

## An Appraisal of Schoolmasters' Status in Pre-Modern Muslim Societies

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### Abstract

*Medieval Muslim sources convey two extremely opposing pictures of schoolmasters. Alongside the official, aspirational image of the virtuous providers of knowledge, another subversive stream of literature lampoons them as despicable charlatans (although the main subject they taught was the Qur'ān). This provocative enigma raises many questions and calls for in-depth investigation to clarify its reasons, implications, manifestations, and repercussions. The present article sets out to spell out the dichotomy noted in the sources vis-à-vis the stature of schoolmasters in pre-modern Muslim societies. In particular, it tries to identify the source of this paradox and contextualize the conundrum of a transmitter of sacred knowledge (i.e., the Qur'ān) being ridiculed in a presumably religion-centred community. It also analyses the reasons behind the satires against schoolmasters by notable Muslim informants in medieval times. While so doing, the article tries to give answers and identify nuances concerning a number of related and more inclusive questions.*

### Keywords

schoolmaster, primary education, satires, society, medieval Islam, social justice.

### Introduction

The importance of primary education cannot be overemphasized; it is recurrently referred to by specialists as the most crucial educational stage. Early educational institutions play a myriad of significant roles: didactical, moral, psychological, and physical. In most pre-modern cultures, classical Islam included, these were adjuncts to their fundamental spiritual role. In medieval Islam, primary education was usually practised in unique learning spaces known as *katātīb*, plural of

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*kuttāb* (alias *maktab*). The origin of the *katātīb* as relatively standardized institutional forms is debatable, but they were clearly popular throughout the Arab-Islamic world in the immediate aftermath of the early Arab conquests, and they continued to flourish throughout pre-modern Muslim societies and subsisted into modern times. It was usually in the *kuttāb* that Muslim children were taught basic religious duties and were instilled with rudimentary Islamic precepts. Most importantly, they were taught the Qur’ān, along with literacy, penmanship, arithmetic, poetry, composition etc.

The teaching in these primitive Islamic schools was provided by a *mu’allim*, which denotes “teacher” in the general sense; the term was typically used in classifying genitives such as *mu’allim kuttāb* or *mu’allim ṣibyān*,<sup>1</sup> to designate elementary teachers in particular. The teacher in such *katātīb* was initially referred to as *muktib* or *mukattib*—sometimes also *mu’addib*.<sup>2</sup> In modern Islamic vernaculars, however, the teacher (who was usually, but not exclusively, male) was more frequently referred to as *fiqī* (from *faqīh*), *shaykh*, *muqri’*, *mullā*, *darrār* (most probably from *dharārī*, “children”), *khūjā*, *sayyidunā*, and *ustādhunā*.<sup>3</sup> While there is no direct equivalent in English to *mu’allim kuttāb*, in this article we use the term “schoolmaster.” Although both *mu’allim* and *mu’addib* were used interchangeably, particularly in medieval Islamic texts, to refer to any person engaged in teaching, with the passage of time the latter came to be more commonly used to designate private tutors and educators of the children of the upper class. Unlike the indigent average schoolmasters, those privileged teachers enjoyed fortunate financial and social dispensations. While dealt with briefly, they do not constitute the

<sup>1</sup> The overwhelming majority of such *katātīb* were attended by male pupils (*ṣibyān*, alias *ghilmān*), but there were also *katātīb* for girls.

<sup>2</sup> See Muḥammad b. Mukarram b. Manzūr, *Lisān al-‘Arab*, ed. ‘Abd Allāh al-Kabīr, Muḥammad Aḥmad Ḥasab Allāh, and Hāshim Muḥammad al-Shādhilī, rev. ed., 6 vols. (Cairo: Dār al-Ma’ārif, 1981), 5:3817; ‘Alī b. Muḥammad b. al-Athīr, *al-Lubāb fī Tahdhīb al-Ansāb*, 3 vols. (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1980), 3:251; Johannes Pedersen and George Makdisi, “Madrasa,” in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, ed. C. E. Bosworth et al., 2nd ed. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1986), 5:1123.

<sup>3</sup> See Ignaz Goldziher, “Education (Muslim),” *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. James Hastings et al. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1912), 5:201; Jacob M. Landau, “Kuttāb,” in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, ed. C. E. Bosworth et al., 2nd ed. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1986), 5:568; ‘Abd al-Laṭīf b. Duḥaysh, *al-Katātīb fī l-Ḥaramayn al-Sharīfayn wa mā Ḥawlahumā* (Mecca: Maktabat al-Nahḍah al-Ḥadīthah, 1986), 49-50. On the differences between *muqri’*, *mu’addib*, and *mu’allim*, see Muḥammad Mubayyidīn, “Mulāḥazāt ḥawl Ta’līm al-Ṣibyān fī Madīnat Dimashq fī l-‘Ahd al-‘Uthmānī: 922-1337/1516-1918,” *al-Majallah al-Urduniyyah li l-Ta’rīkh wa l-Āthār* 6 (2012): 123.

primary focus of this discussion, which specifically concerns average schoolmasters in public schools.<sup>4</sup>

For many reasons, the most fundamental concern of children's learning in Muslim societies was learning and studying the Qur'ān, which remains highly valued. Just as theology was considered the queen of the sciences in contemporaneous Europe, classical Islamic societies—including non-Arabic ones as in Greater Persia—considered the study of scripture to be the foundation of personal spiritual and intellectual attainment. However, despite the axiomatic acclaim of teachers in Islamic culture, medieval Muslim sources convey two extremely opposing pictures of schoolmasters in particular. Alongside the official, aspirational image of the virtuous and pious custodian of humanity, another subversive stream of literature lampoons them as despicable charlatans. This provocative enigma raises many questions and calls for in-depth investigation to clarify its reasons, implications, manifestations, and repercussions.

Generally, the position of schoolmasters in medieval Islamic cultures, in spite of its noticeable significance, has gained only little attention in the literature.<sup>5</sup> The medieval criticisms of schoolmasters were pointed out firstly, albeit tersely, by Goldziher under a subheading entitled “Status of the Elementary Teacher” in his seminal article “Muslim Education.”<sup>6</sup> His treatment of the subject, however interesting, is rather descriptive than analytical and depends on a markedly limited number of sources. Goldziher's succinct subsection was followed by an even more succinct discussion of the subject by Hitti, who scarcely did anything more than reiterate the former.<sup>7</sup> In the following years, the subject of schoolmasters' standing in medieval Muslim cultures continued to receive only meagre attention in the relevant scholarship. Fortuitous references to it were made by, among others, Tritton and

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<sup>4</sup> On private tutors, see Albert Dietrich, “Various Aspects of the Education of Princes in the ‘Abbāsīd Courts,” in *Education and Learning in the Early Islamic World*, ed. Claude Gilliot (Surrey: Ashgate, 2012), 23-37; Maḥmūd Qumbur, “al-Mu‘addibūn wa Ṣan‘at al-Ta’dīb: Dirāsah fī ‘l-Turāth al-Tarbawī al-Islāmī,” in *Dirāsāt Turāthiyyah fī ‘l-Tarbiyah al-Islāmiyyah* (Doha: Dār al-Thaqāfah, 1985), 155-89; Muḥammad ‘Īsā Ṣāliḥiyyah, “Mu‘addibū ‘l-Khulafā’ fī ‘l-‘Aṣr al-‘Umawī,” *al-Majallah al-‘Arabiyyah li ‘l-‘Ulūm al-Insāniyyah* 1 (1981): 35-74; Ṣāliḥiyyah, “Mu‘addibū ‘l-Khulafā’ fī ‘l-‘Aṣr al-‘Abbāsī al-Awwal,” *al-Majallah al-‘Arabiyyah li ‘l-‘Ulūm al-Insāniyyah* 2 (1982): 43-96.

<sup>5</sup> The same thing has been pointed out by Dietrich, “Education of Princes,” 30.

<sup>6</sup> Goldziher, “Education (Muslim),” 5:201-02.

<sup>7</sup> Philip Hitti, *History of the Arabs: From the Earliest Times to the Present*, 10th ed. (London: Macmillan, 1970 [1937]), 409.

Giladi.<sup>8</sup> Some fairly longer treatments can be found in a few Arabic works on Muslim education in general, notably by Shalabī and al-Ahwānī.<sup>9</sup>

Most of such endeavours were hardly anything more than a narration of the medieval Arabic literary jibes on schoolmasters. None of these presented any systematic investigation of the subject or spelt out the dichotomy noted in the sources vis-à-vis the stature of elementary teachers in pre-modern Muslim societies. Recently, however, the topic was surveyed by Ghersetti in a chapter entitled “Primary Schoolteachers between *Jidd* and *Hazl*” in the two-volume *Knowledge and Education in Classical Islam*. In spite of the obvious relevance of its title and the many insights it provides on the topic, the chapter in question is quite heavily engrossed in recounting rife accounts of schoolmasters’ foolishness to the detriment of a thoughtful analysis of their actual social status and the *raison d’être* of the literary criticisms that were aroused against them.<sup>10</sup>

Looking at such accounts as clear anecdotes that were spun around the “perceived” absurdities of schoolmasters, the present article is based on the premise that such literary *topoi* are not sufficiently reliable, at least alone, to guide our perception of schoolmasters’ position in pre-modern Muslim cultures. This article, thus, avoids repeating or commenting on the substance of such folktales and jocular narratives. Instead, it sets out to examine and contextualize the reasons behind the negative literary image of schoolmasters in the different genres of pre-modern Arabic literature. Were these a symptom of any caste-based tendencies? Do they say anything about how education in general was to be valued in the different social strata in medieval Islam? Who led such a tendency against schoolmasters, and why? How expansive was it? Was it a public or an elitist one? Was it indicative of real defects on the schoolmasters’ part? What was the extent of such defects? Were these general in nature? What reasons were there behind them? This paper

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<sup>8</sup> See Arthur. S. Tritton, “Muslim Education in the Middle Ages,” *The Muslim World* 43, no. 2 (1953): 84; Avner Giladi, “Individualism and Conformity in Medieval Islamic Educational Thought: Some Notes with Special Reference to Elementary Education,” *Al-Qanṭara* 26 (2005): 102-03.

<sup>9</sup> Ahmad Shalaby, *History of Muslim Education* (Beirut: Dar al-Kashshaf, 1954); Aḥmad Shalabī, *al-Tarbiyah al-Islāmiyyah: Nuzumuhā, Falsafatuhā, Ta’rīkhuhā*, 6th ed. [title of previous editions: *Ta’rīkh al-Tarbiyah al-Islāmiyyah*] (Cairo: Cairo University, 1978), 218-24; Aḥmad Fu’ād Ahwānī, *al-Tarbiyah fī ’l-Islām* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma’ārif, 1968), 201-11.

<sup>10</sup> Antonella Ghersetti, “Primary Schoolteachers between *Jidd* and *Hazl*: Literary Treatment of Educational Practices in Pre-modern Islamic Schools,” in *Knowledge and Education in Classical Islam: Religious Learning between Continuity and Change*, ed. Sebastian Günther (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 1:488–515.

surveys the criticisms directed at schoolmasters in medieval *adab* literature. A separate subheading probes the position of ‘Amr b. Baḥr al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 255/868), the most significant figure in this regard. The standing of schoolmasters in the *ḥadīth* genre is also explored, including reports commending them, juxtaposed with those censuring or warning them. There is a detailed discussion of the reasons behind the pejorative perceptions of schoolmasters in pre-modern Muslim societies, based mainly on relevant medieval accounts. This is to be followed by an assessment of such narratives and then a conclusion.

### Bitter Criticism and Vilification

Schoolmasters are described in a number of medieval Arabic sources as ignoramus and numskulls.<sup>11</sup> One adage portrays them as the epitome of idiocy: “[Such and such is] more foolish than a schoolmaster!” (*Aḥmaq min mu‘allim kuttāb*).<sup>12</sup> As remarked by Goldziher, the literary mockery of schoolmasters’ intelligence and depicting them as dunces were so common as to pass into a recurrent theme in the *adab* literature.<sup>13</sup> It was even said, “It is enough disrepute (*naqṣ*) of someone to be referred to as a schoolmaster, no matter how meritorious he is.”<sup>14</sup> ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. ‘Alī b. al-Jawzī (d. 597/1201) already ranked schoolmasters at the bottom of his taxonomy of trades, based on the prevalence of idiocy in each of them: “The rationality of a weaver [himself regarded as a simpleton] equals that of seventy schoolmasters.”<sup>15</sup> The teaching of children was described as the calling of the handicapped (*zamnā*), by al-‘Alawī al-Baṣrī (d. 270/884),<sup>16</sup> on the authority of Abū ‘l-‘Alā’ al-Ma‘arrī (d. 449/1057),

<sup>11</sup> For example, see Ibn Qutaybah al-Dīnawarī, *‘Uyūn al-Akḥbār*, 2nd ed., 4 vols. (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣriyyah, 1996), 2:54; Ibn al-‘Adīm al-Ḥalabī, *Tadhkirat al-Ābā’ wa Tasliyat al-Abnā’ al-Musammāh al-Darārī fī Dhikr al-Dharārī*, ed. ‘Alā’ ‘Abd al-Waḥḥāb Muḥammad (Cairo: Dār al-Salām, 1984), 41; Abū Bakr b. ‘Alī b. Muḥammad b. Ḥijjah al-Ḥamawī, *Thamarāt al-Awrāq*, ed. Muḥammad Abū ‘l-Faḍl Ibrāhīm (Beirut: al-Maktabah al-‘Aṣriyyah, 2005), 138-09.

