

Some Challenges Facing Madrasahs in Eastern Africa

Sulait D. Kabali

Islamic University in Uganda

Lecturer, Department of Arabic Language, Faculty of Islamic Studies and
Arabic Language

Email: kabalisulait@gmail.com

Abstract

In my article in the previous issue of this journal, I indicated how madāris contributed to human resource development in East African countries more especially Uganda. In this article I want to put forward some of the challenges that need to be addressed if these schools are to continue performing their duties, otherwise the schools may go off track. In my view, these challenges may be classified into those related to governance, syllabus, teachers, pedagogy, gender and administration, and they are hereby discussed below.

Keywords: challenges, madrasah, East Africa

Muslim schools and mainly *madrasah* pl. *madāris* (religious schools), were built to encounter the forces of missionary schools which were geared towards Christianizing the whole environment. Actually, some Muslim students who joined these schools were converted to Christianity, something that angered the Muslims of that time and forced them to establish their own schools with intention of safeguarding the beliefs of their children. However, the standards of the established Muslim schools were generally not comparable with those of the missionary schools, the situation being worse with Muslim religious schools. Somehow, this state of affairs has continued in many of these schools to this day due to numerous reasons, some of which could be avoided. This paper points out governance, syllabus, pedagogy, gender and administration as the major challenges faced by these schools in East Africa which require urgent attention, if these schools are to compete with others and face the globalization and westernization forces.

Lack of Governing Body

The biggest challenge facing *madrasah* schools throughout East Africa and many other regions is lack of an independent and credible body governing them, which would be the one to direct, plan and supervise these schools. As of today, each school is governing itself depending on the inclination of its initial establishment. Some of these schools, as it was clearly put in my previous article (Kabali, 2019) follow certain institutions in Saudi Arabia while others follow other gulf countries. Of recent, schools following Egypt and in particular Al-Azhar University programs have been founded in the country. These schools are strictly supervised by Al-Azhar University in all educational aspects including the syllabus and even most of the teaching and administrative staff in these schools come from this university. Their

examination programs must be in line with those of Al-Azhar to allow the citizens of Egypt (and their children) working, or for any other reason living abroad to sit for these examinations so that when they go back home, they or their children are not affected by their stay outside their country at the time of examination.

In Uganda, all *madāris* are supposed to be governed and supervised by the education department of Uganda Muslim Supreme Council (UMSC). Indeed, the department gives the impression that it is doing so but the reality is different from the claim (Kakembo, 2013). Actually, even if the department wanted to control these schools, it cannot make it because it is inadequately equipped in all aspects of a supervisory department. My understanding tells me that it is not equipped with the least required man power. From the inception of Uganda Muslim Supreme Council, this department has been working as a curriculum and development centre of the syllabus for the religious schools. To my knowledge, it has not been effective and it has proven to be inadequate. Members of staff of this department with all their zeal of serving the *Ummah* with full measures of sincerity lack the required support. There was a time – and I believe the situation has not changed much – when the whole department was manned by one person – Sheikh Salim Sebaggala who was appointed as the Secretary for Education in the late 70s having worked as a teacher at Bilal Islamic Institute, Bwaise. He even used to type letters by himself. It is currently manned by only two people; the Secretary for Education and the Administrative Assistant. From the inception of UMSC, this department has been putting its emphasis on examinations in which it has not been effective. As far as I know, its major focus has been on authentication of results. According to my recollection, it was during the time of Hajj Jamada Luzinda as Secretary of Education in UMSC – after serving as Permanent Secretary of Education during Idd Amin Dada's government – that the department was somehow equipped with qualified man power to run the affairs of education. Unfortunately, even during his regime penetration of *madāris* was not easy. Many Muslims, especially the head teachers of these schools were not in agreement with his appointment. In spite of that, he was able to formulate rules and regulations which were to be followed by a standard school and I believe this document still exists till today. For sure, many changes must have occurred in it but the fact remains that it is the major and first document. He was assisted by another active and experienced man in matters of Muslim education in Uganda – Hajj Ddungu Lwanga Ismael, who is currently working as the National Coordinator of Uganda National Conference on Muslim Education, seated at Islamic University in Uganda, Kampala Campus. In addition to formulation of rules and regulations, another achievement made during this era was advocating for the teaching of Arabic language in public and private schools of Uganda.

