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Islam and the Everyday Life Literacy Practices of Newly Literate Moroccan Women

Reddad Erguig

Laura A. Valdiviezo, *University of Massachusetts - Amherst*



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Islam and the Everyday Life Literacy practices of "Newly Literate Moroccan Women

REDDAD ERGUIG and LAURA A. VALDIVIEZO

Abstract

In this article, we present a case study of the everyday practices of six newly literate Moroccan women who attended literacy classes in Rabat, Morocco. We drew on New Literacy Studies (NLS) and the use of ethnographic methods to explore the participants' life history as well as their literacy attitudes. We do so to offer a practical account of their literate practices as they engage in them. To collect data, we used in-depth and informal interviews, participant observation and documentary photography over the course of one year. Our data analysis used literacy events as basic units where patterns of religious literacy practice were identified through coding and theme analysis. The results indicate that religion is a strong impetus for literacy acquisition and a significant space for participants to use their literacy practices. These results also demonstrate that participants draw on their literacy skills to self-regulate their reading of the Koran and praying. In addition to showing how a literacy program may be relevant to the real life needs of students, the study supports findings of recent research on the embedded nature of literacy practice and the influence of religion on literate behavior outside the school setting. Although the results obtained demonstrate that the six female participants draw on the literacy skills they have acquired in the adult literacy class to serve largely expected functions, some of them also use literacy in original ways and extend the original literacy skills they acquire in the adult literacy class. This is in line with the findings of ethnographic research conducted in newly literate communities which indicates that literacy is used in creative ways and to serve unanticipated functions.

Islam and the everyday life literacy practices of newly literate Moroccan women

This article draws upon a larger ethnographic study (Erguig, 2009c) on adult emergent literacy in Morocco. Through gathering data from interviews, informal discussion, participant observation and artifact collection, the study explores the day-to-day literate behavior of women participants in Adult Basic Education (ABE) and the prominent domains of their literacy use. Our overall goal is to uncover ways in which the participants' print literacy practices are embedded in broader social and cultural institutions and processes, including a

variety of domains, namely the family and everyday life. Within the larger study, formal religion is the major domain in which women put into practice interpreting print and writing skills they learn in the adult literacy class.

The present article focuses on the reading and writing practices of six ABE students within another significant domain: everyday religious life. We show a range of their religious literacy practices. Theoretically we situate this study within the New Literacy Studies (NLS) which analyze literacy as social practice. This perspective views literacy as emerging within a context of social forces and power relationships rather than a decontextualized set of skills. Given this frame, learning to read and write are valued practices when they are studied within a context of the broader social and cultural practices of which they are a part (Scribner & Cole, 1972; Heath, 1983; Street, 1984, 1993, 2001; Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Maddox, 2005; Zubair 2002). Thus, this study highlights the ways in which practices literacy are socially situated within newly literate Moroccan women's lives and as members of a larger Muslim community (as locally and temporally experienced).

The authors of this article aim to (i) highlight the six participants' literacy practices, (ii) describe and analyze their everyday life reading and writing behavior within the religious domain, and (iii) examine the ways the participants' religious literacy practices fit into their personal and/or social lives. We answer the following questions: In the experiences of the participants: what is the role of religion in the acquisition and development of literacy? In what ways and for what purposes do the participants use reading and writing within the religious domain? How do their religious literacy practices fit within their personal and social lives? How are such print literacy practices embedded within different symbolic systems and modes? What strategies do these women use both to learn new literacy skills and/or to deal with challenges they face as they perform literacy skills within the religious domain? Which literacy skills (reading, writing or math, etc.) do they draw on most often?

From a socio-cultural approach we explore literacy uses within the religious domain and highlight the situated and embedded nature of the literacy practices of the six ABE students within this domain. As such this study aims at contributing to an emerging corpus of research that explores the role of religious practices in literacy development (De la Piedra, 2009; Maddox, 2005; Openjuru & Lyster, 2007; Zubair 2002) in contexts other than schools (Hull & Schultz, 2002) where actors engage in complex practices that have non-academic but meaningful purposes. Purcell-Gates (2007, p. 1) notes that "[i]t is now generally recognized that literacy is multiple and woven within the socio-cultural lives of communities, but what is not yet fully understood is how it is multiple – how this multiplicity plays out across and within differing socio-cultural contexts". Second, previous studies on adult literacy in Morocco (see review below) have

Islam and the Everyday Life Literacy practices of Newly Literate Women

not fully explored the ways adult students use literacy in everyday life and more specifically within the religious domain, and this article aims not only to cover the gap in this literature but also to shed light on women's and adult literacy practices that can inform literacy policy, research, and instruction in the context of Morocco. Survey data about ABE (SECAENF, 2006) has shown that religion is a major factor for Moroccan women's decision to enroll in ABE classes; therefore, an ethnographic case study of the literacy practices of newly literate women which voices their own perspectives and focuses on their expectations and socio-cultural constraints has the potential to produce knowledge that can contribute to inform adult literacy policy, research, and instruction in Morocco. In the following section, we describe our context by discussing literacy initiatives surrounding the ABE program.

Context of the study

Literacy policy and research

Since Morocco gained its independence in 1956, national literacy development has been a major policy concern. The policies adopted by the government often have aimed at reducing illiteracy rates through generalizing access to schooling among school-age children and encouraging participation in literacy classes among adults (See Agnaou, 2002). In this effort, non-governmental organizations have also made enormous investments in "illiteracy-eradication programs" both those which partner with the government and those that do not. While international agendas on literacy development led by UNESCO have tended to focus on the education of children, shifts in recent decades have placed global emphasis on adult education, particularly on literacy programs for women. The International Literacy Year in 1990 marked a change in the national adult literacy policy placing more emphasis on the actual acquisition of literacy. In 1997 policies and programs in Morocco began to take account of adult literacy students' specificities and the use of pedagogy suitable for the literacy needs of adults (Direction de la Lutte Contre L'analphabétisme [DLCA], 2003, p. 4). The National charter of education and training marked another change in the Moroccan literacy policy in 2000. Upon its adoption, education and adult literacy became a national priority and a social duty of the State based on the conviction that literacy training is crucial for socioeconomic development (Charte Nationale, 2001; see also DLCA, 2003, p. 2; Secrétariat d'Etat Chargé de l'Alphabétisation et de l'Education Non Formelle [SECAENF], 2006, p. 16). The Charter stated that all the parties should be involved in "the literacy campaign" and that, adopting a functional approach, literacy programs should target the needs of women, especially mothers, in the areas of health and pregnancy, child upbringing, and home/family management.

