, including generous salaries and stipulations meant to attract the most qualified and experienced instructors in their fields, stipulations ensuring specific instructional positions in the various schools of law and ancillary Islamic sciences with rules on the duration and length of classes, and strict rules on the duration of vacations for which professors and students may be legitimately exempted. Such considerations certainly strike of a level of
formality and quality control in the educational standards and production of a
competent scholarly elite.

Additionally, while he continues to maintain that Islamic education is
predominantly “informal” and “nonsystemtatic,” Berkey’s assertions are not
consistent throughout, and he seems to maintain elsewhere that a certain level
of formality and rigor was a typical feature of higher Islamic education; in his
discussion on women’s participation in Islamic education, he observes that
they were generally excluded from occupations “for which the systematic legal
curriculum of the madrasa and its cognate institutions was designed to produce
qualified candidates” (p. 166). It is here perhaps where a major weakness of
Berkey’s work and selective focus becomes readily apparent. In choosing to
focus primarily on the social and cultural dimensions of knowledge
production in medieval Islam, he fails to provide a general overview of the
intellectual dimension and the general pedagogy of the ‘ulamā’. For instance,
were they guided by a general curriculum of study and style of pedagogy,
whereby a certain canon of works was considered required knowledge, or was
the content of their teachings left largely to the discretion of the individual
scholar and teacher?

Beyond this inconsistency is a more important methodological concern
with regards to Berkey’s choice of primary sources. In his attempts to
historically reconstruct the day-to-day social and cultural dynamics of
medieval Islamic learning, particularly with regards to the nature of the
teacher-student relationship, Berkey relies quite heavily on classical treatises
on Islamic education, especially the well-known works of Burhān al-Dīn
Zarnūjī (d. 1223) and Badr al-Dīn Ibn Jama’ah (d. 1333). Such works are crucial
for his larger thesis on the highly personal nature of the teacher-student
relationship and how this contributed to the absence of a degree system with
established curricula of study. While such treatises may provide for valuable
insights into the perceptions and expectations of scholars in their views on the
classroom experience, relying on such works to describe actual social
interactions and practice within the classroom is rather problematic. The
reason for this is the simple and inevitable gulf that always exists between
normative theory and social practice. As guidebooks for the would-be teacher
and student, this genre of educational literature served a primarily pedagogical
function that was essentially prescriptive and edifying in purpose. As such,
their idealised focus on duties, responsibilities, and classroom etiquettes must
be regarded with far greater caution when employed as actual representations
of classroom experience.

It is unsurprising that classical works such as these are filled with
recurring tropes that are far less insightful when it comes to constructing
actual classroom interactions. To provide but one example, Berkey makes a great deal about “the absolute authority of the shaykh” and the “insuperable psychological gulf” that existed between teacher and student (p. 35), highlighted by the high emphasis on respect and the strict etiquettes placed on students in the classroom. Thus, for instance, Ibn Jamā‘ah specifies that “a student carefully refrain from touching his shaykh’s body, garment, or even the cushion on which he sat, with any part of his own body or clothing” (p. 37). Interestingly, even Berkey notes that such advice is “oddly” contradicted by Ibn al-Ḥājj (d. 1336), who “in a passage somewhat at odds with the rest of his text” urged students to crowd around their teachers so closely, “so that the robes of the students touch the robe of the professor” (p. 37–8, note 71). Again, such contradictory advice only serve to highlight the subjective proclivities of the authors involved in their prescriptive advice on the ideal classroom interaction, and may be less useful as definitive articulations of actual classroom interactions and teacher-student dynamics.

As a further example of this “psychological gulf” between teacher and student, Burkey highlights “certain humiliations that had to be borne by the student,” including such things as the potential need for flattery and “kissing the shaykh’s hand” (p. 38). While such examples are utilised to highlight the “insuperable” psychological gulf between teacher and student and the “absolute authority of the shaykh,” in actual practice they may have been no more than mere examples of the highly ritualised social conventions surrounding respect for scholarly authority, and there is a danger of essentialism in extracting too much from such examples in informing our understanding of the very nature of the day-to-day student teacher relationship.

A final observation concerns Berkey’s implicit theme on the gradual degeneration of Islamic education that such features of “persistent informality” seem to have brought about, as is generally evinced by its relative accessibility to wider audiences among the laity and the gradual blurring “between it [education] and the parallel Muslim tradition of preaching and exhortation” (pp. 206ff). This gradual development, where education became “less rigorous,” is especially notable in the field of hadith transmission, which was considerably open to the laity and to more marginalised groups, such as women and the Mamluks, when compared with the more specialised fields of Islamic learning.

Berkey paints a relatively complex picture on female participation in the transmission of Islamic knowledge, highlighting the many barriers to their inclusion and noting the many ways in which they were included in areas representing a stronger pietistic element, such as the transmission of hadīth.
While Berkey highlights the usual barriers to female participation in positions of religious and educational authority relating to the limits imposed by a patriarchal and religiously conservative social context (pp. 166ff), he fails to provide a convincing account for why their participation was largely reserved to the field of hadith transmission and to account for other sociological explanations, such as the basic division of labour amongst the sexes that is the predominant norm in most traditional societies; while men typically occupied more public and social functions, especially those related to breadwinning, by contrast, the time consuming demands related to the rearing of children and household chores were typically the preserve of women. Given that the more advanced Islamic sciences of jurisprudence and legal methodology required far more extensive training and intellectual exertion, requiring years of advanced study with specialists, the tradition of hadith transmission by contrast was relatively far more accessible by nature, while also serving more direct and practical pietistic functions. Once again, the simplest explanations are oftentimes the most fitting.

In conclusion, despite its contextual richness as a work of Mamluk educational history, Berkey’s work suffers from a methodological weaknesses upon closer analysis. Not only does he fail to properly operationalise some of his important terminology, but he also fails to provide his readers with any rigorous methodological discussion with regards to his historiographical approach. Furthermore, several of his primary sources are used to highlight a certain narrative on the informality of classical Islamic education, whereby the idealised discourse of classical educational treatises is heavily employed. The use of such sources in particular fails to account for the inevitable gap that is likely to exist between normative expectations and social practice, thereby essentialising the medieval classroom experience, in contrast to what is more likely a more nuanced and complex reality. Finally, the work’s major weakness is likely due to its restricted focus; by placing too much emphasis on the “informal” social and cultural dimension of medieval Islamic learning, Berkey fails to account for how the traditional Islamic fields of learning taught at the classical madrasah evolved into highly specialised intellectual traditions that clearly reflected some measure of systematisation, stability, and predictability, and which arguably reflected the presence of regular curricula of study and a more established institutional framework than what we may be led to believe.

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