

The Rise of Madrasa: Strengthening Islamic Religious Education in Kondo-Busi Village, Tanzania

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Abstract

The Islamic worldview provides children from Muslim backgrounds with a way to interpret their life, establish their values and find meaning. Knowing what is taught in *madrasa* is the basis of understanding the worldview in which children with Muslim backgrounds are raised. In *madrasa*, the teacher (*Usthadh*) focuses on the Quran memorization and the five pillars of Islam. This paper discusses the philosophy, process and content taught to children with Muslim background learning *madrasa* among the Rangi people living in Busi village, Tanzania. The paper follows a study that was carried out among thirty respondents; twenty-four Muslims who were composed of *madrasa* teachers, children with Muslim backgrounds who attended *madrasa*, men and women who had gone through the *madrasa* training; six adult Christians, also composed of missionaries and local evangelists who served in the Busi area. The study employed use of ethnographic research design as a traditional model of qualitative research, thus data collection was done through participant observation and ethnographic interviews.

Keywords: Madrasa, Islamic religion, Muslim, Christian, Missionaries, Evangelism

1. INTRODUCTION

Islam and culture are quite inseparable. This explains why Islam in Africa is mixed with African traditional beliefs in folk Islam. "The Islamic tradition, rooted in both its African and Islamic prove to be highly adoptable and the characteristics assured its survival against determined efforts by European missionaries to subvert it" (Pouwels & Nehemiah 2000, p. 266).

According to Blanchard, "The Arabic word *madrasa* (plural: *madaris*) means 'school'." A *madrasa* is an educational institution offering instruction in Islamic subjects including, but not limited to, the Quran, the sayings (*hadith*) of the Prophet Muhammad, jurisprudence (*fiqh*), and law. As an institution of learning, the *madrasa* is centuries old. One of the first established *madrasa*, called the Nizamiyah, was built in Baghdad during the eleventh Century A.D" (Blanchard 2008, 2). To further the story of *madrasa*, Hegeman points out that:

Thirteen *madrasa* schools existed before 1200, twenty were founded between 1200 and 1300, twenty-nine were founded between 1300 and 1400, and two more after AD 1400. In this period Cairo boasted the largest library in the world, with 40 rooms of books. The *madrasa* movement spread quickly from Cairo to Tunis and to the North African Maghreb. In AD 1285/684 AH, the first North African *madrasa*, called al-Saffarin, was built in Fez...The *madrasa* educational movement in West Africa owes its entire revival to the jihad movements of eighteenth century (Hegeman, 2000, p. 321).

Commenting about madrasa, Rahman says, "the madrasa system reached its highest point in the Ottoman Empire where madrasas were systematically instituted, endowed and maintained under the Shaykh al-Islam's office with remarkable administrative skills and efficiency" (Rahman, 1979, p. 184). Rahman's evaluation of the madrasa in the 'Islamic Scholarship History' notes, "If one was to write a history of great and original thinkers in Islam, one would not find many recruits from the madrasas" (Rahman, 1979, p. 185).

Through *madrasa*, children get acquainted with Islamic worldview and values like what is *halla* (lawful) and *haram* (forbidden). According to Nehls and Eric, apart from teaching what is lawful or forbidden, children with Muslim backgrounds are also indoctrinated to use negative words toward Christians and Christianity. "Anti-Christian propaganda is injected into Muslim children while they are little just to safeguard them from courting [relating] with the Christian faith" (Nehls & Eric, 2006, p. 75).

While teaching Islamic religion, Hegeman says, "The Quran is memorized, thereafter as many traditions as possible. Each *Hadith* portion is repeated three times for better retention. This habit traces back to Prophet's habit of sitting in the mosque and answering a question three times" (Hegeman, 2000, p. 322). This is an indication that the traditions of the prophet and the Islamic scholar's *fatwa* (opinion) must be maintained in teaching basic tenets of Islamic faith in *madrasa*. In talking about the Swahili Muslims, who have many similarities with other Africans, Trimmingham (1980) clearly states:

Teaching has been a strong feature in Swahili culture since the revival of Islam through *Hadrami* [a variety of Arabic spoken by people in Yemen] influence during the ninth and tenth century and even earlier of special interest are the lecture sessions called *darasas*, held in both, Mosque and teachers' houses, and intended not for the training of *ulama* [Islamic religious scholars] but for teaching Arabic, *Fiqh* and Quran exegesis to ordinary interested people (p. 61).