Other East African countries are not different from Uganda, yet they look at it as being the most organized in that area although the reality on ground is as bad as indicated above. Kenya, especially the north eastern part has many *madāris* and the citizens of that area have managed to establish a university based on religious education but they do not have a common governing body. Mustaqbal University in Garissa was established in 2008 and is affiliated to Khartoum University in Sudan. It is my prayer that credible institutions with the capability of doing so take over this matter seriously. It is very unfortunate that Muslims of East Africa have little trust in their Supreme Councils which would have been their backbone on many matters of their concern, education inclusive. Rather, education would be number one on their list.

In the case of Uganda, the Islamic University in Uganda currently is the most qualified institution to do so. However, it cannot do it alone, and its role would be to bring together all stakeholders like Uganda Muslim Supreme Council (UMSC), Uganda Muslim Education Association (UMEA), Uganda Muslim Teachers Association (UMTA) and others to formulate a strong, credible and trustworthy organization to plan, govern, direct, supervise and budget for these *madāris*. In Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda and Burundi similar institutions could also do the same in order to govern these *madāris* properly and even pressurize the governments to recognize their outputs.

Syllabus

The syllabi of *madāris* are foreign-orientated because teachers who were sponsored by different organizations to come and teach in Uganda found no *systematic* syllabus that was to be followed by the system. The delegated teachers, especially those who came in the 70's worked hard and struggled their best to put in place syllabi for both primary and post primary schools. These syllabi have continued to serve as bases for almost all Ugandan *madāris* and they have helped the students of these *madāris*, including the writer, to join colleges and universities outside Uganda. The role of these teachers is highly appreciated. As far as Islam is concerned, the syllabus designed by Sheikh Siraj al-Rahman al-Nadawī has served as a model for the *madāris* of Uganda and other East African countries to become what they are now, and has resulted into educating of many Ugandans abroad.

At the beginning of the 70s, Uganda had only two graduates from Arab countries by the names of Sheikh Musa Sa'd Buyondo and Sheikh Kasim Mulumba from Al-Azhar and Cairo Universities respectively. The former worked as a teacher at Noor Islamic Institute, Katwe - Kampala and Bilal Islamic Institute – the only high *madrasah* institute of that time when it was still operating in one of the suburbs of Kampala known as Bwaise –, while the latter worked as an Imam of Makerere University, the only university by then. Thereafter and specifically when president Idi Amin Dada was overthrown in 1979, Sheikh Kasim was elected by Uganda Muslim Supreme Council to be the

Chief *Kadhi* of Uganda. This is not to forget Sheikh Musa Abdulhamid Katungulu and Sheikh Ali Kivumbi, the first Ugandans who graduated in 1968 from the Islamic University of Madīna and were sent to neighbouring countries immediately after graduating. Today, graduates from Arab countries are in thousands. The efforts of Sheikh Siraj Rahman al-Nadawi and his colleagues will be appreciated by East African Muslim societies forever.

However, to this day, the syllabi of many of these schools have remained foreign-oriented. Their authors put much emphasis on qualifying the students of these schools to study abroad. They bothered so much to equating the syllabi of certain schools with the institutions where they had studied which, so I think, was alright at that time. But as time went by it became obsolete and, therefore, it made these schools look like colleges of either Al-Azhar, Madīna University or other Islamic Colleges and Universities situated in Uganda. None of these schools through their syllabi, as per my knowledge, teach the History of Islam in Uganda whereas many of them go ahead and teach that of history of Arabia. Therefore, a student can write about the whole history of *jāhiliyyah* (a period of ignorance which preceded the coming of Islam) and the history of Arabia while he/she is ignorant about the *jāhiliyyah* or the history of his own country.