<sup>12</sup> ‘Amr b. Baḥr al-Jāḥiẓ, *al-Bayān wa ‘l-Tabyīn*, ed. ‘Abd al-Salām Muḥammad Hārūn, 7th ed., 4 vols. (Cairo: Maktabat al-Khānjī, 1998), 1:248.

<sup>13</sup> See Goldziher, “Education (Muslim),” 5:201-02.

<sup>14</sup> Al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī, *Muḥāḍarāt al-Uḍabā’ wa Muḥawarāt al-Shu‘arā’ wa ‘l-Bulaghā’*, ed. Ibrāhīm Zaydān (Cairo: Maṭba‘at al-Hilāl, 1902), 23; Ibrāhīm b. Muḥammad al-Bayḥaqī, *Kitāb al-Maḥāsīn wa ‘l-Masāwī*, ed. Muḥammad Badr al-Na’sānī, 2 vols. (Cairo: Maṭba‘at al-Sa‘ādah, 1906), 2:217.

<sup>15</sup> Al-Ḥamawī, *Thamarāt al-Awrāq*, 138.

<sup>16</sup> ‘Alī b. Muḥammad al-‘Alawī al-Baṣrī was the leader of the anti-Abbasid Zanj revolt.

and the profession of the morons (*ḥamqā*) according to some old sayings quoted by al-Jāḥiẓ.<sup>17</sup>

Teaching children was certainly not a fashionable or sophisticated profession, albeit it was the default role for most intellectuals who did not have other means. Such attitudes are echoed in taunts against prominent political figures who began their careers as schoolmasters, particularly in rural districts. A good example of this is al-Ṣāḥib b. ‘Abbād (d. 385/995), a grand Buyid vizier and a prominent litterateur.<sup>18</sup> He vowed to scourge Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī (d. 414/1023), a notable philosopher, for criticizing the former’s epistles and for his reluctance to copy them. The latter responded, “He [i.e., Ibn ‘Abbād] impended me as if I had criticized the Qur’ān, hurled [coiled] menstrual rags at the Ka‘bah, slaughtered the She-Camel of Sāliḥ . . . or said that al-Ṣāḥib was a schoolmaster (*mu‘allim ṣibyān*).”<sup>19</sup> In the same way, al-Ḥajjāj b. Yūsuf al-Thaqafī (d. 95/714), the notorious Umayyad vicegerent, was also scoffed at for reportedly formerly succeeding his father as a schoolmaster in Taif.<sup>20</sup> Referred to with the opprobrious diminutive “Kulyab,”<sup>21</sup> al-Ḥajjāj was reminded through a satirical poem of his foregone days of misery when he was “a humble slave, who early and late kept company with the village boys,” a person whose loaves were always of different shapes—“one without any visible rounding, another round as the full

<sup>17</sup> See Abū ‘l-‘Alā’ al-Ma‘arrī, *Risalat al-Ghufrān*, ed. ‘Ā’ishah ‘Abd al-Raḥmān, 9th ed. (Cairo: Dār al-Ma‘ārif, 1993), 448; al-Jāḥiẓ, *al-Bayān wa l-Tabyīn*, 1:248-49. Also see Qumbur, “al-Mu‘addibūn,” 158.

<sup>18</sup> Al-Ṣāḥib was said to have started his career as a teacher in one of the villages in Taleqan, Iran. Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī, *Mu‘jam al-Udabā’: Irshād al-Arīb ilā Ma‘rifat al-Adīb*, ed. Iḥsān ‘Abbās, 7 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 1993), 2:663. Also see Adolf Grohmann, “Libraries and Bibliophiles in the Islamic East,” trans. Gwendolin Goldbloom, in *Education and Learning in the Early Islamic World*, ed. Claude Gilliot (Surrey: Ashgate, 2012), 314-15.

<sup>19</sup> Al-Ḥamawī, *Mu‘jam al-Udabā’*, 5:1937.

<sup>20</sup> Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. Khallikān, *Wafayāt al-A’yān wa Anbā’ Abnā’ al-Zamān*, ed. Iḥsān ‘Abbās, 8 vols. (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1968-72), 2:30; Zakariyyā b. Muḥammad al-Qazwīnī, *Āthār al-Bilād wa Akhbār al-‘Ibād* (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, n.d.), 99. This narrative, however, is doubted by some, most particularly Ibn Nubātah al-Miṣrī, *Sarḥ al-‘Uyūn fī Sharḥ Risālat ibn Zaydūn*, ed. Muḥammad Abū ‘l-Faḍl Ibrāhīm (Cairo: Dār al-Fikr al-‘Arabī, 1964), 170-71. Also see Shalabī, *Tarbiyah Islāmiyyah*, 52-53n2; Jean Perier, *Vie d’Al-Ḥadjjāj Ibn Yousof (41-95 de l’Hégire, 661-714 de J.-C.): D’Après Les Sources Arabes* (Paris: É. Boullion, 1904), 6ff; Dietrich, “Education of Princes,” 30.

<sup>21</sup> According to Ibn Qutaybah, this nickname was given to al-Ḥajjāj by his mother. See ‘Abd Allāh b. Muslim b. Qutaybah al-Dīnawarī, *al-Ma‘ārif*, ed. Tharwat ‘Ukāshah, 2nd ed. (Cairo: Dār al-Ma‘ārif, 1969), 397.

moon”—because he received them as payment from the parents of the children whom he primed with the *sūrat al-kawthar*.<sup>22</sup>

أَيَسَى كَلْبُ زَمَانَ الْهُرَّالِ      وَتَعْلِيمُهُ سُورَةَ الْكَوْثَرِ  
رَغِيفٌ لَهُ فَلَكَةٌ مَا تُرَى      وَآخِرُ كَالْقَمَرِ الْأُزْهَرِ

‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Muḥammad b. Khaldūn (d. 808/1406), who laments the fact that in his own day the teacher was generally “oppressed, miserable and rootless (*munqaṭi’ al-jidhm*),” did not accept this rife narrative on al-Ḥajjāj’s early career. He pointed out that the latter was born to a nobleman from Thaḳīf, the chief tribe in Taif.<sup>23</sup> Not excluding the possibility that the Umayyad statesman could in his youth have taught the Qur’ān to children, Ibn Khaldūn commented that this was definitely an honourable undertaking, because in the earliest Islamic decades teaching was generally looked upon as a pious duty and a commendable diffusion of religious knowledge.<sup>24</sup> In later times, he explains, it came to be a hackneyed calling that was usually shunned by the Arabs, most particularly the fanatical proponents (*ahl al-‘aṣabiyyah*) of the so-called “Arab precedence.” According to Ibn Khaldūn, those proud Arabs, preferring the elevated posts of governance and rulership, turned up their noses at teaching (*ta’līm*), which was assigned to inferior people; “it ended up having those working in that field [i.e. teaching] despised by the people of authority and *esprit de corps*.”<sup>25</sup>

### Al-Jāḥiẓ on Schoolmasters

As far as the stature of schoolmasters in medieval Muslim cultures is concerned, ‘Amr b. Baḥr al-Jāḥiẓ stands out as the most central source, the exploration of whose position could lead to a better understanding of this enigmatic issue. Al-Jāḥiẓ also represents a particularly interesting case in the relevant literature. While on one hand, he is thought of as the

<sup>22</sup> Ibn Qutaybah, *Ma’ārif*, 548; the translation is of Goldziher, “Education (Muslim),” 201; Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī, *Muʿjam al-Buldān*, 5 vols. (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1977 [1955–57]), 4:487; Abū ‘l-‘Abbās al-Jurjānī, *al-Muntakhab min Kināyāt al-Udabā’ wa Ishārāt al-Bulaghā’*, ed. Muḥammad Badr al-Dīn al-Na’sānī (Cairo: Maṭba‘at al-Sa’ādah, 1908), 118; Dietrich, “Education of Princes,” 30.

<sup>23</sup> The same opinion was adopted by Ibn Nubātah, *Sarḥ al-‘Uyūn*, 171.

<sup>24</sup> Also see Khalil I. Semaan, “Education in Islam, from the Jahiliyyah to Ibn Khaldun,” *The Muslim World* 56, no. 3 (1966): 194.

<sup>25</sup> ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Muḥammad b. Khaldūn, *al-Muqaddimah*, ed. ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad al-Darwīsh, 2 vols. (Damascus: Dār Ya‘rub, 2004), 1:117-18; 2:166-69; Giladi, “Individualism,” 102-03.

most adamant critic of teachers and schoolmasters,<sup>26</sup> on the other, he is depicted as their most zealous advocate.<sup>27</sup> He is equally heavily quoted by schoolmasters' detractors and admirers. Many of the critiques attributed to him, in this regard, take the form of mordant satires. These, however, are not found today in a book bearing al-Jāḥiẓ's name but redacted in later works—most particularly, *Akḥbār al-Ḥamqā wa 'l-Mughaffalīn* (*Anecdotes on the Fool and the Simpleton*) by Ibn al-Jawzī, and *al-Mustaṭraf fī Kull Fann Mustazraf* (*The Novel Compendium of Every Amusing Topic*) by Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Ibshīhī (d. 852/1448).<sup>28</sup> Most lampoons of schoolmasters' purported deficiencies in these and other works are referred back to al-Jāḥiẓ, particularly to his satire on schoolmasters' absurdities, but the original work is missing if ever existed.

Those thinking of al-Jāḥiẓ as a pro-teacher theorist argue that he, contrary to reputation, never authored such a book, underlining that there is no mention of it in Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī's (d. 622/1229) list of al-Jāḥiẓ's literary works.<sup>29</sup> They opined that later authors used his name to ensure the dissemination of their own sarcasm. Scholars interpreted the divergent opinions attributed to al-Jāḥiẓ in different ways. Wadī'ah al-Najm, for example, does not rule out the possibility that he could have authored two works on schoolmasters, a satire and a panegyric, and that while the latter reached us intact, the former was redacted in later recensions.<sup>30</sup> This is plausible in view of al-Jāḥiẓ's habit of writing two treatises on the same topic or social class, one as a critique and another

<sup>26</sup> This perception of al-Jāḥiẓ was referred to and discussed in (among others) Charles Pellat, *The Life and Works of Jāḥiẓ*, trans. D. M. Hawke (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 113; 'Abd al-Salām Hārūn, "al-Jāḥiẓ wa 'l-Mu'allimūn," *Majallat al-Kitāb* 2 (1946): 564-71; Shalabī, *Tarbiyah Islāmiyyah*, 218-19; Ibrahim Geris, *Kitābān li 'l-Jāḥiẓ: Kitāb al-Mu'allimīn wa Kitāb fī 'l-Radd 'alā 'l-Mushabbihah* (Acre: Srugy, 1980), 29-30.

<sup>27</sup> See Shalabī, *Tarbiyah Islāmiyyah*, 218-19; Wadī'ah Ṭāhā al-Najm, *al-Jāḥiẓ wa 'l-Ḥādirah al-'Abbāsiyyah* (Baghdad: Maṭba'at al-Irshād, 1965), 25-6; Geris, *Kitābān li 'l-Jāḥiẓ*, 31-34.

<sup>28</sup> 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. 'Alī b. al-Jawzī, *Akḥbār al-Ḥamqā wa 'l-Mughaffalīn*, ed. 'Abd al-Amīr Muhannā (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr al-Lubnānī, 1990), 149-52; Shihāb al-Dīn al-Ibshīhī, *al-Mustaṭraf fī Kull Fann Mustazraf*, ed. Muḥammad Khayr al-Ḥalabī, 5th ed. (Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifah, 2008), 691-92. Other works which also report sallies attributed to al-Jāḥiẓ on schoolmasters include, al-Ḥamawī, *Thamarāt al-Awrāq*, 138-39, 298-99; Abū Maṣṣūr al-Tha'ālibī, *al-Zarā'if wa 'l-Laṭā'if wa 'l-Yawāqīt fī Ba'd al-Mawāqīt*, ed. Abū Naṣr al-Maqdisī and Nāṣir Muḥammadī Jād (Cairo: Maṭba'at Dār al-Kutub wa 'l-Wathā'iq al-Qawmiyyah, 2009), 395. For more anecdotes on the shortcomings and absurdities of schoolmasters, see al-Iṣfahānī, *Muḥāḍarāt*, 23-25; Shalabī, *Tarbiyah Islāmiyyah*, 220-25.

<sup>29</sup> See al-Najm, *Jāḥiẓ*, 25. In this list, al-Ḥamawī refers to a treatise called *Kitāb al-Mu'allimīn*, but it is not clear whether it is for or against schoolmasters. Al-Ḥamawī, *Mu'jam al-Udabā'*, 5:2118.

