

Examining the Influence of French and Islamic Colonization on National Education Systems in West Africa

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ABSTRACT

This narrative review examines how French colonial rule and earlier Islamic political and educational traditions influenced the development of contemporary education systems in Côte d'Ivoire, Niger, Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia. Through comparative synthesis of historical, educational, and post-colonial scholarship, it analyzes how colonial policies shaped educational institutions, curricula, linguistic practices, and post-independence educational trajectories across these countries. Key findings reveal consistent themes of resource extraction and cultural imposition by French authorities, marked by strategic educational neglect in colonies and systematic attempts to undermine Islamic educational institutions. Across the 5 cases, these policies produced enduring structural inequalities, particularly in rural access, gender equity, and literacy outcomes. Post-independence reforms did not fully displace colonial models but instead generated hybrid systems in which French, Arabic, secular, and religious forms of education coexist in uneven ways. Details on the impact of Islamic colonization and the enduring pre-French Ottoman influence are more sparse, representing an area of greater research need. Present-day disparities in educational outcomes, gender equity, and literacy rates across these nations underscore lasting colonial legacies. Further academic work engaging with indigenous educational traditions and further archival research into the intersection of Islamic and French colonial influence in Africa is needed. For policymakers, this work also highlights the necessity for educational reforms rooted in indigenous cultural values and improved resource allocation to bridge these historical inequities.

Keywords: Education Systems; Colonization; Islamic Education; North Africa; Post-Colonial Development; French History; African History

INTRODUCTION

Colonial legacies and indigenous frameworks significantly shape contemporary educational systems in post-colonial societies. In West and North Africa, particularly in Côte d'Ivoire, Niger, Algeria, Morocco,

and Tunisia, the complex historical relationship between initial Islamic colonization and, more recently, French colonization, has produced distinct educational outcomes. French colonization, driven predominantly by economic exploitation and cultural domination, systematically imposed French linguistic and curricular structures while undermining Islamic education systems. Conversely, details are sparse on the exact process by which Islamic colonization and Ottoman administrative legacies did or did not provide robust foundations in scientific and cultural education. This research analyzes how dual colonial experiences have

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uniquely influenced the modern educational landscapes in these 5 countries, assessing long-term impacts on literacy, gender disparities, educational accessibility, and cultural identity. Contextualizing historical educational transformations within broader colonial and post-colonial narratives, this work contributes to a deeper understanding of educational development in North and West Africa. This narrative review examines how French and Islamic colonial legacies have influenced and continue to influence the development of education systems across West and North Africa. The research finds limited documentation of the Islamic colonization impact, while significant documentation exists of the French colonial legacy.

COLONIAL EDUCATIONAL FRAMEWORKS AND POST-COLONIAL ADAPTATION

Rather than examining each source independently, this narrative review synthesizes scholarship across multiple thematic areas to identify recurring colonial patterns, educational adaptations, and post-independence reforms across North and West Africa.

Colonial Strategies Within Education

Colonial education systems in Africa were specifically structured to serve the political, economic, and cultural interests of European powers rather than developing the already established indigenous societies. Previous scholarship (1, 2) demonstrates how French colonial authorities systematically replaced Islamic and local education systems with secular curricula based on European standards. This was designed to create a class of limited laborers and clerks who had the job of supporting the colonial economy. Said restructuring would go on to reflect even bigger strategies of domination that the Europeans had in mind, as education was not just used to train workers but also to reshape the people's cultural identity. Colonial education systems reinforced linguistic domination by prioritizing European languages over indigenous knowledge systems (3). This marginalized both indigenous and Arabic knowledge systems. The concept of cultural imperialism further explains how colonial powers positioned European knowledge systems as superior to indigenous traditions (4). In addition to that, additional research (5, 6) highlights how colonial authorities used to frame Islamic education as something that is inferior as well as systematically limited religious institutions in order to weaken the influence that they have. Freire's critique of colonial education systems

further supports this interpretation (2). These systems reflect a sort of "banking model" of education, where knowledge is enforced in lots of different ways that may discourage skills such as critical thinking and reinforce power that already exists. All together, these studies paint a picture which says colonial education worked as a comprehensive mechanism of control that shaped language, knowledge, and social hierarchies in colonized societies.

Adaptation of Islamic Education Systems

Most scholars argue that Islamic education systems were actually not fully displaced by colonial rule, but actually showed significant resilience through changing and adapting. Hamdouch's (4) study of Morocco demonstrates to us that under French colonialism, Islamic educational institutions were not actually broken entirely; instead, they were maintained and regulated and integrated into the colonial infrastructure. This allowed them to keep persisting while the European school systems also existed. Similarly, Ulpah (9) made the claim that Islamic education went through lots of structural reform during and after colonialism, integrating different aspects of Western curricula while also keeping the core of instruction being about religion, which guaranteed the continued relevance in the context of modern education. Further research on West Africa proves this pattern of resilience. Ware (11) in *The Walking Qur'an* demonstrates that Islamic education was deeply integrated in community and socially based practices, which allowed it to survive far beyond the formal education structures that were targeted by authorities during the colonial times. This persistence was even further reinforced by D'Aiglepierre and Bauer (1) who find that Arab-Islamic education is constantly being chosen across sub-Saharan Africa, this indicates that these systems not only were surviving colonial disruption but adapted to exist in parallel with formal Western schooling. In addition to that, Khan (5) emphasizes that Islamic education is able to stay central to cultural as well as identity that goes along with religions that allow communities to conserve language, beliefs, as well as staying together socially despite having to face colonial pressures. All of these together, these scholars argue that the Islamic education system was not being passively conserved but instead being changed actively, as well as coexisting with colonial institutions that were evolving through reform, and maintaining their foundational role within society.

Post-Independence Educational Reforms

After gaining independence, many African countries tried to implement educational reforms that had the goal of undoing the structural and cultural impacts that the colonial people had; however, scholars also make the argument that such efforts ended up being hybrid systems instead of a complete transformation. Siregar et al. (8) takes note of the fact that post-colonial governments tried to reintroduce elements of both indigenous and Islamic education, while in parallel they are increasing the access that people have to schooling; these reforms were limited by the influences that are still lingering from colonial institutions. Similarly, Gravelle (3) puts an emphasis on the fact that colonial education systems had made long-term structural inequalities, in particular those which limited access and ensured that there was unequal curriculum design, which continued to shape educational outcomes even after independence. In North Africa, oftentimes reforms were through linguistic and cultural reorientation. Ulpah (9) explains that countries like Algeria and Morocco put in Arabization policies in order to bring back Arabic as the main language in teaching, which reflected the efforts to reclaim their cultural identity in order to reduce the reliance people had on the French. However, such reforms were not certain, as the French people remained influential, mainly in scientific and technical education. The dual-language system that they have shown what these scholars talk about as a hybrid education mode, which combines the legacies from the colonies with national priorities post-colonialism. At the same time, research done by D'Aiglepierre and Bauer (1) leads us to the fact that reintegration of education about Islam actually plays a key role in bringing back cultural continuity as well as identity. However, D'Aiglepierre and Bauer (1) bring us to the fact that even in the current day people do not even have access to quality education, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, where there are both economic as well as infrastructure limitations that hinder efforts made to reform. Both of these disparities exist even more by broader studies on education in post-colonialism, that demonstrate more persistent gaps in literacy, gender equity, and rural access. Together, these scholars show how post-independence educational reforms do not actually fully break down colonial systems but actually make hybrid models that continue to show both colonial influence as well as efforts made toward cultural as well as national conservation efforts.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