Despite significant literacy efforts invested since 1956, statistics show that illiteracy and school drop out rates remain high especially among girls and women. Table 1 below presents a snap shot of literacy rates, enrolment, and drop out rates by sex in the country.

Table 1: Breakdown gender of literacy, school enrolment and drop out rates in Morocco in 2006 by sex

	male	female	total	source
Literacy rates (people aged 10 and more)	70.2%	47.3%	58.7%	(Haut-Commissariat, 2007)
School enrollment rates (2006)	90.8%	86.4%	85.4%	(World Bank, 2009)
School drop out rates (children aged 6 and more)	7.72%	10.33	8.90%	(ENANSO, 2006: 73)

Based on the gender gap impacting literacy development for women, a significant number of non-governmental organizations, national and international have focused their actions on adult literacy programs for women in Morocco. However, these programs as well as existing research have paid little to no attention to the impact of local cultural practices, including religious practices, on women's literacy outside the formal domain of education.

In turn, the main focus of the studies that have been published on literacy in Morocco has been on children's literacy practices and not on adult literacy. Wagner and his colleagues contribute one major line of research on literacy by exploring the effects of socio-cultural factors such as language and family background, preschool experience, and socioeconomic status on literacy acquisition among Arabic- and Berber-speaking children within the Moroccan Literacy Project (Wagner, 1993; Wagner, Messick & Spratt, 1986; Ezzaki, Spratt & Wagner, 1987). Afkir (2001) similarly investigates the ways Moroccan children's socialization into a literate environment is shaped by their socioeconomic background.

The research that has taken place in ABE and which is reviewed below, however, has three main foci. The first is concerned with the Moroccan government's efforts to fight illiteracy rates, taking down the obstacles that face literacy instruction and designing appropriate strategies to disseminate literacy (Essaknaoui, 1998; Qabaj, 1998; Madi, 1999). The second type of research

Islam and the Everyday Life Literacy practices of 'Newly Literate Women

involves fieldwork and is concerned with the adult students' demographic characteristics, the reasons for their failure to attend school, their motivations to enroll in literacy programs and the literacy difficulties they face (SECAENF, 2006). Other studies within this line of research offer an assessment of the adult students' literacy achievements, the correspondence between the participants' needs and the program objectives as well as women's depiction in the adult literacy primers (Ibaaquil, 2001; Boukous & Agnaou, 2001; Agnaou, 2002). These studies focus on the participants' characteristics and needs and highlight their limitations especially in functional literacy skills and in writing. By relying solely on self-reported data collected through quantitative data collection instruments and statistical measures (SECAENF, 2006), or by measuring the participants' literacy achievements using school-based tests only (Boukous & Agnaou, 2001; Agnaou, 2002) such studies face methodological limitations. Until now, studies of literacy programs in Morocco have not paid attention to the participants' contextualized literacy uses; a gap in the literature that the present study aims to address.

The third type of research on ABE in Morocco is ethnographic in nature and focuses on female adult literacy participants (Erguig 2009 a, b & c). Drawing on the social theory of literacy, this type of research is concerned with the ways newly literate Moroccan women use reading and writing in everyday life. On the one hand, it situates ABE participants' literacy practices within their status as women and mothers, framing them within gender studies. On the other hand, the participants' literacy behavior is studied from the perspective of their status as newly literate people who have just recently become able to break the code and to make sense of the increasingly textual world around them. This article intends to offer an account of the ways six women use literacy within the religious domain.

Adult literacy programs in Morocco

In a national survey conducted by the Moroccan Ministry of Education in 2006 to explore the characteristics and expectations of ABE students, religion (i.e. Islam¹) was one of the two major factors explaining their decision to enroll in an

¹ Islam is a religion of the book that has 1.3 billion followers. Based on the Words of Allah as revealed in the Koran –the unique Holy book for Muslims- Islam has five pillars: to say that there is no God but Allah and Muhammad is his Prophet, pray five times a day, observe fasting in the month of Ramadan, give alms to the poor and go on pilgrimage to Mecca if possible. It is noteworthy that the first chapter revealed to Prophet Mohammed fifteen centuries ago was named "read". Reading the Koran and memorizing chapters (Sourates) or verses (ay'at) from it are therefore essential for any Muslim. In most mosques in Morocco, people recite and/or read the hizb (i.e. one sixtieth of the whole Koran) twice a day: after the dawn and the sunset prayers. A part of the Koran is also recited before the Friday prayer at noon. Besides, during all one's prayers, it is mandatory to recite the opening chapter of the Koran (al-fatiha) in addition to

adult literacy class. In fact, while 93.5% of ABE students expect to learn the basic literacy and numeracy skills, 91,6% of them expect to be able to better perform their religious duties¹ (SECAENF, 2006, p. 114). A range of other factors from social and economic status, emotional well-being and political participation were also highlighted. In terms of outcome, survey results show that the clearest and strongest impact of the adult literacy classes was in the religious domain. The newly literate reported that they used to turn to family members (75,8%) and neighbors (41.2%) to be informed about religion; however, after they attended the literacy class, the students started to draw more frequently on what they themselves learned in the literacy class (48.3%). In comparison, the results show that literacy plays only a moderate role in the participants' political life and in their participation in the democratic process, and it only begins to play a role in their health and environment life (SECAENF, 2006: p. 212).