1.1 Lessons Taught in Madrasa

Educating children in an Islamic context primarily focuses on their knowledge of Allah's will through mandatory practice of religious rituals. "Abdul Malik b.al-Rabi.b. al-Saburah reported from his father on the authority of his grandfather: 'the prophet said, "Command your children to pray when they become seven years old, and beat them for it when they become ten"' (Hassan, 2009, p. 126).

Knowledge is power. Lessons taught in *madrasa* have power to train children in the Islamic beliefs and values. Following are six pillars of Islam explained in detail:

1.1.1 The Islamic Confession (Shahada)

Katerega and his Christian friend David Shenk speak of *Shahada* as the key element in Islamic belief. It is said that, without the *Shahada*, there is no Islam. The key people in the *Shahada* are Allah and Prophet Mohammad. Katerega and Shenk state that:

The true believer in Islam must take the *Kalimah* or *Shahada* very seriously... 'La ilahaila 'llah, Muhammadu rasul Allah.' True *Shahada*, which states that there is no god worthy of worship except Allah, is the covenant of submission which all prophets of Allah, from Adam to Muhammad, came to renew. Pronouncing the *Shahada* must be a sincere confession of deep understanding and appreciation for the one true God, who is the Creator, Master, and Ruler of all that is in existence in the universe (Katerega & Shenk, 1980, pp. 54-55).

The *Shahada* should be confessed by Muslims to express their affirmation of the oneness of Allah and their allegiance to Islam. Muslims believe that it is mandatory for all Muslims when they are born to hear the *shahada* and when they die as well so that they may get favor before Allah. It is the *shahada* that shows their allegiance to Allah and his prophet Muhammad. All Muslims are required to perform prayer to Allah on a daily basis.

1.1.2 Prayer (Salat- required to Pray at least 5 times per Day)

There are five kinds of prayers that Muslims should perform every day. Muslims wake up for prayers in the morning and finish their day with prayers. These prayers acknowledge Allah as the one to be worshipped. Nehls & Eric (2009) categorize these prayers as follows:

Fajr (between dawn and sunrise) (with 2 *ruku*: body movements, e.g. prostrations)

Zuhur (between midday and mid-afternoon) (with 4 *ruku*'),

Asr (between mid-afternoon and sunset) (with 4 *ruku*'),

Maghrib (just after sunset) (with 3 *ruku*'),

Isha' (between nightfall and daybreak) (with 4 *ruku*') (p. 144).

These prayers are not normally performed in a mosque, except for the Friday noon prayer.

1.1.3 Giving (Zakat-an Offering to the Needy)

It is required for all true Muslims to give to the poor as a way of showing compassion towards them and to follow the tradition of Prophet Muhammad. "This 'poortax' is a religious duty and should not be less than 2.5% of the income above one's basic needs" (Nehls & Eric, 2009, p. 142). However, children do not practice *Zakat*, but are prepared to practice it when they grow and have income from which to give.

1.1.4 Fasting (Saum-observing Fasting during the Month of Ramadan)

Observing the month of Ramadan through Islamic fasting is a way of spiritual renewal for all Muslims to seek forgiveness of their sins before Allah. This, again, is explained by Nehls and Eric: "Keeping the Fast during the month of Ramadan (*Sawm*) is a duty for all, except the sick, travelers, pregnant women, nursing mothers and children. The Fast is to last from the rising of the sun until sunset" (Nehls & Eric, 2009, p. 142).

1.1.5 Pilgrimage (hajj-a trip to Mecca at least once in a lifetime)

This is the Muslim's trip undertaken at least once in a lifetime to Mecca. Nehls and Eric point out that, "Pilgrimage to Mecca (*Hajj*) is required at least once in a lifetime during the month of Zu'l-Hijjah, if the means allow. There is also a minor pilgrimage (Umrah), which may be performed at all other times. Notably, very considerable cost is involved in a pilgrimage quite apart from the travel fare" (Nehls & Eric, 2009, p. 142). Again, children do not practice *Hajj*, but are taught to be prepared for this important journey at some point in their life time.