<sup>30</sup> Al-Najm, *Jāḥiẓ*, 25.



as an apologia.<sup>31</sup> This practice of al-Jāḥiẓ could be a reflection of his being deeply influenced by Greek sophistry and Platonic dialogues. As such, there is the possibility that he authored the satirical work first, which soon became popular thanks to its anecdotal nature and mordant sense of humour, and then he wrote the defence which fortunately reached us.

Goldziher considered al-Jāḥiẓ to be a salient example of a Muslim thinker “of unbiased mind who made a stand against the hackneyed judgments of the populace, and attained to a more appreciative estimate of an undeservedly maligned vocation [i.e., (primary) teaching].”<sup>32</sup> However, this assessment of al-Jāḥiẓ’s position is solely based on the chapter about schoolmasters (*Fī Dhikr al-Mu’allimīn*) in the latter’s *al-Bayān wa ’l-Tabayīn*.<sup>33</sup> Goldziher does not seem to have been aware of al-Jāḥiẓ’s extant monograph on the topic, namely *Kitāb al-Mu’allimīn*.<sup>34</sup> Be that as it may, the above viewpoint of Goldziher on al-Jāḥiẓ is also agreed by Ibrahim Geris, the editor of the latter work. Geris believes that al-Jāḥiẓ wrote this treatise in defence of schoolmasters against those among his coevals who depreciated their enlightening role in the community.<sup>35</sup> For Günther, al-Jāḥiẓ was likely provoked to write such an apologia of schoolmasters, in addition to the unjust general underestimation, by the poor working conditions which they suffered.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Among the items praised and then dispraised (or vice versa) by al-Jāḥiẓ are the fellowship of rulers; commerce; wine; scribes, etc. His works on all of these are extant and published. For an extensive list of al-Jāḥiẓ’s literary works, including missing ones, see al-Ḥamawī, *Mu’jam al-Udabā’*, 5:2118-20.

<sup>32</sup> Goldziher, “Education (Muslim),” 202.

<sup>33</sup> Al-Jāḥiẓ, *al-Bayān wa ’l-Tabayīn*, 1:248-53.

<sup>34</sup> As noted by Geris, *Kitāb al-Mu’allimīn* was printed for the first time, albeit unedited, as a marginal material in Muḥammad b. Yazīd al-Mubarrad’s *al-Kāmil*. Geris, *Kitābān li ’l-Jāḥiẓ*, 25. Later, in 1922, some parts of the book were translated into English by the British Orientalist Hartwig Hirschfeld, based on the London manuscript of the book. See Hartwig Hirschfeld, “A Volume of Essays by al-Jāḥiẓ,” in *A Volume of Oriental Studies Presented to Edward G. Browne on His 60th Birthday*, ed. Thomas W. Arnold and Reynold A. Nicholson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922), 200-09. In 1931, it was translated into German by Oskar Rescher, *Excerpte und Übersetzungen aus den Schriften des Philologen und Dogmatikers Ġāḥiẓ aus Baġra (150-250 H.)* (Stuttgart: n.p., 1931). The Arabic edition by Geris in 1980 was preceded by a better one that is due to ‘Abd al-Salām Hārūn, published in volume III of *Rasā’il al-Jāḥiẓ* (1964-79). It is this latter version that we will use in the present article.

<sup>35</sup> Geris, *Kitābān li ’l-Jāḥiẓ*, 26-28, 31-32.

<sup>36</sup> Sebastian Günther, “Your Educational Achievements Shall Not Stop Your Efforts to Seek Beyond: Principles of Teaching and Learning in Classical Arabic Writings,” in *Philosophies of Islamic Education: Historical Perspectives and Emerging Discourses*, ed. Nadeem A. Memon and Mujadad Zaman (New York: Routledge, 2016), 75.

Such interpretations, however reasonable, should not cause us to disregard al-Jāḥiẓ's idiosyncrasies and the well-known dismissive side in his personality, which, combined with occasional casuistic tendency, largely set the tone for many of his works. Al-Jāḥiẓ was rightly in a position, in terms of personal traits and rhetorical powers, to disparage, usually within due limits, a range of professional and social groups. As Pellat puts it, his “acute powers of observation, his light-hearted skepticism, his comic sense and satirical turn of mind fit him admirably to portray human types and society; he uses all his skill at the expense of several social groups (schoolmasters, singers, scribes, etc.).”<sup>37</sup>

With that in mind, let us in the following passages try to examine his approach towards schoolmasters as presented in the relevant chapter in his *al-Bayān wa 'l-Tabyīn*, and see whether it was a negative or a positive one. He begins the chapter in question by narrating some folkloric axioms and sayings by well-known figures that collectively reflect a palpably negative attitude towards schoolmasters. For example, he attributed to Ṣiqḷāb [al-Madīnī] (Muḥammad b. Yaḥyā b. Nāfi'), the *mawlā* of 'Abd Allāh b. 'Umar, the following epigram:

وَكَيْفَ يُرْجَى الرَّأْيُ وَالْعَقْلُ عِنْدَ مَنْ يَرْوِخُ عَلَى أَنْتَى وَيَعْدُو عَلَى طِفْلِ

How would reason and intellect be expected from him who moves back and forth between a woman [i.e., his wife at home] and a child [i.e., in the *kuttāb*]?<sup>38</sup>

Misconceptions in attribution arise from the fact that such popular bon mots are cited (and not composed) by al-Jāḥiẓ, but readers and researchers have tended to deal with such statements as though they were his own.<sup>39</sup> The mere fact that he quoted such derisive material, and

<sup>37</sup> Charles Pellat, “Al-Djāḥiẓ,” in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, ed. Bernard Lewis, Charles Pellat, and Joseph Schacht, 2nd ed. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991), 2:386.

<sup>38</sup> Mention of the same verse is also made by Ibn Qutaybah and others, but without attributing it to a certain poet or scholar. Ibn Qutaybah, *Uyūn al-Akḥbār*, 2:54; al-Tha'ālibī, *Zarā'if wa Latā'if*, 394. The only difference in Ibn Qutaybah is that the verb يُرْجَى is replaced with تُرْجَى—both having the same meaning. Ibn 'Abd Rabbih al-Andalusī (d. 328/940), however, attributed this verse to al-Quṭāmī ('Umayr b. Shuyaym, [d. ca. 101/719]). Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. 'Abd Rabbih, *al-'Iqd al-Farīd*, ed. Muḥammad Sa'īd al-'Uryān, 2nd ed., 9 vols. (Cairo: al-Maktabah al-Tijāriyyah al-Kubrā, 1953), 1:48. Also see al-Bayhaqī, *al-Maḥāsīn wa 'l-Masāwi*, 2:217.

<sup>39</sup> For example, see al-Najm, *Jāḥiẓ*, 25; Sebastian Günther, “Advice for Teachers: The 9th Century Muslim Scholars Ibn Saḥnūn and al-Jāḥiẓ on Pedagogy and Didactics,” in *Ideas, Images and Methods of Portrayal: Insights into Classical Arabic Literature and Islam*, ed. Sebastian Günther (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 112n40.

was the earliest extant source to do so, has caused him to be identified as the font of anti-schoolmaster sentiments in Islamic civilization, with the sarcasm attributed to him by later chroniclers conveying a generally negative attitude towards schoolmasters. Also, the perception of him as a critic of the latter could have been nourished by the fact that he was an ardent Mu'tazilī advocate, whereas the majority of them in his time were among the rank-and-file clerical affiliates of the *ahl al-sunnah wa 'l-jamā'ah*. Nonetheless, we have no credible evidence to say that al-Jāḥiẓ's negative outlook on schoolmasters, if at all, could betray a particular personal or denominational stance; if any such ideological currents were involved, they would have been elitist and fashionable ones of high society and metropolitan gentries.

At any rate, in the same chapter al-Jāḥiẓ scrutinized the above old views (this could also be why he cited them), explaining that the type of criticism they convey applies to every social rank and position, where there is always scope for good and bad practices. In his view, there are, besides schoolmasters in the rural districts, two higher categories of teachers. One group moved up from educating the children of the public to educating those of the elite, and the supreme group moved up from educating the children of the elite to educating the children of the kings, including crown princes. In this connection, he brought up a number of illustrious names as examples of renowned teachers, primarily private tutors, who could never be called fools, including recognised scholars, public officials, judges, governors, and military generals.<sup>40</sup>

Another source for scholars' confusion regarding al-Jāḥiẓ's position is the rhetorical patterns which he uses in his fullest available work on teachers, i.e., *Kitāb al-Mu'allimīn*,<sup>41</sup> which is written in a literary-philosophical style.<sup>42</sup> Introduced to modern scholarship relatively late, this work, as Günther remarks, is little known in both Muslim and Western scholarship.<sup>43</sup> The first part of this epistle frequently uses the second person singular. According to Günther, al-Jāḥiẓ here addresses

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<sup>40</sup> Al-Jāḥiẓ, *al-Bayān wa 'l-Tabyīn*, 2:250-52. Also see Claude Gilliot, "Introduction," in *Education and Learning in the Early Islamic World*, ed. Claude Gilliot (Surrey: Ashgate, 2012), xxxvii; Sayyid Muhammad Imamuddin, "Mosque as a Centre of Education in the Early Middle Ages," *Islamic Studies* 23, no. 3 (1984): 162.

<sup>41</sup> 'Abd al-Salām Muḥammad Hārūn, ed., *Rasā'il al-Jāḥiẓ*, 4 vols. (Cairo: Maktabat al-Khānjī, 1964-79), 3:25-42. This particular epistle by al-Jāḥiẓ will henceforth be referred to in the present article as *Kitāb al-Mu'allimīn*.

<sup>42</sup> Sebastian Günther, "Be Masters in That You Teach and Continue to Learn: Medieval Muslim Thinkers on Educational Theory," *Comparative Education Review*, 50 (2006): 371.

<sup>43</sup> Günther, "Advice for Teachers," 112.

the reader first and then responds to an assumed theorist who is captious of teachers in general and schoolmasters in particular.<sup>44</sup> Others, such as al-Najm and Gerjes, believe that al-Jāḥiẓ is here responding to a real harsh critic, as opposed to a fictitious archetype.<sup>45</sup> However, Günther's view on the "fictitious" faultfinder is seconded by other incidents in which al-Jāḥiẓ opted to present his own ideas on certain topics through concocted characters.

That said, the second person singular in the work at stake could not be used to address both the reader and an imagined theorist at the same time, and in the same flow of speech. The very first passage, *per se*, where the author evokes benedictions to the addressee (defined by Günther as the reader), also includes reprimands for his/her undue disparagement of schoolmasters. In addition, this is a typical feature in many of al-Jāḥiẓ's epistles, where he usually begins by saluting and supplicating God for the addressee whom he is poised to criticize right after. It is more likely that al-Jāḥiẓ is not here responding to denunciations of schoolmasters by other critics, whether fictitious or real, but being himself impugned metaphorically, namely by his own self, for his former negative opinions on them (i.e., as expressed in the missing satire).<sup>46</sup> In so doing, al-Jāḥiẓ wanted to give himself a chance to respond to the criticisms aroused against him for formerly mocking schoolmasters and impress by showing himself as a cavalier thinker and Sophist, who can defend opposing views equally patently. As such, al-Jāḥiẓ's *Kitāb al-Mu'allimīn* comes in the form of a self-interrogation, that is to say, al-Jāḥiẓ plays a double role: the speaker and the addressee. The same literary style is found, almost identically, in his epistle which censures the manners of scribes generally, *Kitāb Dhamm Akhlāq al-Kuttāb*,<sup>47</sup> which is also said to be preceded by another in their praise, *Kitāb Madḥ al-Kuttāb*.<sup>48</sup> Again, the former is written as a response to an epistle by another writer who overstated the merits of scribes. Here as well, this other writer is indeed no one else but al-Jāḥiẓ himself.

After a lengthy introduction that reprimands the schoolmasters' critic, al-Jāḥiẓ leaves the role of the speaker to assume that of the

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>45</sup> Al-Najm, *Jāḥiẓ*, 25; Gerjes, *Kitābān li 'l-Jāḥiẓ*, 33.

<sup>46</sup> This view is supported by that al-Jāḥiẓ reportedly wrote this treatise at a late stage in his life—i.e., after he authored *al-Ḥayawān* and *al-Bayān wa 'l-Tabayīn*. See Gerjes, *Kitābān li 'l-Jāḥiẓ*, 28-29.

<sup>47</sup> Hārūn, *Rasā'il al-Jāḥiẓ*, 2:187-209.