We can better understand the comparative findings of this study by recognizing key post-colonial and critical education frameworks. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (6) made the claim that colonial education systems were the ones enforcing linguistic domination through their way of putting European languages over indigenous as well as local forms of knowledge. This is very clearly demonstrated through all five of the countries covered in this research, where French stays as either the main or secondary language of instruction, which often marginalizes both Arabic as well as indigenous languages. Edward Said (7), similarly, claimed that the concept of cultural imperialism actually helps us in understanding how French colonial authorities portrayed Islamic education as being inferior, while putting Western knowledge on a pedestal and deeming it as superior, which reshaped the whole cultural identity as well as the priorities in education while being in their colonized societies. Said's dynamic was especially seen in both Algeria and Niger, where Islamic institutions were mostly suppressed or under large control. In addition to that, Paulo Freire (2) and his theory of the "banking model" of education, where knowledge is slowly transferred instead of being critically engaged with, aligns with the French colonial approach of teaching and training a labor force with limited knowledge, instead of fostering a society with broad critical thought. All together, these frameworks show us that colonial education systems were not neutral structures, but were actually deliberate tools of control that shaped language, culture, and long-term educational inequality across both West and North Africa.

The following comparative case studies demonstrate how differing colonial structures, educational policies, and Islamic institutional traditions produced distinct post-independence educational outcomes across North and West Africa. While all five countries experienced French colonial influence, the degree of direct control, the strength of pre-colonial Islamic educational systems, and the extent of post-independence reforms varied significantly across cases.

Côte d'Ivoire: Colonial Legacies and Educational Development

In 1893, Côte d'Ivoire was first colonized by the French. This was while Europe was looking to colonize countries all around Africa. The French gained control by drawing up treaties with local chiefs. They also

used their military to achieve area and incite their reign. The colonization forcefully integrated the French government and the French way of living into Côte d'Ivoire. One of the reasons Côte d'Ivoire favored the French was their surplus of valuable resources, such as timber, gold, and ivory. Later, agricultural surpluses, such as coffee and cacao, were also noticed, and these became crucial exports utilized for trade. Côte d'Ivoire's geological position on the coast allowed the French to make Côte d'Ivoire a vital port. Due to that and the vast amount of raw materials that were present, the French could capitalize on the labor force already there in Côte d'Ivoire, selling what they could benefit from the plantations in European markets where these items were in demand.

One of the main reasons that France colonized Côte d'Ivoire was for its resources. Materials like cocoa, coffee, and timber were the main ones exported. This allowed France to become a key player in global trade, such as participating in the transatlantic slave trade in earlier centuries. In the late 19th century, the French sought to expand the French railway line, which required a surplus of timber. All this timber and other materials were needed to develop the 20,000+ kilometers of railroad. In 1848, the concept of outright slavery was abolished, which forced the French people to move to other forms of forced manual labor. They implemented something called the Indigénat system, a set of laws that institutionalized forced labor and severely restricted the rights of indigenous populations. Infrastructure such as railways, roads, and ports were created to support the constant exportation of resources. The plantations were also growing, and France depended on its cash crops, so workers were used in that manner to maintain the plantations. The military was another need for these workers; they were employed there or forced to work on other government projects under harsh conditions (1, 3).

Only after independence in 1960 did Côte d'Ivoire see a notable spike in the Islamic population, especially in the northern region of the country, which would be due to the closeness it had with other Muslim countries. It was also able to spread through the trade routes that were going on in the north of Africa, as well as the Sahel region. On the other hand, Christianity was introduced by European missionaries in the colonial period. According to the 2014 Côte d'Ivoire census, approximately 42.9% of the population identifies as Muslim, while 33.9% identifies as Christian (17.2% Catholic, 11.8% Evangelical, 1.7% Methodist, and 3.2% other Christian denominations). Approximately 3.6% practice traditional

animist religions, while 19.1% report no religious affiliation (25). Despite the difference in religion between Muslims and Christians, Côte d'Ivoire is known for being a country where interfaith harmony is widely sought after, and where communities participate in joint activities. Islam is concentrated primarily in the northern regions of Côte d'Ivoire due to centuries of trans-Saharan trade and historical ties with the Sahel, while Christianity is more prevalent in the southern regions, where French colonial rule and Christian missionary activity established churches and mission schools during the colonial period (26). Scholarship on Islam's role in West African decolonization more broadly suggests that Islamic religious identity offered colonized communities a channel for cultural and political resistance, and a vehicle for reconnecting with a pre-colonial identity distinct from the colonial state, although this dynamic has been documented mainly for other West African contexts rather than Côte d'Ivoire specifically (27). In the modern day, even though Islam is the largest religion, it also coexists with Christianity (5, 11).

The modern education system in Côte d'Ivoire continues to reflect strong French colonial influence, particularly through the continued use of French as the primary language of instruction. Educational access and quality vary significantly between urban and rural regions, with rural schools frequently facing shortages of funding, infrastructure, and qualified teachers. According to World Bank education data, the overall literacy rate in Côte d'Ivoire is approximately 47%, with major disparities between rural and urban populations. Rural literacy rates remain close to 30%, while urban literacy rates approach 60%, demonstrating persistent structural inequalities in educational access. Gender disparities also remain significant despite recent educational reforms. UNICEF reports indicate that only approximately 38% of Côte d'Ivoirian girls complete primary school, while female lower-secondary completion rates remain substantially lower than those of males. Youth literacy rates have improved to nearly 60%, while adult literacy rates remain significantly lower, reflecting the long-term effects of historical educational underinvestment. In response to these challenges, the Ivorian government and international organizations have implemented reforms focused on literacy improvement, teacher training, and increasing educational access for girls and rural populations.

In comparison with other nations from the northern part of Africa like Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia, Côte d'Ivoire had a comparatively weak Islamic educational

system prior to colonization by the French. This is consistent with the views put forward by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (6) regarding the use of colonial education in ensuring that dominance of language persists, where the official language used in education became French and indigenous education was undermined. Educational inequities and inequalities between rural and urban populations, as well as those along gender lines in Côte d'Ivoire, show that colonial education focused on preparing individuals for labor rather than leadership.