The coming back of graduates from Arab countries, especially Saudi Arabia, and the death of many elderly Ugandan sheikhs made Ugandans lose their affiliation to *al-madhhab al-Shāfi‘iyyah* (one school of thought in Islamic jurisprudence). Students who go through these *madāris* these days know very little about this school of thought which their grand fathers who never went through the formal education system used to know in details. Many students of these days are completely ignorant that East African Muslims used to follow the ideology of the *Shāfi‘iyyah* School. It is only graduates of the old system who still understand and appreciate the value added onto them by strictly following the thinking of one school of thought. Some of the graduates have been frequently heard discouraging people from following a certain *madhhab*. They advocate for a direct derivation of *aḥkām* from the Qur’ān and the prophetic *ḥadīth* as if the four Imams were not doing it.

Another problem of equal importance like the former, if not greater, is that until recently these *madāris* were, and others still are, not strictly following one syllabus. Each *madrasah* in one way or another follows a different syllabus although their syllabi have common characteristics. This happens mainly in Arabic language subjects. Teaching of subjects like *al-muṭālī‘ah* (comprehensive reading), *adab* (literature) and in some cases *naḥw* (grammar) depends on books of different countries rather than following a syllabus. One school may be teaching *al-muṭālī‘at al-Su‘ūdiyyah* while another one is teaching the one of Iraq or of al-Azhar and so on. Worse still, at the end of the year some schools set their own examinations, mark them, evaluate the performance of the students and award them certificates!

This practice is dangerous and must be stopped immediately. It leads to having students with the same academic credentials but with different educational backgrounds. Depending on specific books forces students to rely on their memorization capacity rather than on understanding. It has also narrowed down their reading skills, and on the other hand, it has killed their creativity and thinking. The Islamic University in Uganda's efforts to formulate a credible board have been frustrated by some individuals for reasons best known to themselves. In 2004, the university – which is now the main target of students who graduate from these schools – pioneered the work of designing a unified syllabus for these institutions and it implemented it for some years. This effort was appreciated by almost every stakeholder and almost all schools started following the syllabus but unfortunately it was sabotaged by the very people who were assigned the duty of making sure that it succeeds. Although currently this move is neglected by many proprietors of schools, it will for sure result into another dilemma because the university is determined to continue doing its work to the last point. The firm stand of the university will definitely lead into splitting the *madāris* into two and it is only those ones who will follow the recommended path that are to survive.

It is my prayer that the university works hard to ensure that it completes this work as soon as possible to the extent of involving all national bodies concerned like Uganda Muslim Supreme Council (UMSC), National Curriculum Development Centre (NCDC) and the Uganda National Examinations Board (UNEB). In order for this to succeed, a number of principals and head teachers of *madāris* must be brought on board because they are duty-bound to think and make these schools a better future for the Muslim *Ummah* children.

Teachers and Teaching

The teachers in the *madāris* especially those who taught from the 60s to late 80s need to be praised and credited for their commitment to correctly nurture the young stars of this *Ummah* by equipping them with the relevant knowledge they require. Most of them did this, without any external assistance or payment from any organization. They survived on meagre payments and lived at the mercy of the heads of these schools. Each principal or head teacher of the school used to be – and even currently in many schools is still – the appointing authority of most of the teachers. Therefore, they have to dance to his tune or else suffer the wrath of being fired. I am using 'most' because some organizations like Muslim World League (Mecca), International Islamic Call Society (Libya), and African Muslim Agency (Kuwait) and others are sponsoring some of them. Sometimes, the principal / head teacher has no control on this category of teachers and therefore, supervising them becomes problematic especially if the principal is not sponsored by any of these organizations.

Teaching in most of these schools, to the best of my knowledge, is rarely supervised in spite of the fact that in each school the post for director of studies does exist. On the other hand, because some of the teachers were not exposed to teaching techniques during their studies or to any on-job training workshops in pedagogy, they stick to only traditional ways of teaching, e.g. word by word translation. They may even resist any intended change simply because it differs from what is known to them.