<sup>48</sup> The latter, however, is missing but referred to by al-Ḥamawī, *Mu'jam al-Udabā'*, 5:2120.

addressee. In this section, he explains the main reason, in his view, behind the perceived absurdity of many schoolmasters:

It is easier for a child to understand and imitate another [child]. . . . [That being the case] One of the things through which God helps the children is that He has made the manners and mentality of their schoolmasters close to theirs. . . . Do not you see that when even the most voluble and eloquent among the people flatter an infant or speak to a child, they usually consider his [limited] mentality and thus emulate his pronunciation of words? It is inevitable for them [in that case] to cast aside all the noble types of knowledge and elevated discourse which God distinguished them with [i.e., to better communicate with the child].<sup>49</sup>

To conclude on this part, al-Jāḥiẓ's position as indicated by *Kitāb al-Mu'allimīn* and the relevant chapter in *al-Bayān wa 'l-Tabyīn* is definitely supportive of teachers by and large. Quite perceptibly, his views therein are more serious and better-argued than the piquant sarcasm attributed to him by others, and which may (or may not) be excerpts from his missing satire on teachers. Like other medieval Muslim litterateurs, al-Jāḥiẓ had satirical writings on a variety of careers and social segments, and schoolmasters were not unique material for such literary sarcasm. The list in this interesting Arabic literary genre, i.e., *nawādir*, extended to comprise even those on top of the social hierarchy in medieval Islamic societies, including chief judges, viziers, and even caliphs.<sup>50</sup> Unlike many others, Ibn Qutaybah al-Dīnawarī's (d. 276/889) anecdotes on the fools are grouped on a tribal rather than professional basis,<sup>51</sup> whereas those of Ibn al-Jawzī, particularly as reported by Ibn Ḥijjah al-Ḥamawī (d. 837/1433), show clear sectarian classifications as well as biases.<sup>52</sup> Also, the term "*nawādir*"<sup>53</sup> *per se* connotes an integral fatuousness in that comical category of *adab* literature, for which al-Jāḥiẓ was perhaps the best-known figure throughout the entirety of Arabic intellectual history. There is no wonder then that most of the anecdotes in that genre overall were referred to him, whether correctly or erroneously.

The levity of the *nawādir* genre is further accentuated by Ibn al-Jawzī, who expressly stated that the main rationale behind his

<sup>49</sup> Al-Jāḥiẓ, *Kitāb al-Mu'allimīn*, 37.

<sup>50</sup> This is well represented by Ibn al-Jawzī's *Akhbār al-Ḥamqā wa 'l-Mughaffalīn* and al-Tha'ālibī's *Zarā'if wa Laṭā'if*. Ibn Ḥazm al-Andalusī (d. 456/1064) also wrote on "Idiotic Caliphs" (*Nawkā 'l-Khulafā'*). See Iḥsān 'Abbās, ed., *Rasā'il Ibn Ḥazm al-Andalusī*, 4 vols. (Beirut: al-Mu'assasah al-'Arabiyyah li 'l-Dirāsāt wa 'l-Nashr, 1983), 2:73.

<sup>51</sup> See Ibn Qutaybah, *Uyūn al-Akhbār*, 2:37ff.

<sup>52</sup> Al-Ḥamawī, *Thamarāt al-Awrāq*, 132-33.

<sup>53</sup> *Nawādir* is the plural of *nādirah*. It is also known as *laṭīfah*, *nuktah*, *uṭrūfah*, *ṭurfah*, *mulḥah*—all having the same meaning of a "sally."

authorship of *Kitāb al-Ḥamqā* (*Book of Morons*) was to supply a kind of pastime for himself and his readers, to counterbalance the rigorism of constant studying and seeking of knowledge. To rationalize that, he quoted statements by the Prophet (peace be on him) and his Companions, to the effect that it is helpful for an earnest student to seek intermittent diversion. In medieval Muslim scholastic communities, this was usually done through recounting curiously relevant poems and anecdotes. Ibn al-Jawzī also quoted the caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd (r. 170-93/786-809) who said, “Jocular anecdotes polish the mind and make open the ear [i.e., make one better prepared for further pursuit of knowledge].”<sup>54</sup> That being said, while pre-modern literary sarcasm on teachers is unmistakably topological, it reflects a genuinely negative and sardonic sentiment, mainly in the circles of the educated classes, towards schoolmasters of lower socioeconomic status in particular, as investigated below.

### Schoolmasters in *Ḥadīth* Literature

The discord on the intellectual capacity and social status of schoolmasters in medieval Islam found itself expressed in *ḥadīth* literature. Many *ḥadīths* were concocted on the subject (as affirmed by historical context, philological or historical evidence, and the taxonomy of *ḥadīth* scholars), whether for or against them. This escalated the issues to a more serious level, not only because of the well-known authoritative nature of *ḥadīth* but also because the censorious reports here, unlike in the *adab* literature, use repressive rather than derisive address. Some spurious *ḥadīths* portray schoolmasters as scoundrels. As such, they are no longer material for sarcasm but odium—if not damnation. These pseudo-*ḥadīths* were repeatedly disproved by specialists, but some of them found their way into pedagogical literature.

One fabricated (*mawḍūʿ*) *ḥadīth* justifies the irrationality attributed to schoolmasters, which makes them allegedly unworthy of being consulted by people: “. . . for God has deprived them of reason and withheld His blessing from their trade.”<sup>55</sup> Another ranks them as the

<sup>54</sup> Ibn al-Jawzī, *Akhbār al-Ḥamqā*, 15-19; al-Ḥamawī, *Thamarāt al-Awrāq*, 127-28.

<sup>55</sup> Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Dhahabī, *Mizān al-ʿitidāl fī Naqd al-Rijāl*, ed. ʿAlī Muḥammad al-Bajāwī, 4 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Maʿrifah, 1963?), 1:164, as translated by Goldziher, “Education (Muslim),” 5:201. This *ḥadīth*, however, is regarded by al-Dhahabī himself as fabricated (*mawḍūʿ*). Also see al-Dhahabī, *Tartīb al-Mawḍūʿāt*, ed. Kamāl Basyūnī Zaghlūl (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah, 1994), 55. The same judgement was formerly opined by Ibn al-Jawzī, al-Juraqānī, and al-Sūyūṭī, based on a meticulous analysis of the chain of transmitters of the *ḥadīth* under consideration (in its various versions). See Ibn al-

most malevolent people in the Muslim nation, because “they are the least compassionate with the orphans and the cruellest to the poverty-stricken [children].”<sup>56</sup> It may be a sufficient defect for the reliability of the latter *ḥadīth* that it was ejaculated in an angry rant by a certain Sa’d (b. Ṭarīf) al-Khaffāf in response to his son coming home in tears because of a painful corporal punishment administered by his schoolmaster.<sup>57</sup> In another counterfeit *ḥadīth*, the Prophet (peace be on him) was allegedly asked about his thought of teachers, and the answer was surprisingly extremely negative: “Their *dirham* is forbidden property, their livelihood is unjust gain, their speech hypocrisy.”<sup>58</sup> Such reports, however, forged mainly on subjective grounds, blurt out a considerable amount of resentment towards schoolmasters, the reasons for which are to be discussed shortly.

On the other end of the spectrum, there are many popular *ḥadīths*, also mostly counterfeit, which convey a totally different view of schoolmasters, exaggeratedly depicting them as the most virtuous people on earth:

The best among people and among all of those walking on earth are teachers; whenever the religion frays, they renew it. Give unto them,

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Jawzī, *Kitāb al-Mawḍū‘āt*, ed. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Muḥammad ‘Uthmān, 3 vols (Medina: al-Maktabah al-Salafiyyah, 1966), 2:224-5; Abū ‘Abd Allāh al-Juraqānī, *al-Abāṭil wa ‘l-Manākīr wa ‘l-Ṣiḥāḥ al-Mashāhīr*, ed. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ‘Abd al-Jabbār al-Faryawā‘ī, 2 vols (Varanasi: Idārat al-Buḥūth al-Islāmiyyah, 1983), 2:316-19; ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Abī Bakr al-Suyūṭī, *al-La‘ālī’ al-Maṣnū‘ah fi ‘l-Aḥādīth al-Mawḍū‘ah*, 2 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Ma‘rifah, 1975), 1: 200-10; Muḥammad b. ‘Alī al-Shawkānī, *al-Fawā‘id al-Majmū‘ah fi ‘l-Aḥādīth al-Mawḍū‘ah*, ed. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Mu‘allamī (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 1995), 276.

<sup>56</sup> Muḥammad b. Saḥnūn, *Ādāb al-Mu‘allimīn*, ed. Ḥasan Ḥusnī ‘Abd al-Wahhāb and Muḥammad al-‘Arūsī al-Maṭwī, rev. ed. (Tunis: Dār al-Kutub al-Sharqiyyah, 1972), 89; al-Dhahabī, *Tartīb al-Mawḍū‘āt*, 55; al-Shawkānī, *Fawā‘id*, 276.

<sup>57</sup> Ibn Saḥnūn, *Ādāb al-Mu‘allimīn*, 89. This *ḥadīth* is deemed “fabricated” by such authorities as Ibn Ḥibbān, Ibn ‘Adiyy, al-Suyūṭī, and al-Juraqānī. See Ibn al-Jawzī, *al-Mawḍū‘āt*, 1:222-23; al-Suyūṭī, *al-La‘ālī’*, 1:199; al-Juraqānī, *al-Abāṭil wa ‘l-Manākīr*, 2:314-16. This Sa’d b. Ṭarīf was a Kūfan cobbler—hence his epithet “al-Khaffāf” (alias al-Iskāf according to other sources). He was universally deemed an unreliable transmitter and he even used to fabricate *ḥadīth* according to notable authorities, such as Ibn Ma‘īn and Ibn Ḥibbān.

<sup>58</sup> Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Bāqī al-Zurqānī, *Sharḥ al-Zurqānī ‘alā ‘l-Muwatta’*, 4 vols. (Cairo: al-Maṭba‘ah al-Khayriyyah, 1893), 3:7, as translated by Goldziher, “Education (Muslim),” 5:202.

therefore, their just recompense [in other sources, “dignify them”],<sup>59</sup> yet use them not as hirelings, lest you wound their spirit. . . .<sup>60</sup>

O God! Forgive the teachers, prolong their lifespan, and bless their earnings and livelihood [another narration adds: “shelter them under your shade for they teach your Book”].<sup>61</sup>

O God! Forgive the teachers lest the Qur’ān should vanish, and consolidate [religious] scholars lest the religion should vanish.<sup>62</sup>

Ironically, the verb “forgive” (اغفر) in the latter *ḥadīth* was changed in some narrations, presumably by schoolmasters’ detractors, to “impoverish” (أفقر)—similar in the alphabet but totally hostile in approach. The verb used with religious scholars, on the other hand, remained honorific, although rendered “enrich” instead of “consolidate.”<sup>63</sup> This very selective textual mutation indicates that it was schoolmasters specifically who were meant by such libellous campaigns. It also shows how heated in general the disagreement on the stature of schoolmasters was in particular circles. Against this background, there are indeed other *ḥadīths* of widely accepted authenticity on the merits of schoolmasters, particularly those teaching the Qur’ān.<sup>64</sup> The most popular one states, “The best amongst you are those who learn the

<sup>59</sup> The imperative اعطوهم is read by some as عظموهم.

<sup>60</sup> Muḥammad b. Muḥammad b. Muḥammad b. al-Ḥājj al-‘Abdarī, *al-Madkhal*, 4 vols. (Cairo: Maktabat Dār al-Turāth, n.d.), 2:308. Also see Rifā‘ah al-Ṭaḥṭāwī, *al-Murshid al-Amīn li l-Banāt wa l-Banīn*, ed. Munā Aḥmad Abū Zayd (Cairo: Dār al-Kitāb al-Miṣrī, 2012), 764; Giladi, “Individualism,” 106; Tritton, “Muslim Education,” 82. This *ḥadīth* is generally judged as fabricated. See Ibn al-Jawzī, *al-Mawḍū‘āt*, 1:220; al-Dhahabī, *Tartīb al-Mawḍū‘āt*, 54; al-Suyūṭī, *al-La‘ālī*, 1:198; al-Shawkānī, *al-Fawā‘id*, 276; Ibn ‘Abd al-Hādī, *Tanqīh al-Taḥqīq fī Aḥādīth al-Ta‘līq*, ed. Sāmī Jād Allāh and ‘Abd al-‘Azīz al-Khabbānī, 4 vols. (Riyadh: Dār Aḍwā’ al-Salaf, 2007), 4:187-8. The sentence starting from “Give unto them. . . .” is translated by Goldziher, “Education (Muslim),” 5:202.

<sup>61</sup> This one is alleged to have been said by the Prophet in his Farewell Address. Al-Dhahabī, *Tartīb al-Mawḍū‘āt*, 54; Ibn al-Jawzī, *al-Mawḍū‘āt*, 1:220-1; al-Suyūṭī, *al-La‘ālī*, 1:198-99; al-Shawkānī, *Fawā‘id*, 276; Muḥammad b. Khalīl al-Qāwuqjī, *al-Lu‘lu’ al-Marṣū‘ fī mā lā Aṣl lahu aw bi Aṣlihi Mawḍū‘*, ed. Fawwāz Zamarlī (Beirut: Dār al-Bashā’ir al-Islāmiyyah, 1994), 33.

<sup>62</sup> See al-Suyūṭī, *al-La‘ālī*, 2:199; al-Shawkānī, *al-Fawā‘id*, 276; al-Qāwuqjī, *al-Lu‘lu’ Marṣū‘*, 32-33.