Algeria: Colonial Assimilation and Post-Independence Arabization

French colonialism began in Algeria in 1830 and lasted for nearly a century and a half. The territory was previously under Ottoman rule between 1516 and 1830, during which it was a semi-autonomous state with Ottoman-appointed Deys in charge of the country, engaging in piracy in the Mediterranean Sea. The nation was invaded because of the Fly Whisk Incident of 1827, where the Dey of Algiers supposedly struck a French consul with a fly whisk.

The French landed at Sidi Fredj on June 14, 1830, after which Algiers was captured in July of the same year. The French originally had no intentions to engage in full colonization of the country, but the more resistance grew, the more they spoke of a long-term occupation. In 1847, after a series of resistances, France converted Algeria into three French departments, namely Algiers, Oran, and Constantine, thus gaining control of all coastal regions. One of the most prominent resistance campaigns was led by Emir Abdelkader between 1832 and 1847, who set up an organized state in the western part of Algeria and waged a guerrilla war against the French and, after 15 years of resistance, surrendered in 1847. The fight continued in the Sahara over the years. Nevertheless, the resistance kept going in the southern and desert regions, notably from the Tuareg tribes. It was finally in 1903 that France subdued the Algerian Sahara fully and brought it under their colonial administration (3, 7).

In 1848, Algeria was declared an official part of France and divided into three departments: Algiers, Oran, and Constantine, making it different from other colonies as it was treated as French territory rather than a protectorate. French settlers were given areas of land, which often split up indigenous tribes. This land redistribution was part of a larger strategy to encourage European settlement and cement French control over the region. There were numerous reasons that Algeria was a place of interest for the French, including economic interests,

a strategic location, and natural resources. Regarding financial interests, French settlers, called *pied-noirs*, got vast amounts of fertile agricultural land, primarily in the Mitidja Plain and other coastal regions, some of the most productive lands in North Africa. Their goal was to develop vineyards, citrus orchards, and cereal farms. By the early 20th century, Algeria became one of the largest wine exporters for France, with vineyards covering nearly 400,000 hectares of land. These resources were used to make profitable exports to send to metropolitan France. Algeria also had a rich collection of minerals, such as iron ore, phosphates, oil, and natural gas. The French extensively mined iron ore from areas like Zaccar and phosphates from areas like Tebessa and Djebel Onk. Algeria was one of France's top raw material producers in the early 1900s, particularly for industries like steel. Natural gas and oil were discovered at Hassi Messaoud and Hassi R'Mel in the mid-20th century, further establishing Algeria's position in the global economy. Much of France's industrial growth depended on these resources (1, 3).

With independence in 1962, Islam experienced a resurgence as a central component of the country's identity. The French, during their reign, repressed religious leaders, banned Islamic institutions, substituted Arabic with French in schools, and also promoted secularization and the European lifestyle, restricting Muslim practices in public life. However, after independence, Islam was a unifying factor as Algerians attempted to reclaim their heritage and rid themselves of the colonial experience. One of the principal post-independence reforms was the implementation of Arabization policies, through which the Algerian government gradually restored Arabic as the primary language of education, public administration, and national identity (13). The 1976 Constitution of Algeria reaffirmed Islam as the state religion and strengthened Arabization policies by promoting Arabic as the primary language of government and education, building on the 1963 Constitution, which had already declared Islam the state religion and Arabic the sole national and official language (12). The government expanded Islamic education, incorporated Islamic studies into the national curriculum, and promoted Islamic values as part of the country's post-independence cultural and educational reforms (14). During the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Islamic Salvation Front (Front Islamique du Salut, FIS) emerged as Algeria's leading Islamist political party and achieved major victories in the 1990 local elections and the first round of the December 1991 parliamentary elections. After the military canceled the second round of

the 1991 parliamentary elections, Algeria entered a civil war (1991–2002) between the government and Islamist armed groups, resulting in an estimated 150,000 to 200,000 deaths (15).

Approximately 99% of Algerians identify as Muslim, primarily Sunni (5, 11). Islam remains an intense influence over life, though the state employs a controlled religion policy to keep extremism at bay and ensure secular rule. Islamic values remain influential in legislation, education, and culture, while Algeria is, in fact, an officially secular state that harmonizes Islamic customs with modern political institutions.

Algeria's modern educational system has been shaped both by its French colonial history and post-independence reforms. During French colonial occupation, education was largely shut off to native Algerians, as the majority of schools were for settlers of European descent. After independence in 1962, the Algerian government acted to expand access to education, promote Arabic as the primary language of instruction, and introduce Islamic studies into the school curriculum. Compulsory education is now for children between the ages of 6 and 15, and public education is free at all levels, including university.

There are three main levels in the education system of Algeria. Primary education (aged 6–11) is compulsory and focuses on Arabic, mathematics, and Islamic studies. Middle education (aged 12–15) prepares the student for secondary education or vocational training. Secondary education (16–18 years) is provided in general, technical, and vocational streams, with students taking the Baccalauréat examination, which is required for university admission. Although Arabic is the primary language of instruction, French is still widely used in the scientific and technical disciplines. Berber was declared a national language in 2002, and some schools now teach Tamazight.

Algeria has made significant progress in literacy and school enrollment since independence, although regional and socioeconomic disparities continue to affect educational outcomes. According to UNESCO Institute for Statistics data, adult literacy in Algeria stands at approximately 81.4%, with literacy rates of approximately 87.4% for males and 75.3% for females. Youth literacy rates among individuals aged 15–24 have increased to approximately 94%, reflecting expanded access to education in recent decades. According to World Bank education data, primary school enrollment in Algeria is approximately 97%, while secondary school enrollment remains near 67%, with educational access generally stronger in urban areas than in rural

regions. Despite these improvements, challenges including teacher shortages, overcrowded classrooms, and inadequate rural educational infrastructure continue to contribute to higher dropout rates, particularly at the secondary level. In addition, many university graduates face difficulties obtaining employment due to a mismatch between educational training and labor market demands.

To address these challenges, the Algerian government has implemented educational reforms focused on improving vocational training, expanding teacher preparation programs, and increasing investment in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics education. These reforms aim to improve educational quality while supporting national modernization efforts and workforce development. As a result, Algeria's contemporary education system reflects a hybrid structure that combines post-independence Arabization policies with enduring French educational influences and broader efforts to expand access to quality education.