Before the unified syllabus which was put in place by UIIU and I believe it is the same in schools of Kenya, teachers solely depended – and some still do – on particular textbooks. Because of this, they would end up teaching only few pages of the texts until the end of the year. This way the ‘syllabus’ can never be covered. However, due to the above-mentioned fact that at the end of the year the very teacher who taught is the one responsible for setting exams and marking them, therefore students in his/her class continue to pass with high grades.

Principals and head teachers of the *madāris* where this habit still exists should, through their directors of studies, pay more attention to this fact. Let the teachers also be reminded that teaching is a big responsibility, which they have accepted to carry on their shoulders. They should also understand that their students are imitating from them that bad habit without them noticing it. In this way, they may, on the day of judgment, be charged of establishing a bad habit in Islam as per the ḥadīth of the Prophet:

من سنّ سنة حسنة في الإسلام فله أجره وأجر من عمل بها، ومن سنّ سنة سيئة في الإسلام فله أجره وأجر من عمل بها.

Meaning that “Whoever introduces something good in Islam is being rewarded for introducing it and his rewards are multiplied according to the number of people who practice it (without necessarily reducing their rewards). Similarly, the one who introduces something bad will have his punishment multiplied according to the number of people who practice it.

In this regard, I would recommend, on one hand, that Muslim organizations in the country and others like Research Centre For Islamic History, Art and Culture (IRCICA), ISESCO in cooperation with Islamic University in Uganda, Uganda Muslim Supreme Council and other sister organizations concerned with Muslim education in Uganda work together to assist these schools by conducting on-job trainings programs for the teachers of these schools during their school holidays, and secondly by establishing teachers’ training colleges or strengthening those in place to train these teachers. The same can also work for East Africa. On another hand, I would request and encourage the Muslim community of Uganda, in particular, and the communities of other East African countries, in general, to establish endowment funds to improve on the welfare of the staff of these *madāris* and cater for other essential needs of these institutions.

Gender Balance

I should make it clear from the beginning that I am not one of the women activists. But the girls of today are the mothers of tomorrow. They should be equipped with knowledge and training in order to defend themselves from the thoughts of global westernization of cultures. They should be taught and given chance to learn and understand their correct roles and responsibilities in developing their societies without necessarily contradicting the teachings of Islam. Failure to do this, our sisters and daughters are likely to be victims of Western cultures. They will bare Muslim names without having any effect of Islam on their daily life. They will not be able to differentiate between good and bad of the waves of this globalization era. Their behaviour and fashion of their dresses will totally contradict the Islamic teachings. If they are not taught and trained properly today, they will perpetuate ignorance to our children in the future.

Generally, girls are relatively few in our schools compared to the number of boys. The problem may not be of our own making but all the same, it is a fact, which requires our attention. Until recently, in Kenya it was considered to be none Islamic to see a Somali Kenyan girl going to school although it is drastically changing. In Uganda, although it was viewed from an Islamic point of view, until recently the number of girls was very few in *madāris*. Up to the late eighties and early nineties one could find a class of 30 students with one or two girls. Some schools could not even allow girls to continue with their studies beyond O' level. However, this situation is gradually changing both in Kenya and Uganda. Many girls these days are joining these schools and they continue up to higher levels. A good number of Somali Kenyan girls join IUIU and some have graduated with Masters degrees. In Uganda, many girls from these Islamic institutions have specialized in Sharia, Islamic studies and Arabic language. At the secondary school level, Bilal Islamic Institute leads other institutions in Uganda when it comes to training of girl-children. According to school newsletters issued every year especially at the completion ceremonies, in the last two years the number of girls has almost been the same as that of boys or slightly more. This is commendable but we need to put in more effort to see that the numbers of girls in our schools increase.