<sup>63</sup> Ibn al-Jawzī, *al-Mawḍū‘āt*, 1:222; al-Dhahabī, *Tartīb al-Mawḍū‘āt*, 54; Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī, *Lisān al-Miẓān*, ed. ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ Abū Ghuddah and Salmān ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ Abū Ghuddah, 10 vols. (Beirut: Maktab al-Maṭbū‘āt al-Islāmiyyah, 2002), 5:332.

<sup>64</sup> On these, see Ibn Ḥajar al-Haytamī, *Tahrīr al-Maqāl fī Ādāb wa Ahkām wa Fawā‘id Yaḥtāj ilayhā Mu‘ddibū l-Atfāl*, ed. Muḥammad Suhayl al-Dibs, 2nd ed. (Damascus: Dār Ibn Kathīr, 1987), 29-34, also see 21-28.



Qur'ān and teach it [to others]."<sup>65</sup> This particular *ḥadīth* is said to have been a direct impetus for quite a number of prominent early scholars to teach the Qur'ān to pupils.<sup>66</sup>

### Reasons behind the Underestimation of Schoolmasters

This section attempts to contextualize the conundrum of a bearer and transmitter of sacred knowledge (i.e., the Qur'ān) being ridiculed, even if by certain tendencies, in a presumably religion-centred community. Adam Mez imputed the derisive attitude towards schoolmasters in medieval Islamic cultures to the influence of Ancient Greek *kōmōidia*, where the schoolmaster was made a laughingstock.<sup>67</sup> Ussing and Friedrichsen already remarked that comparable themes are found in the didactic chronicles of Greece and Rome.<sup>68</sup> Both Lammens and Goldziher, however, ascribe the reported underestimation of schoolmasters in medieval Islam to “the haughtiness inherent in the Arabic race,”<sup>69</sup> especially in that many schoolmasters belonged to the *mawālī*, “converted non-Arabs and clients of Arab tribes.” According to Pedersen and Makdisi, “the teacher [i.e., in medieval Islam] was as a rule held in little esteem, perhaps a relic of the times when he was a slave”<sup>70</sup>—just like the ancient Greek slave-tutors of the Romans.

The Arabs, particularly under the Umayyad monarchy, greatly cherished their Arabic race and underestimated the conquered peoples. Khalil Totah argues that the mockeries directed at schoolmasters were rooted in the Arabs' contempt of a profession that, *per se*, does not show

<sup>65</sup> Muḥammad b. Yazīd b. Mājāh, *Sunan*, *ḥadīths* nos. 211-13. *Ḥadīths* from the six Sunni canonical compilations, alongside their numbers, are quoted from *Mawsū'at al-Ḥadīth al-Sharīf: Al-Kutub al-Sittah, Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, Sunan Abī Dāwūd, Jāmi' al-Tirmidhī, Sunan al-Nasā'ī wa Sunan Ibn Mājāh*, rev. al-Shaykh Ṣāliḥ b. 'Abd al-'Azīz (Riyadh: Dār al-Salām, 1999).

<sup>66</sup> See Abū 'l-Ḥasan al-Qābisī, *al-Risālah al-Mufaṣṣilah li Aḥwāl al-Muta'allimīn wa Ahkām al-Mu'allimīn wa 'l-Muta'allimīn* (French), ed. and trans. Aḥmad Khālīd (Tunis: al-Sharikah al-Tūnisīyah li 'l-Tawzī', 1986), 75-76.

<sup>67</sup> Adam Mez, *Die Renaissance des Islams* (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1922); Muḥammad Abū Raydah, *al-Ḥaḍārah al-Islāmiyyah fī 'l-Qarn al-Rābi' al-Hijrī*, 5th ed., 2 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-'Arabī, n.d.) 1:344-46, esp. 345. Also see Dietrich, “Education of Princes,” 30.

<sup>68</sup> Johan L. Ussing and Peter Friedrichsen, *Darstellung d. Erziehungs und Unterrichtswesens bei d. Griechen uund Römern* (Altona: A. Mentzel, 1870), 102.

<sup>69</sup> Goldziher, “Education (Muslim),” 5 :202; Henri Lammens, *Études sur le règne du calife omayyade Mo'âwia Ier* (Paris: Paul Geuthner, 1908), 361.

<sup>70</sup> Pedersen and Makdisi, “Madrasa,” 5:1123.

any chivalrous feats.<sup>71</sup> Arab supremacy in the Arab-Islamic state, which was vigorously and aggressively enforced under the Umayyads but which progressively waned with Persian cultural encroachment, was iterated in military domination and political authority, with intellectuals being relegated to an effete, supporting role. Most of the teachers of literacy in the earliest Muslim generations (along with physicians and other “professionals”) were non-Muslim non-Arab locals of the then newly Islamized territories—a feature already grounded in the cultural contexts of pre-Islamic Arabia.<sup>72</sup> The *katātīb* where arithmetic represented the main subject were usually run by *dhimmi*s, particularly Christians, down to the time of Ibn al-Ḥājj al-‘Abdarī (d. 737/1336).<sup>73</sup>

These views, which ascribe the reported vilification of the teaching profession to arrogance and supremacy of the Arab ruling clique, align themselves with Ibn Khaldūn’s above stance on the irony of al-Ḥājjāy for assuming teaching responsibilities at the beginning of his career. Such views, nonetheless, may only be valid for the early period (particularly under the Umayyads) and are weakened by the fact that, unlike the hapless schoolmasters, teachers of higher education (of whom many were also respected scholars), as well as private tutors, were appreciated in medieval Islam by the rulers and the public. Under the Abbasids as well as their client states and quasi-independent sultanates, knowledge proved to be an efficient passport to wealth and power. The cynicism against schoolmasters is more practically attributable to material reasons to do with particular socio-cultural tendencies and conditions as well as life vicissitudes. The above discussions already revealed two of these, i.e., puerile behaviour due to regular association with the children (as pointed out by al-Jāhiz and others) and excessive cruelty towards them (as stated by the above apocryphal *ḥadīths*). The following sections look carefully into these and other possible reasons, to try to give

<sup>71</sup> Khalil A. Totah, *The Contribution of the Arabs to Education* (New York: Columbia University, 1926; reprint, Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2002); For Arabic version, see Khalil Ṭawṭaḥ, *al-Tarbiyah ‘ind al-‘Arab* (Giza: Wakālat al-Ṣaḥāfah al-‘Arabiyyah, 2019), 38-39.

<sup>72</sup> See Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Ḥayy al-Kattānī, *Niẓām al-Ḥukūmah al-Nabawiyyah al-Musammā al-Tarātīb al-Idāriyyah*, ed. ‘Abd Allāh al-Khālīdī, 2nd ed. (Beirut: Dār al-Arqam, 2016), 2:220; Pedersen and Makdisi, “Madrasa,” 5:1123; Hitti, *History of the Arabs*, 409; Shalabī, *Tarbiyah Islāmiyyah*, 45; Dietrich, “Education of Princes,” 30; Gilliot, “Introduction,” xxxvii.

<sup>73</sup> Ibn al-Ḥājj, *al-Madkhal*, 2:326-31. Also see Tritton, “Muslim Education,” 85; Yahia Baiza, “Islamic Education and Development of Educational Traditions and Institutions,” in *Handbook of Islamic Education*, ed. Holger Daun and Reza Arjmand (Cham: Springer, 2018), 6.

answers and identify nuances concerning a number of related questions. As far as the sources available to us can tell, the critical views on schoolmasters are mainly related to their difficult financial conditions, unfair treatment of pupils, lack of knowledge and intellectual incompetence, and common repellent character traits.

### ***Financial Hardship***

A major underlying reason for negative and condescending views towards schoolmasters was their general poverty, due to the insufficiency and irregularity of their income.<sup>74</sup> The overwhelming majority of them worked for only a pittance.<sup>75</sup> Their resultant dependence on handouts (from parents) and alms (from well-to-do philanthropists) left the majority of them in constant need of the higher social classes. This situation established an attitude of mendicancy, and perhaps dupery among a segment of vulnerable schoolmasters, to secure sustenance, which considerably hurt the prestige and reverence that was supposed to be allotted to them by Islamic society. This may well explain why schoolmasters in general were repeatedly called upon by theorists to show due abstinence consistently. The impression that teachers were using the holy scripture and knowledge in general for material gain, as explored below with regard to the legality of charging for the teaching of the Qur'ān, predisposed some jurists as well as the general public in certain societies to have negative prejudices about the character of schoolmasters. The gravamen of related strictures went so far as to deem invalid the testification of schoolmasters for conceivably making use of the Book of God to earn a living. This practice, in such critics' judgement, harmed the formers' integrity and magnanimity—two essential conditions for a trusted witness (*shāhid 'adl*).

The debate on the legality of taking material compensation for teaching the Qur'ān is an old and multifaceted one.<sup>76</sup> The main quandary emitted from an early discord on how such an activity should be looked upon—a pious act or a profession? In relevant forensics, the teaching of the Qur'ān is usually combined with, and given the same judgement as, the teaching and observance of religious duties such as *adhān* and

<sup>74</sup> On wages of schoolmasters in medieval Islam, see Mubayyiḍīn, "Mulāḥazāt," 124-25.

<sup>75</sup> Ibn Ḥawqal explained that it was common that a schoolmaster would not manage to make ten dinars *per annum*, despite having a large number of pupils. See Abū 'l-Qāsim Muḥammad b. 'Alī b. Ḥawqal, *Ṣūrat al-Ard* (Beirut: Dār Maktabat al-Ḥayā, 1992), 120-21.

<sup>76</sup> See Fatḥī Ḥasan Malkāwī, *al-Fikr al-Tarbawī al-Islāmī al-Mu'āṣir: Mafāhīmuḥu wa Maṣādiruḥu wa Khaṣā'īshuḥu wa Subul Iṣlāḥih* (Herndon, VA: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2020), 162-66.

*ṣalāh*—collectively referred to as *qurab* (pl. of *qurbah*, “good deed”).<sup>77</sup> As remarked by Rosenthal, the financial concerns of schoolmasters constituted an integral part in the works of the early North African Mālikī pundits on primary education.<sup>78</sup> Generally, there are three legal opinions on the issue. One is represented by Mālik b. Anas (d. 179/795), who confirmed that all scholars whom he came to associate with saw no bane whatsoever in the remunerations of schoolmasters.<sup>79</sup> Abū Ḥanīfah (d. 150/772), on the other hand, does not see as acceptable the taking of wages for teaching the Qur’ān. According to a third opinion, however, it is acceptable to take an honorarium (*ithābah*), but not a wage (*ijārah*).<sup>80</sup> The latter judgement could have been informed by the aforementioned counterfeit *ḥadīth*: “Give unto them, . . . yet use them not as hirelings.” Admittedly, none of such legal views gained enough ground to settle the question, which continued to call for more forensic discussion and scrutiny in the centuries to follow.

In practice, however, most schoolmasters not only took remunerations to eke out a living but also sought them desperately. They also applied multiple gimmicks to ply their trade. Ibn al-Ḥājj warned against the bad habit of whom he called “plebeian schoolmasters” (*awām al-mu’addibīn*), attempting to drum up business for their newly inaugurated *maktabs* by placing propagandistic placards and hanging them on the gates.<sup>81</sup> Living amid a largely illiterate populace, some village schoolmasters made use of their mediocre literary skills to secure some critically needed extra income and thus enhance their meagre monetary allowances. To that end, they pursued an array of bromidic engagements, such as documenting marriage contracts and transcribing transaction deeds for the public.<sup>82</sup> This made them fully involved in the prosaic life of their communities. The most indigent among them had no hesitations about earning some extra

<sup>77</sup> Ibn ‘Abd al-Hādī, *Tanqīḥ al-Taḥqīq*, 4:182ff. See also al-Shawkānī, *Fawā’id*, 277.

<sup>78</sup> Franz Rosenthal, *Knowledge Triumphant: The Concept of Knowledge in Medieval Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 290-92. Also see Ibn Saḥnūn, *Ādāb al-Mu’allimīn*, 82-3, 129-31; al-Qābisī, *al-Risālah al-Mufaṣṣilah*, 98-125, 146.

<sup>79</sup> Ibn Saḥnūn, *Ādāb al-Mu’allimīn*, 83; al-Qābisī, *al-Risālah al-Mufaṣṣilah*, 99-100; Ibn al-Ḥājj, *al-Madkhal*, 2:311.

<sup>80</sup> Aḥmad b. Abī Jumu’ah al-Maghrāwī, *Jāmi’ Jawāmi’ al-Ikhtisār wa ‘l-Tibyān fī mā Ya’riḍ li ‘l-Mu’allimīn wa Ābā’ al-Ṣibyān*, ed. Aḥmad Jallūlī al-Badawī and Rābiḥ Bunār (Algiers: al-Sharikah al-Waṭaniyyah, 1975), 27-34.

<sup>81</sup> Ibn al-Ḥājj, *al-Madkhal*, 2:321-22. Also see Goldziher, “Education (Muslim),” 5:204; Tritton, “Muslim Education,” 84.