Algeria stood out in contrast to both Morocco and Tunisia due to the fact that France did not see Algeria just as a protectorate or a colony but rather considered it an extension of the French state itself. This resulted in the development of a more assimilationist education system in which Arabic-language teaching and Islamic education were banned and French cultural formation prevailed. The idea of cultural imperialism introduced by Said (7) can be easily seen in Algeria, since the French tried to promote their knowledge system over indigenous and Islamic ones as being superior. But unlike Niger and Côte d'Ivoire, the stronger Islamic-Ottoman background before colonization in Algeria facilitated more Arabization after independence.

Niger: Educational Marginalization and Structural Inequality

France launched its military expeditions to occupy what is now Niger in the late 19th century, as part of its overall expansion into West Africa. The area was inhabited by a number of strong kingdoms and sultanates prior to French colonization, including the Songhai Empire, the Hausa city-states, and the Tuareg confederations. European explorers, such as Heinrich Barth and Mungo Park, mapped the area in their expeditions during the early 1800s, but official French control did not arrive until the final years of the century. Perhaps the most notorious military expedition was the Voulet-Chanoine Mission in 1899, which was marked by savage excesses, including a massacre of civilians at Birni-N'Konni. These bloody military campaigns were

opposed, particularly by the Tuareg and other indigenous peoples.

By 1922, Niger was officially a colony of French West Africa, elevated from military administration to civilian. The French declared Niamey as the capital, though they persisted in governing indirectly by employing native chiefs while enacting policies that weakened customary systems of government. The colonial administration mostly regarded Niger as a peripheral area of its empire, employing it solely for economic exploitation and labor but not for substantial development. Anti-French resistance existed in some shape or form, from local rebellions to revolts, until Niger finally gained independence on August 3, 1960.

French colonization of Niger was initiated due to economic interests, the availability of natural resources, and an attempt to expand French influence across West Africa. The Niger economy during colonial periods was primarily agricultural and extractive. Commercial groundnut (peanut) production was introduced by the French and became the dominant export crop in the colony, often produced through forced labor. Farmers were forced to abandon subsistence farming for cash crops, leaving them economically vulnerable to unstable world markets.

Apart from agriculture, France also utilized Niger's minerals, namely uranium, which would become the most valuable asset of the country in the future. The French extensively mined iron ore and phosphates on a large scale (1, 3), two of the materials most essential for France's industrial growth. France established infrastructure schemes, such as road and railway connections, all designed to transport these raw materials to the port for export to France.

The French colonial state operated under a policy of indirect rule, in which native chiefs were employed to effect French decrees. In doing so, pre-colonial systems of government were circumvented, and the education system was rendered functional for the purposes of the colonial state and not local growth. Urbanization was kept in check, and Niamey grew into an administrative capital rather than a commercial metropolis. While France implemented some elements of modern government, it spent very little on education, health, or economic infrastructure for the native population, and therefore established long-term development issues that persisted even after independence (1, 3).

Islam's presence in Niger spans the centuries through trans-Saharan commerce and North African Islamic scholars. The people generally practiced Islam, especially

those from the center and the north, during French colonialism. But the French tried to curtail the practice of Islam through their policies, as Islam was seen by them as a uniting force that would lead to opposition. Therefore, Islamic education was regulated, religious leaders were kept under strict surveillance, while some aspects of Islamic courts were eliminated by imposing the judicial codes of France.

After independence in 1960, Islam experienced a resurgence along with the search for national identity and cultural renaissance, with the government willing to boost traditional religious practices and Islamic education. Arabic was restored in religious studies after having been suppressed by the French, and Quranic schools became prominent. Since then, nearly 99% of Niger is Muslim, mostly Sunni (5, 11). Islam continues to be at the very core of social life, government, and education. Over the past few decades, the role of Islam in Niger society and politics has remained dynamic. Though Niger is constitutionally deemed a secular state, Islamic values have permeated into several facets of law and government. The development of Islamic organizations has resulted in considerable community development, social welfare, and education, predominantly in rural regions where the provision of government services is poor. But Niger has also had to deal with issues of extremism in the Sahel region.

Niger's education system has been greatly challenged, primarily due to historical neglect during the colonial period and existing economic difficulties. During French colonial rule, the education system was focused primarily on the interests of the colonial government, with minimal schools for indigenous people. Since independence, Niger has concentrated on expanding access to education, but limited resources, widespread poverty, and gender inequality still impact the system.

Niger's educational system consists of primary (6–12 years), lower secondary (13–16 years), upper secondary (17–19 years), and tertiary education. Education is supposedly free and mandatory for those aged 6 to 15, but many families struggle with the costs of school supplies and travel. French is the sole officially employed language of instruction, even though pupils usually employ Hausa, Zarma, or other indigenous languages at home.

Despite efforts to improve education, Niger has some of the worst primary school completion and literacy rates in the world. According to UNESCO Institute for Statistics data reported in the World Bank-supported education brief for Niger, the primary school

completion rate was approximately 61% for boys and 54% for girls as of 2021 (16). The same data show that lower secondary completion rates decline sharply to approximately 17.1% for boys and 14.8% for girls (16). Learning poverty, the share of children unable to read and understand an age-appropriate text by age 10, was estimated at roughly 90% in Niger as of the most recent UNESCO-World Bank assessment, compared with a sub-Saharan African regional average of approximately 86%, underscoring that Niger's learning crisis is more severe than the regional norm (17). World Bank estimates further indicate that out-of-school rates among primary-age children remain high, with boys' out-of-school rate estimated at roughly 34%, and comparable or higher rates among girls, reflecting persistent and substantial gaps in school access (18). Gender disparities are particularly concerning because girls are pushed out of school by child marriage, household responsibilities, or the lack of schools in their area. Rural areas face severe teacher shortages, classroom overpopulation, and infrastructure difficulties, which further undermine educational quality.

With the support of international organizations like the World Bank and UNESCO, the Nigerien government has been implementing reforms to address these challenges. The World Bank's Board of Executive Directors approved US\$230 million in additional financing in June 2023 for the Niger Learning Improvement for Results in Education Project (LIRE), aimed at expanding access to education, improving teaching and learning environments, and strengthening education planning and management across Niger (19). Greater efforts have also been made to enhance vocational training and science, technology, engineering, and mathematics education to better prepare students for employment. Much still needs to be done, however, to extend universal access to quality education in Niger.

Whereas the countries of Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia received significantly higher investments in their colonies with regard to education, Niger was one of the most structurally marginalized colonies within the French empire in this respect. While the French rulers saw Niger as a provider of labor and materials more than as a location for educational advancement, the country continued to suffer from extremely low rates of literacy and schooling even today, which corroborates Freire's (2) position regarding colonial education. The continued existence of Quranic schools in rural Niger also shows the strength of Islamic education traditions, despite French colonial suppression.