Theoretical framework

The present ethnographic work is situated within the framework of the New Literacy Studies (NLS) which regards literacy as more than reading and writing. We draw on qualitative studies (Scribner and Cole, 1972; Heath, 1983; Street, 1984, 1993, 2001; Prinslo & Breire, 1996; Barton & Hamilton, 1998) that explore the "vernacular" literacy practices that are "rooted in everyday experience and serve everyday purposes" (Barton & Hamilton, 1998, pp. 251-252; also see Abrams-Locklear, 2011; Gee, 2000). These studies recognize the value of the day-to-day reading and writing practices as essential "funds of knowledge" and investigate them as part of broader social and cultural institutions and processes. Moreover, Maddox's (2005) and Zubair's (2002) research in religious and literacy practices of women in contexts other than Morocco and other work such as De la Piedra's (2009) ethnography on Indigenous Andean people and Openjuru and Lyster's (2007) study of the influence of Catholic and Protestant religion over literacy development in rural Uganda also inform the present study.

another chapter or part of it. Thus, the ability to read and memorize chapters and/or verses from the Koran is mandatory for an adequate performance of one's religious duties, and this one of the reasons why so many participants decide to enroll in adult literacy classes in Morocco. In fact, many of the formerly illiterate women admitted that they did not use to perform their religious duties – namely, the five daily prayers – adequately.

Furthermore, Islam is based on the sayings and practice of the Prophet (as-sunah) as narrated by his companions and recorded a century after his death. The Prophet's sayings and practice aim to clarify and explain the teachings and instructions of Allah as stated in the Koran, and Muslims are required to read and follow in the Prophet's footsteps.

¹ This refers to several literacy-based requirements: the ability to read the prayer schedule and to know when each one of the daily prayers is due, memorization of the opening chapter of the Koran (al-fatihah) and other chapters or verses from the Koran in order to recite them during their prayer, etc.

Islam and the Everyday Life Literacy practices of Newly Literate Women

Couched within such theoretical and methodological tradition, the present study stresses the embedded nature of literacy and favours the use of ethnographic tools in the examination of specific observable instances of reading and writing behaviour situating them within larger social processes and cultural and practices. Our framework emphasizes:

the social meaning of literacy: that is, the roles these abilities [reading and writing] play in social life; the varieties of reading and writing available for choice; the contexts of their performance; and the manner in which they are interpreted and tested, not by experts, but by ordinary people in ordinary activities. (Szwed, 1981 as cited in Baynham, 2004, p. 285)

Within the NLS tradition, several studies on emergent literacy have explored the experience of adult education in different communities. These studies critique claims that literacy has universal and expected outcomes; they argue against the claim that literacy is a set of uniform "technical skills" to be imparted to the non-literate people in order to empower them. As Street (1993) argues, "[r]esearch in cultures that have newly acquired reading and writing draws our attention to the creative and original ways in which people transform literacy to their own cultural concerns and interests" (p. 1). Illustrating this are Prinslo and Breire (1996) and Papen's (2005)'s studies that contend that adult literacy students in South African and Namibia have different motivations and expectations for enrolling in literacy classes. Kulick and Stroud's (1993) study of literacy acquisition among previously non-literate people in Papua New Guinea demonstrates these participants were "creative in their encounter with literacy" rather than passive recipients (p. 55). Further, Ahearn's (2004) field research in Nepal shows that the newly-acquired literacy is used to serve unexpected functions: the increase in literacy rates among Nepalese women in the 1990's "made possible the emergence of new courtship practices and facilitated self-initiated marriages, but it also reinforced certain gender ideologies and undercut some avenues to social power, especially for women" (p. 306). Within the religious realm, research on women's literacy practices by Maddox (2005) challenges assumptions of the development discourses of empowerment and agency for newly literate women in Bangladesh. Zubair's work with Siraiiki Pakistani Muslim women (2002) shows literacy as conduit for self-expression and redefinitions of identity. Also the De la Piedra's (2009) ethnography of literacy practices and native language maintenance in the Peruvian Andes, and Openjuru and Lyster's (2007) study of literacy practices and Christianity in Uganda show how literacy practices generated in the religious domain can be transferred and reinterpreted in a variety of contexts. The present study contributes in this vein as it presents an ethnographic case study of the multiple ways in which six women in a Moroccan urban context

appropriate literacy for their day-to-day needs. They were newly-literate Muslim women who had just become able to make sense of the increasingly textually-mediated community around them and for whom literacy is integral to the performance of their religious duties.

The ethnographic research process

During the data collection process, which took place at intervals in the period of May 2009 through March 2010, the three ethical considerations of the participants' informed consent, right to privacy and protection from harm were observed. While the principal researcher collected the ethnographic data, the present article is a product of the collaboration of both Erguig and Valdiviezo which ranged from the conceptualization of the study through the analysis of the ethnographic data and then to the co-writing of the present article.

In line with the nature of the research question and our theoretical framework, we used a variety of tools to draw a nuanced picture of the place of literacy in the life of six women, with a particular focus on the religious realm. We used in-depth cyclical interviews and participant observation to highlight these participants' perspectives and to offer a practice account of their literacy practices, situating them within the institution of Islam. Our analysis of ethnographic data was dialogic as we departed from different roles and identities, Erguig as a practicing Muslim and local resident who had a personal rapport and contact with the family of the six women participants and Valdiviezo as a Latina researcher who offered the outsider's approach to the study.

Despite Erguig's status as a male researcher, two main factors facilitated his data collection process. First, the participants attended a literacy class in a non-profit association where Erguig volunteered as English instructor by way of reciprocating having been granted permission to carry on research within their premises. This helped him build rapport with the participants and become a member of the community of the association. Second, the six women were part of Erguig's community and their families regularly attended the same mosque.