1.1.6 Jihad for the Shiites

In *From Seed to Fruit* book by Woodberry, Kim defines jihad as, "(the Muslim struggle "in the way of God")" (Woodberry, 2008, p. 266). It is mentioned above that Muslims are injecting negative attitudes to their children towards Christians. In Busi village, during *Maulid* period, a celebration of Prophet Muhammad's birth, children practice *guarida* (a demonstration of fighting as a sign of how Muhammad spread Islam through Jihad). The basis of this fight is found in the following Quranic verses:

"Then when the sacred Months (the 1st, 7th, 11th, and 12th months of the Islamic calendar) have passed, then kill the *Mushrikun* wherever you find them, and capture them and besiege them, and lie in wait for them in each and every ambush" (Surah 9:5).

"So, when you meet (in fight—*Jihad* in Allah's Cause) those who disbelieve, smite (their) necks till when you have killed and wounded many of them, then bind a bond firmly (on them, i.e. take them as

captives)” (Surah 47:4).

“Fight against those who believe not in Allah, nor in the Last Day, nor forbid that which has been forbidden by Allah and His messenger (Muhammad)” (Surah 9:29).

In *guarida* practice, children in Busi village are taught to be ready using all means of fighting in defending Islam against the infidels (Christians) who are known of going astray against Allah’s will. This kind of teaching demonstrates the difference that exists between the God of Christianity who loves all people without condition and Allah, the god of Islam who requests that mankind fight for His name’s sake.

2. METHODOLOGY

The study adopted ethnographic research design, for it was both a science and an art that assisted in finding the cultural behavior of people in Busi village. Culture, religion and human behavior can be learned and understood. Schenshulel and Margaret point out that “ethnography are a systematic approach to learning about social and cultural life of communities, institutions and other settings” (Schenshulel & Margaret 2010, p. 1).

The study targeted children with Muslim backgrounds who attend *madrasa*, the *madrasa* teachers (Usthadh), the men and women in the area who passed through *madrasa*, missionaries who previously served in this area, the local missionaries, local evangelists and pastors who served in this area, particularly Rangi community at the time of study.

The selection was done using random sampling technique. The second step was choosing key educated people within the village who worked as a point-of-contact to fill in the gap of missing information. The author interviewed a total of thirty people which was a representation of the entire population. Random sampling was used to select the respondents.

A questionnaire was used to collect data and ethnographic interviews were recorded using a *Huawei* mobile phone recorder and participant observation. Data collection steps included “setting the boundaries for the study, collecting information through unstructured [without formal organization or structure] observations and interviews, documents as well as establishing the protocol for recording information” (Creswell 2003, p. 185).

This was done in two stages. First, from the interview recorded transcripts were made; participant observations helped in being eye witnesses of what was going on in the field and thus get appropriate data. The data came from both the *emic* (insiders’) and *etic* (outsider’s perspectives or a proven theory used for analyzing collected data). Secondly, from that data, the author created categories and themes coming from the collected data. “The process of data analysis involves preparing the data, conducting different analysis, moving deeper and deeper into understanding the data, representing the data, and making an interpretation of the larger meaning of the data” (Creswell 2003, p.190).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The informants had differences in their understanding of what the term *madrasa* meant. One of the informants (K1C) said that *madrasa* was an evening program that Muslim children and youth attend. At *madrasa* children learn basic tenets of their faith, the basics of defending their faith against other religions and how to determine and interpret important texts that are taught in the Quran (K1C, 2016). Another informant who was a local evangelist (P1C, 2016) also stated, “*Madrasa* is a class for grounding and preparing young children from Muslim families and others for Islamic beliefs and religious faith.” As for a ten year, old girl (F1M, 2016), “*madrasa ni shule ya dini ya kiislam*,” a Swahili phrase meaning *madrasa* is the school of Islamic religion.