One way of doing so in my view, is to give priority of accommodation facilities to the girls. They are the backbone of the society and the number of disciplinary problems caused when they are day scholars is greater than when they are accommodated at school. What we need is to appoint female wardens for their supervision. Once this is done correctly, and parents put their confidence in our system, they (parents) will be encouraged to bring their daughters to our schools. Definitely, cases of misbehaviour happen in other schools but if they happened in any of the *madāris*, it would be difficult to correct and convince parents to continue bringing their daughters to our

schools. Therefore, strict measures should be put in place before we embark on such a project. In this regard, I am proposing that Bilal Islamic Institute and the Islamic University in Uganda should be consulted on this issue because their girls' hostels have proven to be the best on this matter in our country. Muslim and non-Muslim parents have praised these institutions publicly and privately and they have continued bringing their daughters to them knowing that their daughters are not given full freedom, as some of them would wish.

All the same, all efforts should be put in place to see that the numbers of girl-children at these religious institutions increase more than what they are now. Training them now means training of the future nations which belong to our children and grandchildren.

Dunyawiyyah (Worldly) versus Ukhrawiyyah (Hereafter) Courses

In the past, *madāris* were fertile and were able to produce prominent Muslim scholars like the four Sunni school founders. Great philosophers, physicians and theologians were all products of such schools including the following:

- Abūbakar Muḥammad ibn Zakariyyā' al-Rāzī a.k.a. Abū Bakar al-Rāzī born in al-Rayy, Persia (d.290) was a chief physician in Great Baghdād Hospital and wrote 140 medical works including *Continens* (Al-Hawī) in 10 volumes (Kamal, 1975);
- Abū Aliyyi al-Husein ibn 'Abdullāhi ibn 'Ali b.Sīnā' a.k.a. ibn Sīnā' (d.428/1037) was a great philosopher and at the same time a great physician. He was given the title of al Shaykh al-Raīs "Master and Head" as society's recognition of his medical and philosophical work, and also received a court position post. His work is about 100 books, the greatest being the Canon (ibn Abī Uṣaybī'a);
- Abū al-Walīd Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad ibn Rushd a.k.a. ibn Rushd (Averoes) (d. 595/1198) was a philosopher, a physician and a jurist and served as a *qāḍī* for several years (Nyazee, 1994);
- Ḥasan al-Baṣri, al-Ash'arī; and
- Abū Ḥāmid, Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al-Ghazālī al-Tūsī a.k.a. al-Ghazālī (d.505/1111) (Watt, 1963).

The question to be paused here is, what happened to our schools especially those of East Africa to become barren of such great men? It is up to all of us to find proper answers to the question. Nevertheless, in my view, it lies partly in the way some of our schools deal with what I have preferred to call *al-'ulūm al-dunyawiyyah* (secular courses). In Arabic language, courses like mathematics and statistics are referred to as *al-'ulūm al-riyāḍiyyah*. *Al-'ulūm al-taḥbīqiyyah* terminology refers to physics, chemistry, geology and others. Philosophy and logic are mainly referred to as *al-'ulūm al-'aqliyyah*. *Al-ādāb* will generally refer to subjects like geography, history, economics and others. I do not, and definitely no one should, have a problem with the above terminologies. The problem, however, comes when we want to refer to all of

them, on one hand and to Islamic courses on the other, at a go. Some call them *mawād ākādīmīkiyyah wa ghayr ākādīmīkiyyah* (i.e. academic and non-academic courses). Others would say *ḍiniyyah and wa ghayr ḍiniyyah* (i.e. religious and non-religious). Others still may say call them *al-‘ulūm al-‘aṣriyyah wa ghayr ‘aṣriyyah* commonly translated as secular and non-secular, or as per the subtopic above. I have preferred the latter for personal reasons.

In the year 1981 in Uganda, Bilal Islamic Institute pioneered and imposed on all its students a dual syllabi system. The government school and *madrasah* syllabi were both studied simultaneously. This was opposed by some sister schools blaming Bilal for having diverted from its origins, on one hand, and by some parents on the other. Sheikh Muḥammad Kalanzi, Mr. Ali Kyakulumbye and Sheikh Abtwahiyyu Kinobe, the then Principal, Deputy and Director of studies respectively, must be credited for their firm stand on this matter, which enabled them to resist all kinds of criticisms. During this period, however, no measures were put in place to protect students from being burdened by the load especially at A' level.