The participants

The participants in this ethnographic study are six Muslim women, Amal, Hayat, Khadija, Sanaa and Souad (pseudonyms), who present a variety of linguistic backgrounds (Arabic and Amazigh). They currently live in a popular area in Rabat, the capital city of Morocco. It is noteworthy that Morocco is a predominantly Muslim country: Islam is the religion of 98,7% of the Moroccan population; whereas only 1,1% of the population are Christians and 0,2% are

Islam and the Everyday Life Literacy practices of 'Newly Literate Women

Jewish. The choice of women as the only participants in the present study is dictated by the fact that the overwhelming majority of participants in ABE classes in Morocco are women (DLCA, 2003: p. 10). Moreover, such a choice is also justified by the broader socio-cultural context, where women's education and specifically literacy development receive attention from national and international programs (including NGO activity) but such attention yet needs the acknowledgment of the impact of local practices (out of school and religious literacy practices) on women's literacy development.

Name	Age	Marital status	Job	Mother Tongue	Languages Spoken	Previous Schooling experience
Amal	30's	Single	Unemployed	Arabic	Arabic	Left school in fifth grade
Hayat	31	Single	Unemployed	Amazigh	Arabic and Amazigh	None
Khadija	50's	Married with 3 sons and 3 daughters	Housewife	Arabic	Arabic	One day
Sanaa	30	Married	Housewife	Amazigh	Arabic and Amazigh	Attended Koranic classes
Souad	Late 40's	Widow	Unemployed	Arabic	Arabic	Left school in fifth grade
Imane	36	Married	Unemployed	Arabic	Arabic	Left school in fourth grade

Data collection

To collect demographic data about the six women and to explore their literacy history and schooling experience, Erguig conducted ninety-minute individual interviews in Moroccan Arabic, which is the mother tongue of the participants. The researcher met and interviewed these women in the premises of the non-governmental organization where he volunteered to give English classes. The interviews were also an important means to learn about their reading and writing practices and to uncover the ways literacy is part of the participants' personal, family and community life and to highlight the ways their religious world is textually mediated. The questions in the interview schedule were open-ended and consisted of prompts (included in the appendix). Interviews also emphasized the ways in which they used literacy, their roles and attitudes in

their literacy activities, the literacy problems they faced and the strategies they used to handle them. The participants were interviewed several times and maintained continuous communication with Erguig. Nuanced understanding gained through recurring interviews have enriched themes identified in the data which allowed for both, the classification of the participants' religious literacy practices into sub-domains of use and their analysis in terms of the relation of these practices to their status as newly literate Muslim women. The six women were also observed as they engaged in literacy events in day-to-day life; such observations were recorded through field notes. Additionally, the participants were asked to maintain a journal of the everyday occasions when reading and writing were part of their religious practices. To further triangulate the data sources, the literacy artifacts in some of the participants' houses were photographed in order to provide a vivid picture of the ecology of writing in their homes.

We focused on the ways in which Amal, Hayat, Khadija, Sanaa and Souad use literacy within the Muslim religious realm and the temporal and spatial contexts where they draw on their newly acquired literacy skills. Data analysis centered on "literacy events" defined as "the occasions in which written language is integral to the nature of participants' interactions and their interpretive processes and strategies" (Heath, 1983, p. 96). We emphasized the analysis of any occasion on which reading and writing are actually used or referred to or serve as a background in the participants' interaction with literacy or with other people. Literacy events were the starting point for the study of "literacy practices", which are "a broader concept pitched at a higher level of abstraction and referring to both behaviour and conceptualisations related to the use of reading and writing" (Street, 1993, p. 12). By examining these women's observable reading and writing behaviors we aimed to situate their literacy practices within their identity as Muslim women for whom literacy is essential for an adequate performance of religious duties.

Making meaning: Literacy practices of six women in the religious domain

*I read a few Sourates [chapters] from the Koran at home now, but my biggest dream is to be able to read and understand the whole Koran.
(Souad, interview, June 4, 2009)*

Religion is a major domain where newly literate Moroccan women exercise their reading and/or writing skills. Out of the 78 identified literacy events in which the six participants engaged and which we retained for analysis, 23 related to reading some religious material or to reading and/ or writing for a religious purpose. In addition, all the participants emphasized the fact that religion was a major impetus for them to decide to enroll in the literacy class despite numerous family responsibilities. For instance, Souad's decision to

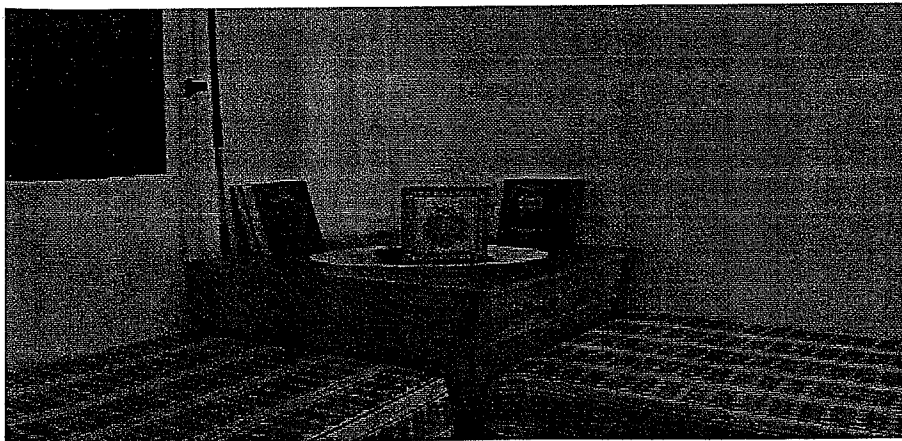
Islam and the Everyday Life Literacy practices of 'Newly Literate Women

enroll in the adult literacy class was motivated by her interest not only in developing her ability to read and write but also in reading the Koran and making sense of it. Although the Koran is nowadays available to both the literate and the illiterate alike in audiovisual form, Souad prefers to read it in book form, but she listens to it on a CD-ROM only when she is busy. For Imane, too, the ability to read and make sense of the Koran was a strong reason why she joined the literacy program despite her family responsibilities as mother to three daughters. Khadija has a similar motivation: "I learnt how to read a few verses from the Koran in the literacy class that I attended before, and I have decided to join this class again because I still want to learn more" (Khadija, interview, June 26, 2009).