Morocco: Protectorate Rule and Educational Continuity

Before colonization, Morocco was under independent rule under the Alaouite dynasty. This was one of the few nations to maintain sovereignty instead of falling under Ottoman rule. Even so, in Africa, Morocco was a subject of interest to European powers such as France, Spain, and Germany, primarily due to its prime real-estate location in the Mediterranean and its potential in the economic arena. The first Moroccan crisis occurred in 1905, when Germany challenged France's diplomatic agreements with the sultan of Morocco. Kaiser Wilhelm II, the emperor of Germany at the time, traveled to Tangier, Morocco, and challenged French influence in the country. In 1911, there was another incident, the Agadir Crisis, where France sent military forces to Fez, Morocco, to calm Moroccan revolts, claiming they were protecting their European citizens. The Germans interpreted this as an attempt at French expansion and sent the gunboat SMS Panther to Agadir, increasing tension. The British supported France and warned the Germans against taking military action. These tensions ended in 1911 with the Franco-German Agreement, under which Germany acknowledged France's power in Morocco in exchange for territory in central Africa. In 1912, the Treaty of Fez established French control over most of Morocco, confirming its status as a protectorate (3, 7). In contrast, Spain gained control over the Rif region in the north of Morocco, as well as parts of the south, under a separate Spanish Protectorate.

Through colonization, the French introduced large-scale commercialized agriculture, emphasizing olives, citrus fruits, and vineyards. Moroccan farmers had to stop farming what they believed in and were forced to start working on crops that could be exported for profit. Settlers from France controlled regions like the Gharb Plain and Souss Valley, which contained fertile land. The French started mining phosphate, particularly in the regions of Khouribga and Youssoufia, which made Morocco a primary contributor to France's chemical industry. Other commonly exported resources included copper, ores, and iron. At one point, locals were optimistic when infrastructure projects began, believing they would benefit local development; instead, they were utilized primarily for resource extraction.

In contrast to neighboring nations such as Algeria, Morocco remained a protectorate. This meant that the sultan of Morocco remained in his position of power but was still under the resident general of France. Wealthy local families were used to enforce French policies, but

the real power remained with the colonial authorities. Not all of what France did was harmful; it improved places like Casablanca, Rabat, and Fez, turning them into trade hubs. Rural towns saw minimal improvement, unlike the urban areas. The French army made outposts in various parts of Morocco to maintain control, especially in the regions known to rebel, like the Rif and Atlas Mountains. Traditional tribal governance was also weakened, which made most communities living in rural areas rely on colonial intermediaries.

Even though Morocco was a protectorate of France, Islamic institutions in Morocco, such as mosques and religious schools, remained crucial to society. Indirect rule was established through colonization, which allowed the sultan to maintain religious authority and preserve Islamic practices. After independence in 1956, Morocco affirmed that Islam was central to its national identity. The monarchy, led successively by Mohammed V and Hassan II, positioned itself as a protector of the faith, reinforcing the Alaouite dynasty's role as the ruling dynasty. Today, about 99% of Morocco follows Sunni Islam, which mainly adheres to the Maliki school of jurisprudence. In Morocco, Islam is the state religion, and Moroccan laws are often influenced by this religion, especially in matters such as family law, marriage, and inheritance. The Ministry of Habous and Islamic Affairs oversees religious affairs, ensuring that Islamic values are integrated into governance (4). One major challenge Morocco faces is balancing its Islamic identity with the demands of modernization, drawing comparisons with countries such as the United Arab Emirates that interpret Islamic rules less strictly while maintaining core religious cornerstones. Morocco has promoted a more modern interpretation of the religion that pushes back against extremism while also advocating for women's rights and economic development.

Modern Morocco's education system reflects a combination of Islamic educational traditions, post-independence reforms, and enduring French colonial influence. Pre-primary education remains limited in many regions, with formal kindergarten programs primarily accessible to wealthier urban families. Quranic schools also continue to play an important role in early childhood education by providing religious instruction and Quranic interpretation. Primary education in Morocco generally serves students between the ages of 6 and 12 and includes instruction in Arabic, mathematics, science, social studies, and Islamic education, while French is introduced alongside Arabic at an early stage. Lower secondary education, commonly referred to as *collège*,

introduces more advanced subjects including physics, chemistry, biology, and geography, while English is often introduced as a foreign language. Following lower secondary education, students complete a national examination that determines placement into upper secondary academic tracks, including scientific, literary, and technical or vocational pathways.

According to UNESCO Institute for Statistics data, Morocco's total gross enrollment ratio in primary education reached approximately 107.4%, with 112% for males and 101% for females, a figure above 100% that reflects the inclusion of over-age and under-age students alongside students of the official primary-school age. UNESCO Institute for Statistics data from the same period indicate that the gross enrollment ratio in higher education stood at approximately 11%, reflecting the limitations in access to tertiary education that prevailed at that time, though more recent UNESCO data show this figure has since risen substantially, to roughly 40% (20). According to UNESCO data, Morocco's adult literacy rate has continued to climb in recent years, reaching approximately 77% as of 2022, representing a substantial improvement since independence, even as significant disparities persist between urban and rural populations, particularly among women, whose literacy rates remain lower in many rural areas (20). Although primary school attendance rates have increased considerably, concerns regarding educational quality, teacher preparation, and student competency levels remain ongoing challenges within the Moroccan education system.

In response to these challenges, the Moroccan government has implemented several educational reform initiatives aimed at improving teacher training, expanding access to pre-primary education, and decentralizing educational administration to regional and provincial levels. The World Bank approved a US\$496 million Program-for-Results loan in 2019, the Morocco Education Support Program, to support improvements in early childhood education quality, teacher effectiveness, and the governance of the education sector across Morocco; the World Bank subsequently approved an additional US\$250 million in financing for the program in 2023 (21).

This difference is seen in the fact that in Morocco the French colonialists ruled under the protectorate method, thus permitting Islam and the monarchy to keep some power. As a result of this system, Islamic education did not disappear but remained side by side with the education provided by the French rulers. This can be seen as further evidence for the claim that the stronger

the Islamic education system was in a nation prior to colonization, the easier it would be for that country to maintain its identity after colonialism. This can be seen from the dual-language policy followed by Morocco as well as the fact that there continues to be Qur'anic education even at present, as discussed by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (6) in the context of hierarchy in language.