<sup>82</sup> See Abū ‘l-Faḍl al-Murādī, *Silk al-Durar fī A’yān al-Qarn al-Thānī ‘Ashar*, 4 vols. (Bulaq: al-Maṭba‘ah al-Amīriyyah, 1874-83), 2:20.

payment, no matter how slender, even at the expense of their social dignity. Such self-abasement reverberated in trivial comportments. Ibn al-Ḥājj criticized the tendency of some schoolmasters to write invitations for wedding parties, usually distributed by female bands known as *musta'dhināt al-afrah*,<sup>83</sup> such missives tended to pedantically flatter the invitees using affected titles and epithets, such as “inviolable sanctum” and “elevated asylum,” etc., or writing the invitation as a rhymed panegyric.<sup>84</sup>

The socio-religious stature of schoolmasters was further impaired by the fact that some of them used to “routinely” act as witnesses in legal proceedings in return for compensations, taking advantage of their supposedly good reputation as affiliates of the fraternity known publicly as *ahl al-Qur'ān*, “the people of the Qur'ān.”<sup>85</sup> Those known for the repetitive provision of testimony were unsurprisingly bitterly criticized by scholars. For example, Muḥammad b. Aḥmad b. 'Abdūn al-Tujībī (d. 527/1133), an Andalusian *muḥtasib*, “chief censor,” urged judges against the acceptance of their testimony unless certainty could be attained regarding their integrity.<sup>86</sup> Two prominent judges who are said to have denied their testimony were 'Abd Allāh b. Shubrumah (d. 144/761), the judge of Kufa,<sup>87</sup> and Yahyā b. Aktham (d. ca. 242/857), a chief judge under the Abbasid caliph al-Ma'mūn (r. 198-218/813-33).<sup>88</sup> Meanwhile, we understand from Abū 'l-Ḥasan al-Qābisī (d. 403/1012) that the type of testification (*shahādah*) referred to in the sources did not exclusively denote the one given before a court, but extended to that related to wedding contracts and transactions. Schoolmasters were also warned against that, as their school days ought to have been fully dedicated to teaching their students.<sup>89</sup>

<sup>83</sup> Ibn al-Ḥājj's statement regarding this peculiar pre-modern North African tradition was clearly misread by Goldziher who states, “It is likewise unbecoming that a teacher, in requesting the parents to attend the school-festivals (*afrah*), should in his letter of invitation (*awraq isti'dhānāt*). . . .” Goldziher, “Education (Muslim)”, 5:204.

<sup>84</sup> Ibn al-Ḥājj, *al-Madkhal*, 2:323.

<sup>85</sup> Shalabī, *Tarbiyah Islāmiyyah*, 222.

<sup>86</sup> Muḥammad b. Aḥmad b. 'Abdūn al-Tujībī, “Risālat Ibn 'Abdūn,” in *Thalāth Rasā'il Andalusīyyah fī Ādāb al-Ḥisbah wa 'l-Muḥtasib*, ed. Évariste Lévi-Provençal (Cairo: Imprimerie de l'Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale, 1955), 25-26. Also see E. Lévi-Provençal, “Un document sur la vie urbaine et les corps de métiers à Seville au début du XII<sup>e</sup> siècle: Le traité d'Ibn 'Abdun,” *Journal Asiatique* 224 (1934): 215-16.

<sup>87</sup> Ibn al-Jawzī, *Akhbār al-Ḥamqā*, 149.

<sup>88</sup> Al-Ḥamawī, *Thamarāt al-Awraq*, 138.

<sup>89</sup> Al-Tujībī “Risālat Ibn 'Abdūn,” 25. Also see Tritton, “Muslim Education,” 84.

Another reason for the schoolmasters' testimony being denied and for their leadership of collective prayer to be invalidated was their notoriety for taking things from the children under their charge.<sup>90</sup> Jurisconsults firmly warn schoolmasters against encouraging pupils to bring anything from their houses, "even if as little as firewood." By the same token, they should never accept gifts, no matter what, from the children—all the more so if that was done without their parents' awareness and permission.<sup>91</sup> Schoolmasters were repeatedly warned against seeking or accepting any gifts from parents—the only exception being the one known as *khatmah* (given in return for the pupil's memorisation of the entirety of the Qur'ān) and those given on the two Muslim feasts.<sup>92</sup> Nonetheless, schoolmasters should not try to secure such "legitimate" gifts through illegitimate ways, such as intimidating the pupils or promising them leisure or release (*takhliyah*) in return.

### **Unfair Treatment of the Pupils**

Some schoolmasters tended to inflict cruel punishments on pupils. In medieval Islamic civilization, as in most pre-modern civilizations, the sternness of elementary teachers was infamous and was reinforced by parental approbation. In the belief that bodily chastisement is effective, some of such parents used to present their children at the mercy of schoolmasters, stating, "The flesh is yours and the bones are ours," insinuating that any physical punishment is accepted as long as it does not inflict orthopaedic damage.<sup>93</sup> This is attributable to the common belief in traditional societies that physical pain is conducive to effective outcomes ("no pain, no gain"), including education, as in the medieval Islamic proverb: "Craftsmanship arises whence a tear comes out."<sup>94</sup> One poetic verse reads:

لَا تَنْدَمَنَّ عَلَى الصَّبِّبَانِ إِنْ ضُرِبُوا      فَالضَّرْبُ بَيْرٌ وَبِنْفَى الْعِلْمِ وَالْأَدَبِ

<sup>90</sup> See al-Maghrāwī, *Jawāmi' al-Ikhtisār*, 37.

<sup>91</sup> See Ibn Saḥnūn, *Ādāb al-Mu'allimīn*, 95; al-Qābisī, *al-Risālah al-Mufaṣṣilah*, 144; Ibn Ḥājj, *al-Madkhal*, 2:312-13, 319; Muḥammad b. Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, "al-Adab fī al-Dīn," in *Majmū'at al-Rasā'il*, ed. Abū Shāmah al-Maqdisī (Cairo: Maṭba'at Kurdistān al-'Ilmiyyah, 1910), 67; al-Haytamī, *Tahrīr al-Maqāl*, 91.

<sup>92</sup> The prize for the *khatmah*, in particular, was looked upon by Mālik b. Anas and his Medinan disciples as a moral obligation to be fulfilled by parents. See Ibn Saḥnūn, *Ādāb al-Mu'allimīn*, 123-26; al-Qābisī, *al-Risālah al-Mufaṣṣilah*, 149-64.

<sup>93</sup> See Fāṭimah Muḥammad al-Mubārakī, "Dawr al-Muḥtasib fī 'l-Ḥadd min Zāhirat al-'Unf fī 'l-Katātīb fī 'l-Ḥijāz fī 'l-Aṣr al-Mamlūkī wa 'l-Dawlah al-Sa'ūdiyyah al-Thālithah," *Majallat Qiṭā' al-Dirāsāt al-Insāniyyah* 21 (2018): 368-70.

<sup>94</sup> Al-Maghrāwī, *Jawāmi' al-Ikhtisār*, 41.

Never regret beating the boys; [the effects of] beating will heal, while knowledge and cultivation will endure.<sup>95</sup>

It was expected that schoolmasters and private tutors would apply corporal punishment, even with young princes.<sup>96</sup> The directions which the caliph al-Rashīd gave to Abū 'l-Ḥasan al-Aḥmar (d. ca. 194/810)—the tutor of his son al-Amīn after Abū 'l-Ḥasan al-Kisā'ī (d. 189/805) was afflicted with leprosy—included a leave to apply punishment if needed.<sup>97</sup> In commenting on Sa'd al-Khaffāf's aforementioned *ḥadīth*, Muḥammad b. Saḥnūn (d. 256/870), the author of the oldest *Rules of Conduct for Teachers*, resented the fact that pitiless schoolmasters usually beat the pupils while driven by their own petulance and “caprice,” and not as a penalty for the latter's negligence of assignments.<sup>98</sup> The sources expound on the acceptable limits and efficacy of punishments as understood among the educated classes of the time. It was also stressed that schoolmasters should avoid beating the head and the face. Nor should they insult the pupils using invectives such as “monkey,” “freak,” or “bull.”<sup>99</sup> Scholars who wrote on *ḥisbah* even described the type of whip/lash to be used, as well as the parts in the pupil's body to be lashed, so that he would only feel reasonable pain, but not be injured.<sup>100</sup>

In his noted *al-Muqaddimah*, Ibn Khaldūn wrote a chapter entitled: “On That Toughness with Learners is Harmful to Them.”<sup>101</sup> There, he reveals, from a psychological perspective, how the excessive use of punishment could have dire effects on the ethical make-up of the

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Al-Jāhīz, *al-Bayān wa 'l-Tabayīn*, 1:259; Ṣāliḥiyyah, “Mu'addibū 'l-Khulafā' fi 'l-'Aṣr al-'Abbāsī al-Awwal,” 72.

<sup>97</sup> Ibn Khaldūn, *al-Muqaddimah*, 2:357; al-Bayhaqī, *al-Maḥāsīn wa al-Masāwī'*, 2:212-13. Also see Hitti, *History of the Arabs*, 409.

<sup>98</sup> See also Tritton, “Muslim Education,” 84.

<sup>99</sup> Ibn Saḥnūn, *Ādāb al-Mu'allimīn*, 100-01, 135-36; al-Qābisī, *al-Risālah al-Mufaṣṣilah*, 128-30, 170; Ibn al-Ḥājj, *al-Madkhal*, 2:317, 325; Shams al-Dīn al-Anbābī, *Risālah fi Riyāḍat al-Ṣibyān wa Ta'līmihim wa Ta'dībihim*, ed. Walīd al-'Alī (Beirut: Dār al-Bashā'ir al-Islāmiyyah, 2011), 41-46; al-Maghrāwī, *Jawāmi' al-Ikhtisār*, 35.

<sup>100</sup> Muḥammad b. Muḥammad al-Qurashī (known as Ibn al-Ikhwah), *Ma'ālim al-Qurbah fi Aḥkām al-Ḥisbah*, ed. Muḥammad Maḥmūd Sha'bān and Ṣiddīq Aḥmad al-Muṭay'ī (Cairo: al-Hay'ah al-Miṣriyyah al-'Āmmah li 'l-Kitāb, 1976), 261; 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. Naṣr al-Shayzarī, *Nihāyat al-Rutbah fi Ṭalab al-Ḥisbah*, ed. Muḥammad Ismā'īl and Aḥmad al-Mazīdī (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 2003), 266; Muḥammad b. Aḥmad b. Bassām, *Nihāyat al-Rutbah fi Ṭalab al-Ḥisbah*, ed. Ḥusām al-Dīn al-Samarrā'ī (Baghdad: Maṭba'at al-Ma'ārif, 1968), 161-62; al-Maghrāwī, *Jawāmi' al-Ikhtisār*, 40; al-Haytamī, *Tahrīr al-Maqāl*, 80; al-Anbābī, *Risālah*, 44. Cf. Giladi, “Individualism,” 109-13.

<sup>101</sup> Ibn Khaldūn, *al-Muqaddimah*, 2:356-57.

children and instil in them lingering despicable qualities. More importantly, the gruffness for which some schoolmasters were known runs counter to a well-known Qur'ānic verse: "It is a part of the Mercy of God that you [Muḥammad] do deal gently with them [i.e., adherents]. Were you severe or harsh-hearted, they would have broken away from about you: so, pass over [their faults] and ask for [God's] forgiveness for them. . . ."<sup>102</sup> The above scholastic tendency strongly urged that violence ought to be relaxed in favour of gentleness and building up a good rapport with pupils.<sup>103</sup>

### *Lack of Knowledge and Intellectual Incompetence*

Apart from memorization of the Qur'ān, no specific qualifications were generally required for an individual to establish his own *kuttāb*, nor was he subjected to any type of assessment for that purpose. This was rightly so, particularly in the first three centuries AH. In the early period, the teaching of the Qur'ān was accessible to "whomsoever deemed himself qualified, even if not endorsed by anyone"—as stated by Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505).<sup>104</sup> In later times, when *waqf*-sponsored *katātīb* emerged, there began to be precise recruitment criteria, usually stated in the *waqf* deed itself, with periodic vetting by the *muḥtasib*. The by-far more numerous private *katātīb*, on the other hand, continued down to recent days to elude such official surveillance.

Some schoolmasters contented themselves with only textual memorization of the Holy Scripture and, unlike teachers in the post-*kuttāb* stage, would have hardly committed themselves to any further pursuit of knowledge ever since.<sup>105</sup> Therefore, many of them were criticized, albeit more in the literature than in public perception, for their lack of knowledge—a major defect that usually made itself felt in incidental aspects like the inaccurate pronunciation of Qur'ānic verses and ludicrous grammatical mistakes as well as religious

<sup>102</sup> Qur'ān 3:159.

<sup>103</sup> Muḥammad b. Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* (Beirut: Dār Ibn Ḥazm, 2005), 957; al-Ṭaḥṭāwī, *al-Murshid*, 775-76; Kamil M. El Bagir, "Al-Ghazālī's Philosophy of Education: With Special Reference to Al-Iḥyā', Book 1" (PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 1953), 212; Hitti, *History of the Arabs*, 409. Avner Giladi, *Children of Islam: Concepts of Childhood in Medieval Islamic Society* (Oxford: Palgrave Macmillan, 1992), 2.