The importance of Islam in the life of the participants is also evident in the literacy ecology in their homes (See Image 1). Although most of them have either a modest or no library at all, they all have the Koran or printings of it in different formats somewhere in their homes. Khadija's written environment at home, for instance, consists of a small library where there is the Koran in addition to her children's schoolbooks. While it is common in Morocco to find people who keep books – including the Koran – at home and may seldom read them, Khadija affirmed that she not only has the Koran at home but she actually reads it.

I have bought a new copy of the Koran and I frequently read it. It is an edition that includes the recitation rules of the Koran. The big font size in this edition makes reading it easy for an old woman like me. (Khadija, interview, June 26, 2009)

Image: Religious books (right and left) and an edition of the Quran (middle) in Khadija's house



Sanaa has a similar literacy environment at home. Although she does not have a home library, she has some books: namely, the Koran, some stories, and adult education textbooks. She has books in both Arabic and French (Field note, June 4, 2009). Further, Imane keeps a variety of books at home ranging from the adult literacy textbooks to the textbooks that her daughters use at school.

Reading the Koran

Reading the Koran is a common literacy practice emphasized by all participants. Most adult literacy students prefer to read it in book form. For instance, although the participants read different Sourates in terms of length and location in the full-text of the Koran, Amal - like many other participants - reads the short Sourates found at the end of the Koran: these are usually the chapters they learnt when they first started to learn the rudimentary skills of reading and writing. "I read the short Sourates starting from the at-tariq onwards. I like the at-tarik Sourate because it is the first one I learnt to read when I joined the ABE class. But honestly I don't read the Koran everyday" (Amal, interview, June 18, 2009). Amal also reads the short Sourates in the last hizb of the Koran more frequently because she finds them particularly easier than the longer Sourates in the rest of the Holy Book.

I often read the last hizb, which includes the short Sourates. There are Sourates like at-tarik, al rachiya, and al-aala, which I read very easily, but there are Sourates which I read with difficulty. It takes me some time to read them. (Amal, interview, June 18, 2009)

Moreover, reading the Koran is a particularly significant activity for a person like Amal also because it simultaneously indicates the change that has occurred in her literacy status. Now that she is literate, she no longer accesses the sacred text via audiovisual media, which were the royal channels she herself used when she was illiterate. "I am happy now that I can read the Koran in its book form because in the past I used to listen to it on the radio or follow in on one of the TV channels" (Amal, interview, June 18, 2009). This practice of reading the Koran can be construed as signaling the change that has happened to the ways the women have access to the sacred text; they no longer rely on audiovisual media as the only channel through which they have access to Word of Allah (although that may be of benefit for them), but they also draw on their own literacy skills.

The participants associate so much social and religious value with holding the Koran as a book and reading it in order to ask God for blessing and forgiveness. For Imane, for instance, "Reading the Koran is a way for me to ask Allah to forgive my sins and to give me blessing" (Imane, interview, September 9, 2008). She engages in the reading of short Sourates such as at-taakathur and

Islam and the Everyday Life Literacy practices of Newly Literate Women

al-ikhlas at home using the full-text of the Koran. She finds the reading of the Koran easier when using the Koran printed in A-3 size because she can clearly see the printing (Imane, interview, April 12, 2009). She reads the Koran at home despite her family duties as mother of three children and as an unemployed woman who occasionally works as assistant cook for her mother to make some money to pay for her personal and family needs.

Image 2: Imane is at home reading from the full-text of the Koran.



Similarly, the reading of the Koran for a person like Hayat is a means of worshipping and feeling humility. It helps her to better observe the Word of Allah. "Now that I can read the Koran alone, I feel satisfied and I can feel al-khuchuu [humility]" (Hayat, interview, June 8, 2009). Second, the reading of the Koran is an opportunity for Hayat to practice the reading skills she has acquired in the literacy class. "I usually read the Koran before the noon prayer...I also use this as an opportunity to practice my reading skills" (Hayat, interview, June 23, 2009). Third, reading the Koran again and again, especially a particular Sourate, has also enabled Hayat to memorize it.

I read the Koran; I prefer to read it in book form. I like yaa-cine Sourate and I read it almost everyday - of course when I am not busy. I have read it so many times that I am about to memorize it. This is the Sourate read while a dead person is being buried. I don't go to [the] mosque on Friday. In Ramadan I go to [the] mosque to perform the at-tarawih prayers but apart from Ramadan I don't go (Hayat, interview, June 18, 2009).

Sanaa, too, reads the Koran in its book form whenever she has some free time. She particularly reads some of the short Sourates from the last hizb of the Koran.

I went to visit Sanaa at home; I had called her husband and he agreed to receive me at home. I was warmly received, and I noticed that the Koran was laid on the table in the middle of the sitting room. As Sanaa later told me, she had just finished reading two short Sourates: al-fajr and at-tarik. She does not regularly read the Koran, but she does so whenever she is free. (Field-note, June 18, 2009)

Reading the Koran is highly contextualized as a temporal activity. Tusting (2000: p. 39), for example, argues that "A focus on time as a significant element in all social practices can contribute to a more insightful understanding of aspects of socially situated literacy practices (p. 35) and emphasizes the fact that "the events and people's experiences and expectations of these literacy practices change over time". Therefore, domains of literacy practice can be defined not only in spatial terms (Barton and Hamilton, 1998) or socio-textual terms (Purcell-Gates, 2007), but also in temporal terms because time is an important boundary marker. Further, data suggests that Koran reading is mostly a solitary activity rather than a collective one; the participants read it more frequently when they are alone rather than as a group whether in the house of one of them or in the Mosque.