Tunisia: Hybrid Educational Reform and Religious Continuity

Tunis Province was ruled by the Husainid Beys as an autonomous province under the Ottoman Empire. Other regions had relative autonomy, but Tunisia faced economic instability and European pressure. France, seeing the potential, established a protectorate in 1881 through the Treaty of Bardo, maintaining the Beylical government as a token while taking full control. In 1883, the La Marsa Convention further solidified French dominance, effectively stripping the bey of power and placing Tunisia under direct French domination. Actual power lay in the hands of the French Resident-General, who imposed economic reforms favoring French settlers, particularly in agriculture and infrastructure. Vast areas of land were seized for European farms, and railways and ports were built to serve French trade interests. Resistance to colonization began early: in June 1881, tribal armies such as the Hammama, Zlass, and Methellith rebelled but were crushed by the French shortly afterward. Nationalism grew quite strong in the twentieth century with the Destour Party (1920) and Neo-Destour Party (1934) under the leadership of Habib Bourguiba. After World War II, global realignments and additional protests led to negotiations, and in 1956 Tunisia obtained independence from France. The monarchy was abolished by 1957, and Tunisia was made a republic under Bourguiba (3, 7).

Colonization ushered in an era of large-scale commercial agriculture in Tunisia, primarily olives, wheat, and vineyards grown for export. Tunisian farmers were pushed away from subsistence farming and toward cash crops that satisfied the French market. French settlers found the most fertile areas, such as the Medjerda Valley, where they founded European-owned farms. Phosphate mining was extended in Tunisia by the French, especially in Gafsa, with the idea of making Tunisia a major supplier to France's chemical industry. Other extracted resources included lead and iron, which were sent abroad for sale to Europe.

Infrastructure projects were said to be a sign of local development but were largely constructed to facilitate

the extraction of resources. While Algeria was a colony, Tunisia was always a protectorate; the beylical government remained nominally in place but had no real power. Wealthy Tunisians and elites saw to the implementation of French policies, but real decision-making remained within the French administration. Modernization in specific urban centers transformed Tunis and Sfax into commercial and administrative hubs, yet rural areas continued to receive minimal infrastructure investment. The French army built outposts throughout Tunisia to control the interior, particularly in regions with active resistance movements, which significantly weakened traditional tribal governance structures and forced rural communities to rely on French colonial intermediaries for administration.

During the French protectorate in Tunisia, places of worship and Islamic education, such as mosques and religious schools, survived in society. The French policy of indirect rule allowed the Husainid Beys to maintain their nominal authority and Islamic traditions. After independence in 1956, Tunisia maintained that Islam was the linchpin of national identity. The first president, Habib Bourguiba, set forth a policy of modernization that sought a balance between Islamic traditions and secular governance. As of now, almost 99% of Tunisians are Sunni Muslims, the majority following the Maliki school of jurisprudence. Islam remains the state religion, and Tunisian laws are thus founded upon Islamic principles, especially concerning family law, marriage, and inheritance. The Ministry of Religious Affairs deals with all matters related to religion, ensuring that Islamic values permeate the government's administration. Tunisia has managed to maintain a balance of Islamic identity and modernity, permitting the evolution of a moderate form of Islam that, while obstructing extremist movements, also allows space for women's rights and economic growth.

Tunisia's modern education system reflects a combination of post-independence modernization efforts, Islamic educational traditions, and continued French educational influence. Pre-primary education for children between the ages of 3 and 6 includes both kindergarten programs and Quranic schools, where students develop foundational literacy, numeracy, and religious education skills. Primary and lower secondary education are compulsory and free for students between the ages of 6 and 16. Primary education lasts six years, followed by three years of lower secondary education. Subjects taught at the primary level include Arabic, mathematics, science, social studies, and Islamic studies, while French

is introduced during primary school and English during lower secondary education.

Upper secondary education, commonly referred to as lycée, includes multiple academic tracks such as science, literature, and technology, and concludes with the Baccalauréat examination, which serves as the primary qualification for university admission. According to net enrollment data reported by the World Bank, Tunisia's net enrollment rate in primary education reached approximately 99.5% for children aged 6 to 11 as of the 2018–19 school year, reflecting near-universal participation in primary education (22). Despite these achievements, significant challenges remain within the Tunisian education system, including disparities in educational quality between urban and rural regions, high dropout rates at secondary and tertiary levels, and the need for curriculum reform to address changing economic and labor market demands.

According to a 2021 Arab Barometer regional survey, approximately 77% of Tunisians expressed dissatisfaction with the country's education system, the highest dissatisfaction rate recorded among the North African countries surveyed, reflecting widespread concern regarding educational quality and institutional effectiveness (23). In response, the Tunisian government has continued to implement education reforms focused on strengthening teacher training, modernizing curricula, and improving school infrastructure, with support from international partners including the World Bank and UNICEF (24).

Like Morocco, Tunisia experienced French rule through a protectorate structure rather than full territorial integration, which allowed Islamic institutions and local political structures to survive to a greater extent than in Algeria. However, Tunisia pursued a more centralized post-independence modernization strategy that attempted to balance Islamic identity with secular governance and educational reform. This hybrid approach reflects Said's (7) concept of cultural imperialism, as French educational and administrative influence remained embedded within Tunisian institutions even after independence. At the same time, Tunisia's comparatively strong literacy outcomes and lower gender disparities suggest that sustained investment in national education systems can partially mitigate the long-term structural inequalities established during the colonial period.

Colonization History Comparison and Analysis

If we look at the colonization history of Côte d'Ivoire, Niger, Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia, we can see

much in common, but there are also some considerable differences. All five countries were colonized by France, and in all five cases, the French had a strong impact on their governments, economies, religions, and educational systems.

One significant similarity among all of these countries was that French interest was driven mainly by resources and economic reasons. In Côte d'Ivoire and Niger, the French focused on agricultural materials like coffee, cocoa, and groundnuts, while in Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia, this was complemented by heavy exploitation of mineral resources like iron, oil, and phosphates. They bought fertile land and hired natives to work on export crops instead of growing food for their own consumption. Throughout the five territories, the French built railroads and roads, but they built them primarily to allow goods to be shipped out of the country, not to help local populations.

Another similarity was how France dealt with local government institutions, whether through full control as in Algeria or indirect rule as in Morocco and Tunisia. Even in protectorate areas, French authority remained dominant; colonial administrations utilized local elites to help impose French regulations, yet at the end of the day, the colonial regime made the decisions.

The differences are mostly due to how France treated each country on paper. Algeria was incorporated into France, effectively making it part of metropolitan Europe, while the other four countries were colonies or protectorates. That meant Algeria had more French colonizers and more land taken from natives. Morocco and Tunisia kept their traditional rulers, the Sultan and the Beys, but they were not rulers in actuality. Côte d'Ivoire and Niger were directly ruled and were part of French West Africa.

Islam was present in all five nations already, but the French tried to limit its impact. This reflects Edward Said's (7) concept of cultural imperialism, as French authorities attempted to position European educational and legal systems as superior while marginalizing Islamic institutions and indigenous cultural structures. They tried primarily to replace Islamic law with French law, minimize religious education, and block Muslim leaders from gaining too much authority. But Islam regained prominence in the post-independence era. Algeria and Niger passed laws to promote Arabic and Islamic education, and almost all of the present-day nations have over 90% Muslim populations.