According to this study, there were approximately twenty-six *madaris* in Busi village and two secular schools with one mission preschool that had begun recently. Children in these *madaris* defined the Islamic beliefs as the only truth on earth. The practice of Islam includes praying five times a day, practicing alms giving, fasting during the month of Ramadan, and the recitation of the *shahada*. Most Muslims defined *madrasa* as an important institution in their village. They saw it as the blessing from God while one person had a mixed reaction. The old man whose father was a *madrasa* teacher (S2M, 2016) in the village had a contrary perception. According to him many people in Busi had not attended (formal school) because of keeping cattle and being satisfied with knowledge that was from *madrasa* due to the conviction that they had from the Arabs. Six Christians were interviewed as well; they had been selected based on their standing in the community. They were people who already worked either as missionaries or evangelists in Busi area. This was to help find the proper understanding of the influence of *madrasa* and its missiological perspective from the Christian viewpoint. The findings revealed that Christians had little understanding of *madrasa* because they had never attended *madrasa*. They only based their understanding on their observation and what they thought *madrasa* is all about.

According to one *madrasa* teacher (M1M, 2016) “God planned *madrasa* to be in Busi village.” The man was proud of this statement as he seemed to be very religious and proud of these institutions among the Rangi people in Busi. Another *madrasa* teacher (A2M) said *madrasa* is an Islamic school that teaches the word of Allah from the Quran and Hadith Muslim lady (M9M, 2016) shared the same sentiments. According to her, *madrasa* was an institution that teaches Islamic education. One young Muslim (S1M, 2016) on the other hand

noted that *madrasa* was the process of knowing Allah and Prophet Muhammad. Actually, for this young man, Prophet Muhammad was a valuable person before Allah and all Muslims. He was chosen for a specific mission of helping people worship Allah alone around the world. One Muslim old lady (M6M) said that *madrasa* was the school where the Quran is memorized.

3.1 The Purpose of Madrasa

The purpose of *madrasa* differed based on the religious learning. Most of the Muslims interviewed said that the purpose of *madrasa* was to learn about what is *halal* and *haram*. A *madrasa* teacher (M1M, 2016) said, "In *madrasa* we teach the Quran and respect in the clothes we wear, the Massai and the Samburu who have not embraced Islam do not know how to put on clothes. We teach children that if anyone buys clothes with even one forbidden [stolen] shilling, when he/she prays in the Mosque those prayers cannot be answered by Allah." According to one old Muslim lady (M3M, 2016), the purpose of *madrasa* was to teach the legal and illegal things in life which were the basis of morality in the Quran. According to her what was *halal* should be done and what is *haram* was to be avoided in order to receive Allah's rewards on the day of judgment. As for one *madrasa* teacher (A2M, 2016), "the purpose of *madrasa* was to learn moral values from the Quran, so that all mankind may be able to live well in the society." Another *madrasa* teacher and respected person in the village (M7M, 2016) opined, "The purpose of teaching *madrasa* is to know God because he created man and jinn so that they may worship him." It means that the purpose of existence is worshipping. He also said, "In *madrasa*, children are taught that God is one and He does not have anyone else as his companion."

According to a Christian missionary lady (K1C, 2016) who was working in this community as a secondary school volunteer teacher, "*Madrasa* produces indoctrinated religious followers more than devoted followers." An old missionary lady (D1C, 2016) in this place said, "The main purpose of *madrasa* is to continue the Islamic religion in this region." In addition to this, the Christian missionary (K1C, 2016) observed *madrasa* and concluded its purpose by saying, "The purpose of *madrasa* is training children in the way of Islam." In expanding her explanation, she continued saying, "Ritual washings, reading Arabic, reciting, and defending the faith against other faiths was the main purpose of *madrasa* in Busi village, and children are taught why other religions are wrong." For a local evangelist (Y1C, 2016), who is leading one church in this area, "The purpose of *madrasa* is to expand Islam, investing in children in their early age".

3.2 Function of Madrasa

Madrasas were under the administration of the mosque. Most of *madrasas* in this area belonged to the denomination of Sunni. There was no payment or budget from the central government of Tanzania towards *madrasa*'s education. Evaluation was done locally and thus the standard of education in these schools was low. According to one missionary lady (K1C, 2016), children were taught the basics of their religion as a way of helping them be rooted in the Islamic beliefs. According to the evangelist (Y1C, 2016), a leader of the church in this place, "The *madrasa* children are taught through the singing of the Quran text in the Arabic language." A local evangelist and the founder of the Christian preschool (P1C, 2016) in the area and from the Rangi community observed and said, "Through *madrasa* teachings, more knowledge is acquired that leads children in their religious lifestyle."