In 1986, temporary measures were put in place by suggesting that those students who passed their O' level examinations very well would be allowed to study only the core subjects of the syllabus of *madrasah* in addition to the load of the other syllabus. These measures have helped Bilal students to perform better at A' level and they (measures) have made them to be able to compete favourably with students of other schools. Consequently, they have been able to join any faculty of their wish in higher institutions of learning like Makerere University, Islamic University in Uganda among others. On the other hand, other schools, which have adopted the system of teaching the two syllabi have continued burdening their students who have to equally study all the courses of the two syllabi.

Some schools to this day encourage and teach the *dunyawiyyah* and *ukhrawiyyah* courses in separate sessions instead of integrating them. They still pay less attention to *dunyawiyyah* courses. In my opinion, lessons on timetables should be mixed-up in a way which does not allow students to think of a possible separation between the two, save where the teachers are teaching on part-time basis. I recommend that head teachers of these schools should come together and carefully study the best way of teaching and handling these courses, and they should come up with the best solutions.

Islam urges us to embrace any kind of beneficial knowledge without segregation. Science- and Arts-based fields are all beneficial to the *Ummah*. In fact, the word “*‘alaq*” (clot) of the first *surah* which was revealed to the Prophet (PBUH) can only be well interpreted scientifically. Unfortunately, our schools, generally, have given up teaching of science subjects like Physics, Chemistry, Mathematics and others. Most of our students are Arts subjects oriented. To my knowledge, science laboratories of most *madāris* are not well-equipped. It is my hope that this attitude changes immediately. The above

subjects combined with *proper* understanding of Islamic knowledge, are able to revivify the situation of the *Ummah* from the weak position that it has been subjected to, to a strong one; from darkness, which has been crippling it, to the light that made it champion of the past. The Muslim *Ummah* is now being oppressed because it is considered to be weak. This situation will not change unless we initiate changes from within the system and equip ourselves with whatever is required as directed by our Creator in the following self-explanatory verse of the Qur'an in which Allah for many years declared the fact that:

"إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يَغَيِّرُ مَا بَقِيَتْ حَتَّىٰ يَخُذُوا مَا بَأَنفُسِهِمْ"

"Verily Allah will never change a situation of people until they themselves change what is in their souls".

Administration

The administration of these schools is almost left to their principals and head teachers. Boards of Trustees, Boards of Governors and Teachers and Parents Associations (PTA) are not existing in almost all Ugandan *madāris*. Where they do exist, they are not properly functioning. Many of the principals/head teachers come into these schools without a single grey hair in their heads but after a while or by the time they live the headship of the school, it is found that grey hair has spread all over their heads because of the many problems that they face. They spend sleepless nights thinking of problems and their solutions for both the staff and the students. Due to the lack of administration organs in these schools, students of some schools have misunderstood their administrators and as a result of this, some principals have lost their expensive properties in useless strikes of their students. This situation is dangerous especially when it comes to the management part of it. Uganda Muslim Supreme Council and, or Uganda Muslim Education Association (UMEA) in collaboration with Uganda Muslim Teachers Association (UMTA) should as soon as possible find ways of solving this problem. All these organizations must come together and level the ground bearing in mind that almost all *madāris* are *privately* owned.

Conclusion

In spite of these many challenges, *madrasah* system schools have contributed enormously to the development of East African countries. What is needed is to improve where we are not performing well so that we become competitive in all aspects. Organizing ourselves will benefit the *Ummah* to the extent of compelling our governments to deploy its competent teachers to our schools because we shall be talking with one language.

Lastly, anybody who has been hurt or offended by this writing is kindly requested to forgive the author. His purpose has not been to hurt anybody or any organization. It is high time we developed an attitude of accepting *self* and

developing criticism. It is my conviction that it is better to be blamed and be able to change than to be cursed by the future generations.
May Allah guide all of us to the right path. Amiin.

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