In summary, the French colonized these countries mostly for economic gain, and all of them suffered loss

of land, forced labor, and limited education. The largest differences come from how much control France left with native leaders and whether the country was treated as part of France or just a colony. In every case, Islam survived the colonial period and came back stronger after independence, playing a key role in national identity today.

Major Colonial Education Policies (Table 1)

Comparison of Colonization's Impact on Historical Education Systems

Looking at the effect that colonization had on the education system in Côte d'Ivoire, Niger, Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia, a clear trend can be observed. Islamic education and the Ottoman Empire had a widespread influence before French occupation, mainly in North African countries like Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco. There, education would usually take place in mosques or Quranic schools and focused on the teaching of Arabic, the Quran, and Islamic law. These institutions were deeply rooted in religious life and communal tradition.

As soon as the French arrived, much of this changed. In all countries, France tried to substitute Islamic education with a more Western model of schooling, using

French as the main language of study, with most lessons focused on European subjects. In states like Niger and Côte d'Ivoire, where Islamic education systems were less developed to begin with, France started essentially from scratch and provided minimal education to natives outside of its own colonial interest. Schools were not common, and only a minority of children, mostly the sons of aristocrats or chiefs, were allowed to attend.

Colonial Administrative Structures (Table 2)

In Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia, where there was more established Islamic education due to the Ottoman Empire or older tradition, the French nonetheless tried to limit access to those systems. They banned some religious schools, controlled Islamic education, and dominated the curriculum. In Algeria especially, the French built schools for colonists and mostly ignored education for indigenous Algerians, seeking to weaken Islamic identity and replace it with a French one.

However, while Tunisia and Morocco were protectorates rather than outright colonies like Algeria, the Ottoman and Sultanate legacies that preceded French rule continued to shape the educational systems of both countries. The original Quranic schools were not entirely abolished; they were, however, relegated to a secondary status. Yet this continued semblance of the Ottoman

Table 1. Comparison of Major Colonial Education Policies Across Five North and West African Countries. Comparison of colonial education policies in Côte d'Ivoire, Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, and Niger, including educational access, language policy, curriculum orientation, religious education, and the primary educational objectives imposed under French colonial rule. The table highlights differences between direct colonies, protectorates, and assimilationist models, illustrating how colonial governance structures shaped long-term educational development and institutional continuity.

Category	Côte d'Ivoire	Morocco	Tunisia	Algeria	Niger
Access to education	Very limited; mainly trained for labor roles	Moderate; some access due to indirect rule	Moderate; more access than colonies	Extremely limited for natives; prioritized for settlers	Extremely limited; local language excluded
Language policy	French only; indigenous languages ignored	Arabic + French (dual system)	Arabic + French (dual system)	French imposed; Arabic suppressed in schools	French only, local languages excluded
Purpose of education	Train laborers and clerks	Maintain control while preserving limited education	Similar to Morocco; hybrid control	Assimilation into French identity	Workforce training
Religious education	Suppressed / ignored	Allowed to continue (Quranic schools)	Allowed but controlled	Strongly suppressed	Limited and controlled
Curriculum focus	Basic literacy and labor skills	Mix of French and traditional Islamic studies	Mixed curriculum	French-centric and Eurocentric	Minimal curriculum focused on obedience

Table 2. *Comparison of Colonial Administrative Structures Across Five Countries. Comparison of colonial governance models in Côte d'Ivoire, Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, and Niger; including direct colonial administration, protectorate arrangements, and settler-colonial integration. The table summarizes key characteristics of French political control and illustrates how differing administrative structures influenced educational systems, local governance, and post-independence institutional development.*

Country	Type of Rule	Key Characteristics
Côte d'Ivoire	Direct colony	Fully controlled by France; economic exploitation
Morocco	Protectorate	Sultan remained, but France had real power
Tunisia	Protectorate	Bey remained symbolic; France controlled policy
Algeria	Full integration (settler colony)	Considered part of France; heavy European settlement
Niger	Direct colony (French West Africa)	Indirect rule through chiefs but strong French control

legacy in Tunisia, combined with the insistence of the Sultan in Morocco, allowed some religious education to survive there to a greater extent than in Algeria. Niger and Côte d'Ivoire had weaker roots in formal Islamic education and did not benefit from the Ottoman administrative heritage; they instead experienced a very basic French system designed to create workers and clerks rather than thinkers and leaders.

Perhaps the most significant difference between Islamic or Ottoman and French colonization was the purpose of education. Whereas Islamic educational traditions emphasized religious scholarship, cultural continuity, and community leadership, French colonial systems often prioritized administrative control and labor preparation, aligning with Freire's (2) critique of education as a mechanism of social control. For Islamic and Ottoman traditions, education was tied to religion, community, and cultural transmission. For the French, education was primarily an instrument of domination, intended to train the colonized to submit, while leaving the remainder uneducated or indebted.

Briefly, Islamic education was pushed out by French colonization and replaced with a system more favorable to France. Nations with stronger Islamic or Ottoman traditions were able to preserve parts of their old systems, but everywhere, education was limited and unequal. All five countries were forced to rebuild their systems post-independence, trying to bring back their language, religion, and values into education. The effects of colonization on education are felt even today.

MODERN-DAY COMPARISON OF EDUCATION SYSTEMS

The effects of colonization remain evident in the educational systems of Côte d'Ivoire, Niger, Algeria,

Morocco, and Tunisia today. French is either the primary language taught in schools or is significantly intermingled with Arabic in practically every nation. The continued dominance of French within education systems across these countries demonstrates the long-term persistence of colonial linguistic hierarchies discussed by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (6). While Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia attempt to balance French and Arabic together, schools in Côte d'Ivoire and Niger primarily educate in French. Many of the subjects that students study today, including science, math, and even history, are derived from the systems that the French established during their occupation.

However, Islamic education has persisted, particularly in Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco. Islamic subjects are taught to children at a young age in these nations, which still operate Quranic schools. Because Morocco and Tunisia were protectorates rather than full colonies during French administration, religious schooling remained more prevalent there. However, Islamic education was never as extensive in Côte d'Ivoire and Niger to begin with, and is therefore primarily available only in private settings now.

Contemporary Language Use in National Education Systems (Table 3)

Today's nations differ greatly in how accessible education is. The governments of Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia have worked to ensure that the majority of children, both boys and girls, attend school, even in rural areas. However, many children in Niger and Côte d'Ivoire still fail to complete basic schooling. This is far more difficult, particularly in rural areas, due to factors including poverty, a shortage of teachers, and poor school infrastructure.