Muslims had their own way of looking at the functions of *madrasa*. The author found out that the *madrasa* was established first to help the children in memorization of the Quran. Second, it was to teach the Muslim children how to respect one another. Third, it provided adequate training on how to submit to God (Allah) and respect his prophet Muhammad. Also in *madrasa*, children with Muslim background were taught not to "gossip, mistreat others and care for the vulnerable like orphans, widows and poor." This was shared by a seventeen-year-old boy (S1M, 2016) who had gone through *madrasa*. An old Muslim man (S2M, 2016) had a strong statement and said, "The Arab people lied to the Rangi that Islam was the only true religion and that the practice of all the Islamic pillars should be practiced every day. *Madrasa* teachers were teaching children *Falaq* (the Quranic scriptures that were used to consult the Jinn and make them harm people)."

3.3 Qualifications of the Madrasa Teacher

Most of the Muslims interviewed said that children should begin *madrasa* at the age of seven, because by that time the child's mind is able to grasp the concept that he/she is being taught. They equated that with the same level of many children who begin their primary school education. Many understood that laying a good foundation of *madrasa* learning might help children to know the basic concepts of the Islamic faith and in turn they might be able later on to teach it to others. A *madrasa* teacher (M1M, 2016) reported that to teach in *madrasa* someone needed to have gone through *madrasa* at least to be able to finish thirty *Juzuu* (volumes). This is because one should teach what he/she has learned and memorized. Translation is needed to explain to others what the Arabic text is all about. The Quran could be taught in Arabic but also needs to be translated into Kirangi or Kiswahili. According to the old man who was a *madrasa* teacher (M7M, 2016), "The *madrasa* could

be taught by any teacher who at least knows the Islamic basics. If children are many, they are taught by many teachers.” According to one of the *madrasa* teachers (R3M, 2016), *madrasa* teachers were supposed to have an undergraduate degree in Islamic studies before teaching in *madrasa* class. The teacher of *madrasa* should learn in the Islamic religious schools in Tanga, Zanzibar, or Mwisanga (in Haubi, a village where the Rangi are known to originate from). Older children could teach the little ones, but based on the Balanga street *madrasa* teacher (A2M, 2016); those who had finished and understood the Islamic books were more qualified to teach. Those old children who taught the little ones should know at least ten *Juzuu* (Volumes) from the Quran.

3.4 Materials Taught in Madrasa

The materials taught in *madrasa* were the Quran and the Hadith. According to another *madrasa* teacher (M1M, 2016) who began his teaching career in 1996, “The whole Quran has three hundred *Surahs*; the first *Surah* is *surah-ul-baqara*.” When talking about the teaching in the *madrasa*, a farmer (A3M, 2016), who went through *madrasa* said, “The syllabus emanated from the teachings of Prophet Muhammad. Children begin their lesson with *Alifu* [an Arabic Alphabet].” In addition to this, an old man (S2M, 2016), a carpenter in Balanga Street explained that the Quran had many things. He said that many *madrasa* teachers used *falaq* (the teaching of Jinn); these are specific Quran *Surahs* that could be read to send Jinn to people and also appease them. According to one informant (M4M, 2016), wife to the *Sheik*, who has been teaching *madrasa*, “The reason why children spend more time in *madrasa* class is because of the Arabic language that should be memorized and be used as the language of teaching Islamic beliefs and values.”

3.5 Joining Madrasa

According to these findings every Muslim child that is born in Busi among the Rangi people has to hear the “*athan*” in his right ear; this is because Muslims in this village of Busi value their religion more than anything else and believe that this is for protection against the devil. The first day the child is born is dedicated to their religious ritual. Reaching at the age where children can walk and speak, they start accompanying their brothers or sisters to the *madrasa*. In *madrasa* classes, girls are separated from boys while attending *madrasa*. This seems to help the boys to avoid being tempted by girls but the question that needs to be asked is; can space save someone from sin? Children were also taught that the right religion is Islam and that other religions were wrong. God made man to be a Muslim and this is a call to all people to become Muslims as well. They are taught that Christ did not die on the cross and that He is not the Son of God. The problem is that they don’t open their door to read and understand. They are taught about the story of Christ that He did not die, among other lessons that confuse the Biblical teachings.