<sup>104</sup> 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. Abī Bakr al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān*, 3rd ed. (Cairo: Maṭba'at Ḥijāzī, 1941), 1:178.

<sup>105</sup> See Shalabī, *Tarbiyah Islāmiyyah*, 222; Muḥammad 'Aṭīyyah al-Abrāshī, *al-Tarbiyah al-Islāmiyyah wa Falāsifatuhā*, 3rd ed. (Cairo: Dār al-Fikr al-'Arabī, 1976), 138.



misconceptions.<sup>106</sup> Such failings were too nagging to go unnoticed by zealous scholars. Al-Kisā'ī, for example, reported that he was prompted to teach the Qur'ān in Rey by the common mistakes of schoolmasters which he noticed there.<sup>107</sup> It is because of the same reasons that some jurisconsults, such as Ibn 'Abdūn, insisted that the mere memorization of the Qur'ān, however fundamental a credential this was for knowledge, should never be considered enough qualification for the making of a good schoolmaster, which according to him required “knowledge, experience, and affability.” Ibn 'Abdūn pointed out that in his own day most schoolmasters were “unaware of the essence of the profession of teaching (*ṣinā'at al-ta'līm*).”<sup>108</sup>

In order to counterpoise such critical deficits in their professional eligibility, some teachers in this category reportedly tended to show off the stains of ink (*ḥibr*) on their clothes as a stamp of diligence in teaching.<sup>109</sup> They could have been encouraged to do so by the general appreciation, in scholastic milieus, of such appearance, which was typically indicative of a dedicated scholar. A poetic verse, attributed by some to Muḥammad b. Idrīs al-Shāfi'ī (d. 204/820), reads:

مِدَادُ الْفَقِيهِ عَلَى ثَوْبِهِ أَحَبُّ إِلَيْنَا مِنَ الْعَالِيَةِ

The ink stain on a *faqīh*'s clothes is, for us, more agreeable than fragrances of the most exquisite quality.<sup>110</sup>

It is reported by Ibrāhīm al-Nakha'ī (d. 96/715) to be an aspect of magnanimity that the clothes and lips of a scholar would show ink stains.<sup>111</sup> While this is a legal license, rather than a call for scholars to anoint themselves with ink, some village schoolmasters were accused of deliberately applying ink to themselves to feign seriousness and dedication to their profession.

### **Common Character Defects**

A number of sources blamed the prevalence of inanity among schoolmasters on their regular association with children.<sup>112</sup> As explained

<sup>106</sup> See Ibn Ḥawqal, *Ṣūrat al-Arḍ*, 121-22.

<sup>107</sup> Ibn al-Jawzī, *Akhbār al-Ḥamqā*, 150.

<sup>108</sup> Al-Tujībī, “Risālat Ibn 'Abdūn,” 25.

<sup>109</sup> Aḥmad 'Abd al-Rāziq, *al-Ḥadārah al-Islāmiyyah fī 'l-'Uṣūr al-Wuṣṭā: Al-'Ulūm al-'Aqliyyah* (Cairo: Dār al-Fikr al-'Arabī, 1991), 19.

<sup>110</sup> Al-Maghrāwī, *Jawāmi' al-Ikhtisār*, 49.

<sup>111</sup> See Ibn Saḥnūn, *Ādāb al-Mu'allimīn*, 87-88; al-Qābisī, *al-Risālah al-Mufaṣṣalah*, 134-35.

<sup>112</sup> For example, see Ibn al-Jawzī, *Akhbār al-Ḥamqā*, 149.

previously, some medieval pundits were convinced that spending long hours with children might negatively affect the schoolmaster's personality.<sup>113</sup> While not scientifically substantiated, this notion, a recurrent one in the literature, was ostensibly nourished by accounts of some schoolmasters engaging in vulgar badinage and jokes with their pupils.<sup>114</sup> Apparently, that type of schoolmaster was predisposed to such activities due to both their inherent doltishness and the absence of any formal surveillance—apart from parents' intermittent appraisal of their children's progress, perhaps linked with stipends and/or rewards. As such, a number of scholars and pedagogues warned schoolmasters against taking liberties with their pupils. Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad b. Muḥammad al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), for example, advised them on how to establish decorum with pupils, through such conduct as keeping silent when not in session, and even "looking askance" at them in the meantime. He impelled schoolmasters to look stern and not to fool around with the pupils or anyone else in their presence, and he warned that they should not engage in idle talk with passers-by.<sup>115</sup>

Finally, the proverbial inanity of schoolmasters was explained by al-Ma'mūn, albeit in boyhood, in a markedly interesting way that could indeed be taken to stand for an apologia, a tribute, and a lampoon at the same time. Having been once maltreated by a tutor of his, the young prince reportedly said:

What do you think of him who polishes our minds with his erudition, while his mind blunts because of our nescience? He respects us due to his apperception, but we make light of him due to our frivolity. He sharpens our minds with his knowledge, while his mind fatigues because of our deficiencies. He keeps counterbalancing our ignorance with his knowledge, our inattention with his advertence, and our shortcomings with his perfection, until we take from him the best of his qualities, while he absorbs our bad ones. Therefore, the more we benefit from him, the blunter he becomes. As such, we are like age that takes away from his good qualities and gives him in return our instinctive morals. Throughout his lifetime, he gives us perspicacity and takes from us unawareness. [In that,] he is to be likened to a lamp wick and a silkworm.<sup>116</sup>

<sup>113</sup> See al-Ḥamawī, *Thamarāt al-Awrāq*, 138; al-Tha'ālibī, *Zarā'if wa Laṭā'if*, 394-95.

<sup>114</sup> Ibn al-Ḥājj, *al-Madkhal*, 2:319-20.

<sup>115</sup> See al-Ghazālī, "Adab," 67; cf. al-Qābisī, *al-Risālah al-Mufaṣṣilah*, 128. Also see Tritton, "Muslim Education," 84.

<sup>116</sup> Ibn al-Jawzī, *Akhbār al-Ḥamqā*, 149.

### Reflecting on the above Reasons

In fact, all of the above negative practices are symptoms of one or another of two underlying issues: meagre returns and lack of knowledge.<sup>117</sup> Let us deal with the former first. Insufficient and irregular income was a persistent vexation for most schoolmasters down to recent times. As already seen, this troubled them seriously and caused some of them to come up with a multitude of negative practices, which in turn affected their social status. It should be noted here that, in spite of their low wages, schoolmasters not working in *waqf*-sponsored *katātīb* had to secure the funds needed for hiring the learning place (*kirā' al-ḥānūt*) and supplying writing and punishment tools.<sup>118</sup> With this in mind, the irregularity of income, in particular, and the ensuing dependence on boons, was more of a communal shortfall that was initiated and fuelled by certain religious opinions, particularly those to the effect that teachers of the Qur'ān, which was the main subject in medieval *katātīb* as already referred to, should be given gifts but not wages. This approach was firmly grounded in popular understandings of the Qur'ānic verses on "selling" the word of God.<sup>119</sup> It also generated general sensibilities about charging for teaching religious subjects. With the proliferation of Sufis and ascetics during the classical period offering religious "services" for free, conventional professional teachers would be viewed in a negative light in comparison.

Such limitations caused the damage already referred to, and with the absence of any uniting social form of schoolmasters, the treatment of such challenges was left to the estimation and ethical standards of individuals on an *ad hoc* basis. Gifts, particularly those for the *khatmah* and on the two feasts, were first launched voluntarily by the elite (*khāṣṣah*) and well-off parents, and later developed into a custom. They were consequently deemed allowed, and then, based on their public diffusion, somewhat binding from a religious point of view.<sup>120</sup> Some, such as 'Abd al-Malik b. Ḥabīb al-Sulamī (d. 238/853), a prominent Mālikī jurisconsult from Al-Andalus, differentiated between *ḥadhqāt* (payments for memorization achievements) and *aḥḍār* (any other gifts including

<sup>117</sup> On their average income, see Shalabī, *Tarbiyah Islāmiyyah*, 238ff.

<sup>118</sup> See Ibn Saḥnūn, *Ādāb al-Mu'allimīn*, 103-04; al-Qābisī, *al-Risālah al-Mufaṣṣilah*, 144-45; al-Maghrāwī, *Jawāmi' al-Ikhtisār*, 52; Wadad Kadi, "Education in Islam—Myths and Truths," *Comparative Education Review*, 50 (2006): 313.

<sup>119</sup> Qur'ān 2:41; 3:199; 5:44; 9:9.

<sup>120</sup> See al-Qābisī, *al-Risālah Mufaṣṣilah*, 151-54; al-Maghrāwī, *Jawāmi' al-Ikhtisār*, 35-37; al-Ahwānī, *al-Tarbiyah fī 'l-Islām*, 206-08.

those on the two feasts), seeing that only the former is obligatory because the teacher is entitled to them based on the effort he exerted in this regard.<sup>121</sup> In practice, these religious opinions had a variant impact on the individuals involved and with the absence of a uniform and compelling state policy, the whole situation became muddled. It is this very lack of a clear-cut definition of schoolmasters' material rights which worsened their financial situation and led to the aforementioned distasteful acts by numerous individuals, which subsequently came to be associated with schoolmasters in general.

Another societal shortcoming had to do with unwealthy parents this time. Ibn al-Ḥājj underlined and criticized the fact that some parents in his time tended not to give remuneration to a schoolmaster if it was generally known that he was prepared to teach for the sake of God, capitalizing on the fact that he would not normally stake a claim to any payment. That being the case, Ibn al-Ḥājj interestingly advised schoolmasters to pretend they work for the sake of money (*ma'lūm*), while their true intention had to be seeking God's pleasure.<sup>122</sup> Like others, Ibn al-Ḥājj stressed that material recompenses and otherworldly rewards should not represent the primary objective of schoolmasters.<sup>123</sup> He, however, did not call upon them to quit their profession but to rectify their intention (*niyyah*).<sup>124</sup>

Now we turn to discuss the second main reason that reportedly undermined schoolmasters' reputation in certain medieval Islamic communities, namely their lack of knowledge and mental ineptitude. The above argument that schoolmasters were ridiculed because of their trade, which conceivably depended on rote learning and memorization rather than reasoning and reflection, seems poised to convince. Nonetheless, there are indeed particulars to make us hesitant to draw generalized conclusions based on that view. As we understand from the forensic advice given to schoolmasters by jurisconsults, many of the former tended to study and look into books regularly. Some schoolmasters even authored books in *fiqh* and other branches of knowledge, and yet others wrote books for other authors, although they were advised to do such extra academic activities while not in class or when students would not need their assistance (e.g., when the latter

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<sup>121</sup> See al-Maghrāwī, *Jawāmi' al-Ikhtisār*, 37.

<sup>122</sup> Ibn al-Ḥājj, *al-Madkhal*, 2:309-10; cf. Goldziher, "Education (Muslim)," 5:203.

<sup>123</sup> Ibn al-Ḥājj, *al-Madkhal*, 2:306. Also see El Bagir, "Al-Ghazālī's Philosophy of Education," 212; Tritton, "Muslim Education," 85.

<sup>124</sup> Ibn al-Ḥājj, *al-Madkhal*, 2:306-10.

were engaged in handwriting drills). Otherwise, schoolmasters were to be always industrious in teaching their pupils, dedicating their full time and attention to them.<sup>125</sup>

Good schoolmasters needed to work hard to live up to the standards of their career, as set by professional pundits since the earliest Islamic times. As already referred to, the mere memorization of the Qur'ān, in spite of its paramount significance, would not satisfy such standards to any nicety unless complemented by proper knowledge of phonetic rules of Qur'ānic recitation, orthography, parsing, and desinential inflexion (which entail an understanding of the holy text). According to such specialists, pupils ought not to be moved from one chapter of the Qur'ān to another, unless these aspects are fulfilled. A competent schoolmaster ought to be also acquainted with the variant seven/ten readings of the Qur'ān. This knowledge was and still is, deemed certainly precious, and the prestige of each schoolmaster was mostly judged based on his proficiency in such fields. Graduate pupils, on the other hand, were always proud that they were taught and graduated by certain masters, whose *ijāzahs* (licenses) could be traced back to reputable authorities of the earliest Islamic times. In that context, indoctrination (*talqīn*) was not looked upon as a pedagogical shortcoming but as a source of pride.

There are numerous examples of schoolmasters who were known for their exceptional erudition in a variety of disciplines, with many of them preferring to continue to teach in the *kuttāb* besides their notable academic posts in prestigious institutions of higher education.<sup>126</sup> Having attained the rank of '*ulamā*', they usually did that out of modesty, or because they wanted to benefit the children of the Muslim nation.<sup>127</sup> The vocation of teaching the Qur'ān to children was usually attached with both humility and humbleness, and its low social status paradoxically elevated its spiritual value and qualified it to be thought of as a kind of Sufi practice by some scholars, who decided, usually towards the end of their career, to practise it.<sup>128</sup> Generally, however, unlike Islamic scholars who had measurable relations with the ruling clique and the other social classes,<sup>129</sup> schoolmasters did not manage to organize themselves into any

<sup>125</sup> Ibn Saḥnūn, *Ādāb al-Mu'allimīn*, 101, 122-23; al-Qābisī, *al-Risālah al-Mufaṣṣilah*, 141-42.