All the participants affirmed that they read the Koran, specifically certain Sourates, more frequently at specific times and for specific purposes. For instance, most of participants read the Koran around the dawn (al-fajr) prayer. A common practice among the newly literacy women is the reading of the Koran before going to bed. For Khadija, for instance, this is an important form of worshipping.

I don't usually go to bed early, so I like to read the Koran in its book form. This also helps me to memorize it. Yesterday, for example, I read three Sourates: al-jumuaa, al-monafiqun, and at-tarabun using my reading glasses because without them I can't read anything. (Khadija, interview, June 18, 2009)

Amal, too, has developed the habit of reading the Koran before she goes to bed. It is an opportunity for her to practice her reading skills too.

Before I went to bed yesterday, I read some short Sourates from the Koran. I read al-rachiya, al-aala, and at-tariq, and then I couldn't resist sleep. I put the Koran away and I slept. I like to read the Koran; it is

Islam and the Everyday Life Literacy practices of Newly Literate Women

also an opportunity to practice my reading skills. (Amal, interview, June 25, 2009)

Reading the Quran is an integral part of Souad's everyday life. She reads it whenever she can. "I always have the Koran with me in the kitchen and dining room, so I read it whenever I have time" (Souad, interview, June 4, 2009). Reading the Koran is indeed a relaxing experience for her given that she is a widow who now lives by herself. In the same way that attending the literacy class helps her fill her time, reading the Koran in particular helps her fight the sense of loneliness: "I live alone and most of the time I am by myself, so Koran-reading is my major hobby. It is my best resort when I feel down" (Souad, interview, June 24, 2009). Reading the Koran for her – as is the case for the other participants – is not simply a mental or intellectual exercise; rather it is embedded within her identity as a woman who has managed to learn how to break the code and as a Muslim for whom the reading of the Koran is part and parcel of her religious practice. As such, the participants draw on their newly acquired literacy skills to serve the predictable ways to interpret and rehearse reading the Koran.

Koran-reading as a school literacy task

In addition to reading the Koran as a way of worshipping God and practicing one's literacy skills, data shows that its reading is embedded within their status as students in an adult literacy class. The participants engage in literacy activity to satisfy the requirements of their adult literacy class. Hayat, for instance, had the opportunity to read the Koran when asked to fulfill a "school" task.

My ABE teacher assigned us a task related to the Koran. He gave us a few verses from the Koran and asked us to locate the name and number of the Sourates. I used my Koran (book form) but I couldn't find them. So I used the Internet with my younger sister's help. I dictated to her the excerpts and we found the Sourates I was looking for. When I completed this task, I checked the Koran again. I was happy to make such an achievement. (Hayat, interview, June 18, 2009)

Souad, too, reads the Koran as homework. As part of the ABE mission in Morocco, students are required to develop not only their reading and writing skills and become familiar with the basic mathematical operations, but they are also expected to develop their reading skills with particular reference to the reading of the Koran, especially the short Sourates in the last hizb. Equally important is the expectation that they memorize some of these Sourates.

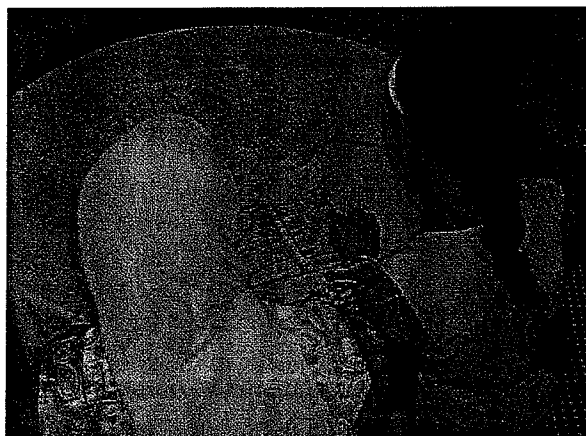
As an assignment, the teacher gave us the first part of a Sourate and he asked us to find the name and number of the Sourate. I asked my son-in-law for help. Honestly, when an assignment consists of locating a Sourate I am not familiar with, I turn to someone for help. With the help of the Internet, he managed to locate the Sourate for me. Then I checked the whole Sourate in the Koran I have in book form. On other occasions, the teacher would ask us to read the rest of a Sourate. For this latter task, I draw on my own skills and knowledge. (Souad, interview, June 18, 2009)

The participants' reading the Koran outside the school context overlaps a great deal with a major component of the adult literacy class which is the reading, comprehension and even the traditional practice requiring the memorization of Koranic passages. Reading the Koran as literacy practice reveals not only the participants' motivation for improving their newly acquired reading and writing skills but also the change towards a more autonomous reading of the book. Newly literate women in this study show diverse choices of time and manner to read the text, and their desire to achieve autonomous understanding of the Koran when they draw on their own critical skills and knowledge.

Koran-reading as a family task

For participants like Imane, the reading of the Koran is additionally a domestic chore. She draws on her literacy skills to help her fifth- and second-grade daughters with their school work, particularly the reading of specific short Sourates from the Koran and the memorization and accurate recitation of excerpts from it.

Image 3: Imane is at home helping her daughter with a school task.



Islam and the Everyday Life Literacy practices of 'Newly Literate Women

Despite her status as a newly literate woman who masters only the basic skills of reading and writing, she manages to provide useful 'religious' literacy help to her children because they are primary school pupils who do not yet require her to have advanced literacy skills. Although she may not be able to provide literacy help in the form of comprehension, she at least helps her daughters 'break the code' in connection with the Sourates which form the school curriculum. Such literacy help is part of the domestic chores assigned to her in a family structure which features a strong gender-based division of labor. "I help my daughters mainly with the Koran. I am also the first to read their transcripts; my husband doesn't often read the transcripts"(Imane, interview, September 6, 2008). The mother's new status as a literate person impacts positively on their children in the sense that the latter start to develop more positive attitudes towards their mother and to view her as more knowledgeable and reliable as a source for their literacy help. This resonates with findings of previous research which claims that literacy tasks within the household are seen as the woman's task. Women tend to help their children with schoolwork and to respond to the family literacy demands more often than men (Barton & Hamilton, 1998, p. 172; Rockhill, 1993).