3.6 Madrasa Syllabus

The materials that are taught in *madrasa* are the same from one place to another apart from small variations or sometimes different Hadith, the Quran and Hadith being the main training materials. The Quran has one hundred and fourteen *Surahs* which are supposed to be memorized. Many people in Busi village were not able to recite the whole Quran. Not many of the people had read the Hadith either. Children spent two hours daily in the *madrasa* from 4:00 pm. to 6:00 pm. This was daily learning of the Quran apart from Fridays. Some had been in *madrasa* for a period of between four to seven years. However, *madrasa* was interfered with by early marriages, and migrating in search of better pastures. It was surprising when one of the teachers (M1M, 2016) said in an interview that the Quran had three hundred chapters and that *Surah Al Bakara* was the first *surah*.

The language of *madrasa* was ancient Arabic. For a long time, the children could recite the *Surahs* without understanding the information. As indicated by this study, not many children in these schools found something important to do with this kind of training. The village had a large population that felt no satisfaction, but could just express their feeling in a private setting. This was an opening for the church of God to reach out. Some children left *madrasa* without understanding the Quran, but only the propaganda. Although this village seems closed, there was still a door to reach out to children who are open as it is noted that this childhood stage is the moment in which children are open to teachings. The management of *madrasa* class is something to be concerned about as well as what it tells of how children learn.

3.7 Management of Madrasa Class

The findings of this study as concerns the management of *madrasa*, indicated that it was both local and international. ‘Local’ here meant that the teachers and administrators were emanating from the local community. Each *madrasa* had its leadership from the local vicinity. ‘International’ meant that the prophet Mohammad had the upper hand in the management of the *madrasa* through the Quran and Hadith. His influence through the alleged revelation of the Quran that believed to have received from Angel *Gibril* and his lifestyle as the teacher of Islamic beliefs and values are more important to note. The *madrasa* teachers today manage it through following Muhammad’s revelation and tradition. In the management of *madrasa* there is a mentorship kind of

leadership whereby the children in these *madaris* were given responsibilities to lead or demonstrate their abilities. Some of the responsibilities were teaching younger children, making the call to prayer (*adhan*) and cleaning the *madrasa* classes.

The skill for a good organization was lacking in *madrasa* management. In the management of *madrasa*, one man is known to manage the whole program. Teachers did not care about the size of the class because the older children could teach the younger ones. It was surprising to realize the zeal that teachers had; this was evident in the case where one of the teachers was teaching fifty children without payment because he had passion to teach. The mosques had a daily responsibility of teaching the children in the village. Financing the whole system depended on well-wishes from the local community.

4. CONCLUSION

The relative level of importance of the *madrasa* study, its implications for Christian witness to children with Muslim backgrounds in Busi is clearly demonstrated. The significant difference that was observed by the author between *madrasa* and Sunday school training was that the *madrasa* training was done every day of the week apart from Fridays, from 4:00 pm to 6:00 pm, while the Sunday school was only on Sundays for two hours. This was a challenge that the church should take into consideration and create initiatives to train children in the ways of the Lord when they still young so that when they grow up they will not forget it (Proverbs 22:6).

In Christian cycle, the Bible teaches that children should be able to memorize God's word in order for them to live accordingly. Children with Muslim background's discipline of Quranic memorization, should challenge adult Christians to teach their children the Biblical truth both helping in their memorization and application as well. God's instruction to Israel is stated,

Hear, Israel: Yahweh is our God; Yahweh is one: and you shall love Yahweh your God with all your might. These words, which I command you this day, shall be on your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise up. You shall bind them for a sign on your hand, and they shall be symbols between your eyes. You shall write them on the door posts of your house and on your gates (Deut 6:4-7 AMP).

5. RECOMMENDATION

Given different interpretations of *madrasa* worldwide, some taking it as special training for children and adult to be jihadists, and others taking it as merely training in Islamic beliefs and values, it is recommended that in order to understand and provide conclusions on what *madrasa* entails. The study of *madrasa* should consider its cultural, political backgrounds and its geographical locations. This is because *madrasa* may differ from another depending on its location.

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