<sup>126</sup> See Mubayyidīn, "Mulāḥazāt," 130-31.

<sup>127</sup> See Qumbur, "al-Mu'addibūn," 155-89.

<sup>128</sup> For relevant examples, see Qumbur, "al-Mu'addibūn," 158; Mubayyidīn, "Mulāḥazāt," 128-30.

<sup>129</sup> Cf. Semaan, "Education in Islam," 197, who argues that the prestige accorded to teachers and scholars in general "should suffice to prove the point against the jibes we read about teaching and the teachers of small children in medieval Arabic literature."

sort of a guild that would defend their communal interests and maintain workable liaisons with elite scholars who shared the same genus of trade (i.e., education). As such, they remained closer to the rank and file of society than to higher social ranks.

Starting from the fourth century AH, as already hinted, the *katātīb*, particularly those funded by *waqfs*, “endowments,” were put under state surveillance—represented here by the *muḥtasib*, who in a sense was a medieval Muslim equivalent of the *agoranomos* in Ancient Greek culture. Henceforth, mention began to be made recurrently of specific qualities as must-satisfy criteria for schoolmasters and their assistants.<sup>130</sup> Besides established knowledge of the Qur’ān and the other types of knowledge needed for this particular profession, a schoolmaster ought to be pious, upright, honest, and married—unless he was a virtuous old man. He should be known for his integrity among people, whose opinion in this regard had to be sought prior to appointment.<sup>131</sup> Parents were urged to assign their children to the best schoolmaster available—in terms of knowledge and piety—even if he was far away from where they lived.<sup>132</sup> In this connection, the qualifications required for the hiring of a schoolmaster as stated by the *waqf* deeds due to the Mamlūk sultan al-Ashraf Sha’bān (r. 764-79/1363-77) and emir Jamāl al-Dīn al-Ustādār (d. 814/1411) convey a totally positive image of this vocation.<sup>133</sup>

On the public level, in spite of the above literary criticisms, the notoriety of the term “*mu’allim*” was never universal or sufficiently compelling to prevent people from using it to call any eminent shaykh or esteemed scholar.<sup>134</sup> We are also told about how jubilantly the public

<sup>130</sup> See André Raymond, “Le fonctionnement des écoles élémentaires (*maktab*) au Caire d’après des documents de *waqf*,” in *L’Orient au cœur en l’honneur d’André Miquel*, ed. Floréal Sanagustin et al. (Paris: Maisonneuve & Larose, 2001), 277-78.

<sup>131</sup> See al-Tujībī “Risālat Ibn ‘Abdūn,” 25; Ibn al-Ikhwah, *Ma’ālim al-Qurbah*, 260; al-Maghrāwī, *Jawāmi’ al-Ikhtisār*, 35; Ibn al-Ḥājj, *al-Madkhal*, 2:319. The same condition of being married is also found in Talmudic directives. See Goldziher, “Education (Muslim),” 5:203; Tritton, “Muslim Education,” 84.

<sup>132</sup> Ibn al-Ḥājj, *al-Madkhal*, 2:323.

<sup>133</sup> See Rāshid Sa’d al-Qaḥṭānī, *Awqāf al-Sultān al-Ashraf Sha’bān ‘alā ‘l-Ḥaramayn* (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Malik Fahd, 1994), 97, 119-20; *Hujjat Jamāl al-Dīn al-Ustādār* (no. 106 at Archives of the Sharī’ah Court), cited by Sa’īd ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ ‘Āshūr, *al-Mujtama’ al-Miṣrī fī ‘Aṣr Salāṭīn al-Mamālīk*, 2nd rev. ed. (Cairo: Dār al-Nahḍah al-‘Arabiyyah, 1992), 167-68.

<sup>134</sup> See Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Muqaddasī, *Aḥsan al-Taqāsīm fī Ma’rifat al-Aqālīm*, ed. Michael J. De Goeje (Leiden: Brill, 1877), 369. Also see Semaan, “Education in Islam,” 197. The term “*mu’allim*” is still particularly esteemed in modern Arabic usage. It denotes, besides teacher, an expert in any profession or field.

celebrated *kuttāb* graduates,<sup>135</sup> in a way expressive of the value of both the knowledge acquired and those who delivered it and endorsed the graduation, i.e., schoolmasters.<sup>136</sup> Finally, the popular medieval idea that schoolmasters' mental capacities were badly affected by their frequent association with the pupils is discredited by the fact that the same perception was not equally popular with regard to private tutors, who were also in regular contact with early-age students, even if belonging to higher classes.<sup>137</sup> As already indicated, the negative image of public schoolmasters did not definitely hold good for private tutors, who were typically renowned scholars, enjoying prominent social standing, and in many cases considerable political influence in caliphal and sultanic courts.

## Conclusion

The jibes scattered in a number of classical Arabic sources about schoolmasters cannot, *per se*, be taken to draw any broad-brush picture of their standing in medieval Muslim societies. The modern opinions basing themselves on such sallies *alone* to argue that elementary teachers were “generally” ridiculed in medieval Muslim societies are more impressionistic than analytical. This has mainly to do with the nature of the literary type to which such sallies belong, i.e., *nawādir* (an approximate equivalent to “anecdotes”). In addition to its topological character, the *nawādir* genre showcases an intrinsic lack of seriousness; its focus is to magnify the quirks of the characters at stake. These could be factoids or real stories interspersed with hyperbolic details to better entertain, rather than to inform and instruct. Also, such sallies were not only, or mainly, aroused against schoolmasters; mockeries in that type of literature were also made of a vast range of professions and social strata, including the patriciate and the ruling clique.

<sup>135</sup> Abū 'l-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī, *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, 20 vols. (Bulaq: al-Maṭba'ah al-Amīriyyah, 1868), xviii, 101; Ibn al-Ḥājj, *al-Madkhal*, 2 :332-3; Goldziher, “Education (Muslim),” 5:199; Hitti, *History of the Arabs*, 408; Landau, “Kuttāb,” 568; Tritton, “Muslim Education,” 85.

<sup>136</sup> However, Ibn al-Ḥājj criticized what he deemed extravagant and religiously unacceptable aspects of such celebratory rites, which were known as *iṣrāfah*, *takhrījah*, and *iqlābah*—all with the meaning of “graduation.” Ibn al-Ḥājj, *al-Madkhal*, 2 :331-33. These festivities continued to be observed, in astonishingly the same way, down to recent times. See Duḥaysh, *al-Katātīb fī 'l-Ḥaramayn*, 53-55.

<sup>137</sup> The only episode we can find in the sources on private tutors' intellect being reportedly negatively influenced by the fellowship of young pupils is al-Ma'mūn's above account on his preceptor.

Most modern perceptions of schoolmasters' status in the medieval Islamic world, whether negative or positive, are rooted in one informant, 'Amr b. Baḥr al-Jāḥiẓ, who (beside Abū Nuwās, al-Ḥasan b. Hāni', d. ca. 199/814) is the key figure in the *nawādir* genre taken together. In spite of the mordant sarcasm on schoolmasters attributed to him by later chroniclers and the possibility that he might have written a monograph in this regard, a careful analysis of al-Jāḥiẓ's extant writings on education shows him to be definitely appreciative of the profession and its people. Apart from al-Jāḥiẓ, some of the works which convey negative views on schoolmasters also include reports and statements in their praise. Of course, this is not done to obfuscate the reader; it is only indicative of the non-committal mirthful essence of such writings whose main task was to amuse the reader by amassing curious tales on miscellaneous subjects. Sometimes, depending on the nature of the literary work itself, the negative views on a particular subject are *directly* followed by positive ones on it, disproving any claims for serious generalizations, even if the statements quoted therein do not communicate such a distinction.

Equally inadequate for any reliable perception of schoolmasters' status in pre-modern Islamic cultures are the many *ḥadīths* in their dispraise. As we saw, all of these were fabricated—mostly on idiosyncratic grounds, e.g., to revenge maltreated relative children in particular episodes. That being said, when such tetchy counterfeit *ḥadīths* and literary jibes coalesce with the forensic opinions on schoolmasters' lack of integrity, the advice given by medieval Muslim educationalists against the former's behavioural defects and the negative historical reports to the same effect, it is unmistakably indicative of a genuine negative sentiment towards schoolmasters, or more accurately a category of them. However, the overstated sarcasm set aside, well-argued criticism locates within a comprehensible range, seeing that the existence of a faulty category is universal in every profession and social class. As such, the negative literary images of schoolmasters were egregious caricatures rather than the norm, and the impoverished and incompetent schoolmaster was no more a reality than other literary tropes, such as the avaricious and swindling merchant. Also, the position of schoolmasters in certain medieval Islamic ethos is, in a sense, analogous to the way physicians were traditionally viewed as *medicasters* and quacks in the Middle Ages.

Al-Jāḥiẓ already saved us the effort to indicate that elementary teachers were of different ranks and categories. Any uncalculated generalization on schoolmasters being widely disdained in medieval



Islam is clearly at odds with their supposedly respectful status as the first to pass knowledge, particularly divine knowledge, to Muslim offspring throughout the ages. The negative picture was not a general one; it was particularly true for many indigent schoolmasters in unsympathetic societies. Astonishingly, such a category of schoolmasters continued to subsist in comparable settings down to the modern era, as testified by the writings and autobiographies of notable thinkers who themselves attended the *kuttāb* in their childhood. The type of schoolmasters one would encounter in such modern literary works are almost a replica of those criticized in medieval sources.

Then and now, however, the negative sentiment against schoolmasters *en bloc* is more popular in literature than in public practice. They were comfortably entrusted with teaching the children of Muslim families whose appreciation of the profession and its people was well expressed in the joyful public parades they usually organized in celebration of their children's graduation. Generally, schoolmasters were also engaged in a host of honesty-based notary chores, such as documentation and attestation to contracts, and testification before the court. The fact that this honesty was betrayed by some of them is not enough reason to discredit its existence in them generally. If the reported moral defects were indeed so prevalent among schoolmasters, we would expect a louder campaign against them by zealous religious scholars and social theorists and an ultimate loss of their social recognition in the long term (which is not the case). The above criticisms notwithstanding, schoolmasters were still seen as trustable by the different intellectual groups in medieval Islam, from conservative traditionists to sceptical philosophers. The Brethren of Purity (Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'), for example, advised that the early education of children should be assigned to schoolmasters in the public *katātīb*.

Generally, schoolmasters were called upon by keen voices to enhance their knowledge of the Holy Book, its rules of pronunciation, parsing, and variant readings. Many of them, we know from the legal advice given to them by jurisconsults, used to study and author books. Some were even established scholars. Indigent schoolmasters, on the other hand, usually neglected the path of knowledge. For many of them, this was less a lucrative undertaking than the above remunerated prosaic activities. As such, the scanty and intermittent income represented the key issue in the tragedy of that type of elementary teacher. Had these had salaries commensurate with the vital societal significance of their job, there would have been no need for them to seek extra sources of income and their focus would, even if theoretically,

have been on their profession and its sublime message. At least, we would have had firmer grounds to assess more objectively their ethical and intellectual aptitude.

The dilemma was initiated by some religious opinions which prohibited remuneration of schoolmasters on account that the main subject they taught was the Qur'ān, whose reading and teaching, they said, is a pious deed that could not be rewarded with any material compensation. A pragmatic exit from this jurisprudence *cul-de-sac* was that schoolmasters depended more heavily on honoraria than on fixed salaries. Some families gave salaries, but scant and spasmodic ones. In the course of time, needy schoolmasters became accustomed to and aspiring for seasonal donations and handouts doled out by political figures and well-to-do philanthropists, and (less bountifully, but probably more frequently) by parents. While these were given as a charity as part of good works, they further perplexed the financial situation of disadvantaged schoolmasters, which was aggravated by the near absence of the state. The latter's financial and regulatory interference mainly focused on *waqf*-sponsored *katātīb*, which usually took the form of large orphanages annexed to the central congregational mosques in the main cities in particular. These, while serving large numbers of pupils, were naturally a minority when compared to private *katātīb*. Their existence did not do away with the reasons behind the misery of common schoolmasters.

Against this backdrop, many of the parents in the indigent districts, themselves belonging to the rank and file, usually fell behind in their payment of schoolmasters' fees. Sometimes, the retort made by a number of aggrieved schoolmasters against this "social injustice" clearly crossed the line as per religio-cultural norms. Some of them tended to compare the treatment they received unfavourably to their Jewish counterparts. The pious calls upon them to teach gratuitously were quixotically idealistic and unworkable, given the practical requirements of subsistence. In the absence of the needed financial indemnity, schoolmasters were often crushed under the wheels of life, giving way for the worst of their qualities to manifest themselves boldly. That type of schoolmaster, whose practices smeared the whole picture of the profession, was both a culprit and a victim. Instead of organizing themselves in a sort of a union that would vouch for their rights and improve their financial and social position, they became resigned to the realities of their lives as providing a subsistence lifestyle with precarious and irregular income.

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