The Koran and Information and Computer Technologies

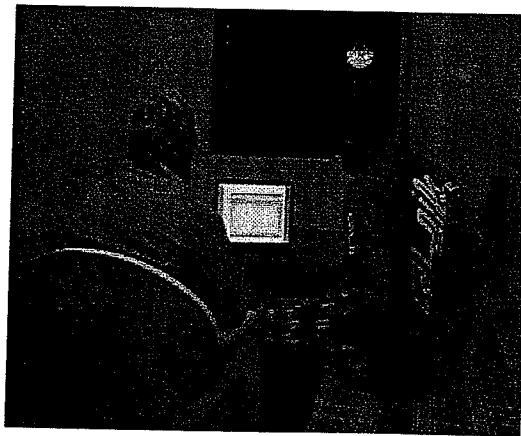
In connection with the reading of the Koran, the participants also use Information and Computer Technology (ICT) in several ways. In their leisure time, they listen to the Koran as recited by one of the leading reciters in the Islamic world either on a CD-ROM or via the Internet. Hayat, for instance, often listens to the Koran being recited by her most favorite reciter: "I use the Internet to listen to the Koran as recited by my favorite reciter - Saad Al Ramidi" (Hayat, interview, June 8, 2009). Other participants such as Khadija are accustomed to watching the Koran being recited on TV. "I occasionally listen to the Koran on the Moroccan Channel of the Koran (Assadissa TV channel)" (Khadija, interview, June 18.).

Image 4: Khadija is at home with one of her daughters watching a religious TV channel and listening to the Koran being recited by a professional reciter.



Other participants such as Souad use ICT for religious purposes differently. Although they prefer to read the Koran in its book form in their free time and despite their aging-related sight problems, they opt for new technologies of communication - namely CD-ROMs - to listen to the Koran, especially when they are busy doing the housework. In short, these media allow the participants to extend the literacy skills they acquired in the adult literacy class and to use them in original ways to serve unexpected functions. In fact, their listening, viewing and judging the different recitations are all multimodal literacy practices and learning activities.

Image 5: Souad is using the Internet to locate a Sourate in the Quran with the help of her son-in law



Handling literacy difficulties

Due to their status as students in an adult literacy class and as women who cannot be deemed fully literate, the participants sometimes need literacy help even when they deal with print literacy tasks. Some participants turn to family members for assistance whenever they have a literacy problem. Imane, for instance, resorts to contacting her sister, a high-school student, when she faces literacy difficulties and fails to independently handle a literacy task. She remembers how she once asked her for help with the reading of an excerpt from a Hadith which she came across. Sanaa, too, seeks her husband's help in this respect. "When I face a problem while reading something like this [a book of the lives of the prophets], I rely on myself or I ask my husband if he is around for help" (Sanaa, interview, June 24, 2009). This can further be construed as a growing sense of independence and more participation in the practice of reading on Sanaa's part, and as such it indicates a positive change in her family life because she can draw on her reading and writing skills not only to meet her personal literacy needs but also to act as a source of literacy help for her children.

Conclusion

The present ethnographic study has shown some impact of newly acquired literacy skills on Muslim women's religious practices, particularly the reading and understanding of the Koran. The analysis of the participants' literacy behavior within the religious domain reveals that their reading of the Koran is not merely a decontextualized cognitive activity of decoding the sacred text but rather a means through which these newly literate women achieve several objectives. The reading of the Koran is an opportunity to practice, further develop and even evaluate the reading skills they have acquired in the literacy class as adult literacy students. Their reading is therefore important in that it indicates the change in their literacy status and reassures them they have managed to learn how to break the code and make sense of the textually mediated world around them. At times, the Koran is read as 'homework' to fulfill a requirement related to their adult literacy class. It is read as a 'school assignment' following a classroom activity or preparing for a classroom task. Additionally, as in the case of one participant the Koran is read as a domestic chore to help one's children complete their school tasks which may constitute a shift in family and religious relationships.

The study also demonstrates that religion emerges strongly in the literacy environment at home: it is the predominant topic in the reading

materials that participants keep at home either in a small library or somewhere in their homes. Interestingly, although some people simply keep reading materials for mainly decorative purposes, some participants actually read them in their free time. Moreover, religion is the reason why when they face a literacy-related difficulty, some participants solicit the help of their relatives.

Moreover, the participants' Koran-reading is an important means of gaining access to the Word of Allah, worshipping Him and observing His Word. Therefore, such reading practice is embedded within their identity as members of the large Muslim community. The different literacy events in which the participants engage are illustrative of the ways the literacy behavior of these newly literate women is framed by the religious institution of Islam. Rather than being a decontextualized cognitive activity, Koran reading for them is purposeful and fits into the religious duties they have to perform as Muslim women; it is integral to their religious practice. In fact, part of being a "good" Muslim and properly carrying out the religious duties is that one has to memorize a set of Sourates in order to be able to recite them during prayer. Thus, the variety of literacy uses that the participants make of literacy within the religious domain is consistent with previous research which shows that literacy practices are purposeful and "are already embedded in an ideology and cannot be isolated or treated as "neutral" or merely technical" (Street, 1984, p. 1; see also Barton & Hamilton, 2000, p. 12). This lends further support to Street's (1995) call for "the conceptualization of literacy...as an ideological practice, implicated in...and embedded in specific cultural meanings and practices (p. 1).

Furthermore, the study of the participants' literacy behavior indicates the primacy of reading over writing. Most of the literacy activities in which the participants engage within the religious domain consist in reading the Koran. Within the religious domain newly literate women do not have enough opportunity to practice writing and they mostly practice reading.

The participants' literacy practice as being social and temporal is also evident in the fact that they draw on ICT when they engage in literacy practice. They draw on ICT, which has become largely available, to either watch the Koran on TV or listen to it on a CD-ROM being recited. They also use the Internet to locate a verse in the Koran – usually with the help of a relative.

In conclusion, learning about Islam is a major impetus for the participants to enroll in the literacy class and a locus where they mainly practice their reading skills. The participants draw on the literacy skills they have acquired in the adult literacy class in order to read the Koran and Prophet Mohamed's sayings and enrich their knowledge of the lives of the prophets using a variety of media. Thus, the present research has shown the ways in which a literacy program may be relevant to the real life needs of students. It has also provided

Islam and the Everyday Life Literacy practices of 'Newly Literate Women

data that supports findings of recent research on the embedded nature of literacy practice and the influence of religion on the participants' literacy behavior outside the school setting. Furthermore, the results support the findings of research which stress the fact that adult students' exposure to authentic materials impacts positively on their vernacular literacy practice and that if efforts are made "to involve learners in real-life literacy practice *in the classroom*", they are more "likely to carry those school-learned practices out into their lives" (Purcell-Gates, Jacobson & Degener, 2004: p. 13). The participants are indeed motivated by religion to learn literacy skills, and they actually draw on what they learn in class in order to enlarge their knowledge of Islam and perform their religious duties in autonomous ways they see as more effective.

Finally, the data obtained indicate that the participants' uses of literacy have emancipatory implications in the sense that they become self-reliant in their access to the Word of God in the Koran and the sayings of the Prophet. The data also demonstrate that the six female participants draw on the literacy skills they have acquired in the adult literacy class to serve largely expected functions; namely the reading of the Koran and the sayings of the Prophet. Nonetheless, some participants use literacy in original ways and extend the original literacy skills they acquire in the adult literacy class. Their use of the Internet to carry out tasks for their adult literacy class is an instance of some of the unexpected use of literacy in which they may engage. This is in line with the findings of the research conducted within NLS by scholars such as Ahearn (2004) and Kulick and Stroud (1993), whose ethnographic research in newly literate communities and social groups indicates that literacy is used in creative ways and to serve unanticipated functions.

Authors' Notes

Reddad Erguig is Professeur de l'Enseignement Supérieur Habilité at the Faculty of Letters and the Humanities, Chouaib Eddoukali University in El Jadida, Morocco. He has conducted doctoral research on the everyday life literacy practices of some Moroccan people, and then he conducted post-doctoral research on the vernacular literacy practices of newly literate Moroccan women. He is also interested in the literacy instruction of adult literacy teachers. His publications include articles on Moroccan people's conceptions and day-to-day uses of literacy as well case studies of literacy practices among newly literate Moroccan women. His most recent publication is on adult literacy instruction as social practice.

Laura A. Valdiviezo is assistant professor of Language, Literacy and Culture at the University of Massachusetts. She has conducted ethnographic work mainly in formal school settings hosting ethnolinguistic minorities, including

Indigenous peoples in the Americas. Among Dr. Valdiviezo's interests are the local implementation of education initiatives as a way to inform macro-level policies and education reform.

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Islam and the Everyday Life Literacy practices of 'Newly Literate Women

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Appendix

Interview schedule

Date

Pseudonym of participant

Part One: Background

1. Demographic Information

Age

Gender

Native language
Place of birth
Marital status
Age of spouse and siblings
Job/professional status of participant's spouse
Job/professional status of participant
Job/professional status of participant's father
Job/professional status of participant's mother

2. Household Information

Area of residence
Number of people who live in your household:
Do you have a computer at home?

Do you have a library at home?
If yes, please describe it in detail:

3. Level of schooling

Highest level of schooling completed by the participant: (and location?)
Highest level of schooling completed by the participant's father: (and location?)
Highest level of schooling completed by the participant's mother: (and location?)
Highest level of schooling completed by the participant's children: (and location?)
Highest level of schooling completed by the participant's siblings: (and location?)
Highest level of schooling completed by the participant's spouse: (and location?)

Part Two: Previous and current schooling and literacy experience

4. Former schooling experience

Did you ever attend school?
Please give details:
Did you ever attend a literacy class other than the current one?
Please give details:

5. Current literacy class

Why did you decide to join the literacy class?
Describe all circumstances, motivations and expectations:
Is there a relationship between what you learn in the literacy class and what you actually need in terms of reading and writing?

Part Three: Literacy Conception

6. Literacy conception

What is literacy for you?
In what way is literacy important for you?
How consequential is it for you?

Part Four: Literacy Behavior

7. Literacy behavior

Current

Description of reading behavior:

Any reading event the participant has recently engaged in (I could suggest prompts only)

Setting/Context (time and place) and purpose
Participants involved and their status
Your feeling when involved in the event
In what language

Description of writing behavior:

Islam and the Everyday Life Literacy practices of Newly Literate Women

Any writing event the participant has recently engaged in (I could suggest prompts only)

Setting/Context (time and place) and purpose
Participants involved and their status
Your feeling when involved in the event
In what language

Description of numeracy behavior:

Previous

Description of reading behavior:

Any reading event the participant engaged in in childhood (I could suggest prompts only)

Setting/Context (time and place) and purpose
Participants involved and their status
Your feeling when involved in the event
In what language

Description of writing behavior:

Any writing event the participant engaged in in childhood (I could suggest prompts only)

Setting/Context (time and place) and purpose
Participants involved and their status
Your feeling when involved in the event
In what language

Description of numeracy behavior:

Family members

Describe your husband's former and current literacy behavior?
Describe your children's former and current literacy behavior?
Describe your parents' former and current literacy behavior?
Describe your siblings' former and current literacy behavior?
Describe your husband's former and current literacy behavior?

Task

Please report any literacy behavior.

Visual documents

Please photograph the literacy material you have at home.