The objectives of Islamic education were entirely

Table 3. *Contemporary Language Use in National Education Systems. Comparison of primary and secondary languages used in modern education systems across Côte d'Ivoire, Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, and Niger. The table illustrates the continued influence of French colonial linguistic policies and the varying degrees of Arabization, bilingual education, and indigenous language integration within contemporary schooling systems.*

Country	Primary Language Today	Secondary Language	Notes
Côte d'Ivoire	French	Local languages	Strong colonial legacy
Morocco	Arabic	French	Dual system still present
Tunisia	Arabic	French	French used in science/tech
Algeria	Arabic	French	Arabization policies post-independence
Niger	French	Hausa/Zarma	French dominates education

different from those of French colonial education. Islamic education, particularly during the Ottoman era, focused on community development, leadership training, and religious instruction. In contrast, the French primarily employed education to maintain control and train their workforce. Because of this, nations that maintained more of their Islamic educational traditions, like Morocco and Tunisia, were able to recover more quickly after gaining independence.

In the end, even though all five countries are trying to modernize their education systems today, the strength of a country's Islamic education foundation prior to French colonization continues to show in how their schools work today. Some countries were able to hold onto their traditions more, while others are still recovering from the disruptions of the colonial years.

Continuity of Islamic Educational Traditions Following Colonial Rule (Table 4)

Current gender outcomes across Côte d'Ivoire, Niger, Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia show a complex

relationship between colonial history, schooling structures surrounding religion, and broader socioeconomic conditions. While all of these countries show some progress in expanding access to education, gender disparities still exist to differing extents, especially when comparing outcomes across Islamic, Christian, and broader national educational systems.

In countries like Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia, where Islamic education systems remained embedded in national institutions and were later reintegrated into a national framework, gender outcomes tend to be more favorable overall. Islamic schooling in these contexts, particularly state-regulated Quranic and public schools, has continued to align with national modernization goals. Governments in these countries have actively encouraged female education as part of broader development strategies, resulting in relatively high literacy rates and a narrowing of gender gaps. In both Algeria and Tunisia, for example, literacy rates are generally above 80%, with female literacy only modestly lower than that of males. In such settings, Islamic schools were not isolated religious

Table 4. *Continuity of Islamic Educational Traditions Following Colonial Rule. Comparative assessment of the degree of continuity of Islamic educational traditions across five countries following French colonization and post-independence reform. The table summarizes patterns of institutional persistence, including the role of Quranic schools, Arabization policies, and the integration of Islamic studies within national education systems.*

Country	Level of Continuity	Explanation
Côte d'Ivoire	Low	Islam present but not central to education system
Morocco	High	Quranic schools and Islamic studies still strong
Tunisia	High	Islamic education integrated into system
Algeria	High	Reintroduced after independence via Arabization
Niger	Moderate	Quranic schools are common, especially in rural areas

institutions; they were integrated into national systems that encouraged female literacy, helping to reduce gender disparities.

However, within North Africa, differences emerge when rural and urban populations are compared. In Morocco, for example, while the overall literacy rate is approximately 77%, rural female literacy remains considerably lower than urban male literacy. This suggests that while Islamic education systems have evolved to support gender inclusion at a national level, socioeconomic barriers at the local level, such as poverty, distance to schools, and traditional gender roles, continue to hinder equitable outcomes.

On the other hand, Niger and Côte d'Ivoire show more visible gender gaps, specifically in regions where educational access is limited and systems are less connected. In Niger, where almost 99% of the population is Muslim, Islamic schools usually take the form of informal or community-based Quranic education, especially in rural areas. While these schools play an important cultural and religious role, they do not always provide comprehensive academic instruction or clear pathways into formal education, especially for girls. The result is that gender gaps remain very high, with girls disproportionately affected by early marriage, household labor, and lack of access to schooling. Completion rates for girls at both the primary and secondary levels are markedly lower than those for boys, contributing to one of the lowest literacy rates globally.

Côte d'Ivoire highlights the way that gender outcomes are shaped by education structure more than religion per se, as both Christian and Islamic schooling systems coexist there. Christian missionary schools, concentrated mostly in the south, usually offer more structured and accessible education, which leads to higher rates of

female enrollment and completion. More informal Islamic schooling exists in the more rural northern regions, which usually lacks the same level of resources or integration into the national system, contributing to a larger gender gap. This difference is mostly attributable to funding, infrastructure, and governance, rather than to religion itself. A comparable pattern can be seen across all five of these countries: in Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia, where education systems are more centralized and developed, gender disparities are notably smaller, while countries like Niger continue to contend with larger gaps due to limited access and weaker infrastructure. These disparities further demonstrate how colonial educational inequalities continued into the post-colonial era, particularly in regions where educational infrastructure remained underdeveloped after independence.

In summary, gender outcomes remain a work in progress across North and West Africa. The complexities of colonial history intersecting with Islamic, Christian, and indigenous cultural traditions reveal progress toward gender-equal outcomes in some regions, alongside significant barriers and room for improvement in others. Further research is needed to understand how the post-colonial education system is evolving, especially considering the role of emerging technologies such as satellite internet access in rural areas.

Literacy Outcomes, Gender Disparities, and Educational Challenges (Table 5)

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the evidence suggests that the further north one goes in Africa, especially toward Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia, the more Islamic education

Table 5. *Literacy Outcomes, Gender Disparities, and Educational Challenges Across Five Countries. Comparison of contemporary educational indicators across Côte d'Ivoire, Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, and Niger, including literacy rates, gender disparities, and major educational challenges. The table highlights persistent inequalities in educational access and outcomes and illustrates how colonial legacies, educational investment, and post-independence reforms continue to shape educational development across North and West Africa.*

Country	Literacy Rate	Gender Gap	Key Issues
Côte d'Ivoire	~47%	High	Rural vs. urban divide; low female completion
Morocco	~77%	Moderate	Rural female literacy gap
Tunisia	~81%	Low-moderate	Better gender equity overall
Algeria	~81%	Moderate	Women slightly lower literacy than men
Niger	Very low (~30%)	Very high	Severe gender inequality; low school access

survived and even thrived alongside modern schooling. One of the main reasons that Islamic education stayed in place in the north was that it was already incredibly strong before the French arrived, in large part because of the legacy of Ottoman administration. In places like Niger and Côte d'Ivoire, Islamic education was not as prominent or well established, which made it easier for the French to control and reshape the whole education system. In some North African countries like Morocco and Tunisia, governments worked harder, even after independence, to make education more equal and standardized, improving access for both boys and girls. In places like Côte d'Ivoire and Niger, children still struggle with access to education, especially girls and those in rural areas. After independence, France and international partners attempted to address this through school funding and teacher training, but the results have not been uniform across every country. The impact of both Islamic and French colonization is still visible today in how education functions in these five countries.

The study is limited by its dependence on high-level secondary source analysis, which can provide a broad comparative perspective but may not fully capture local variation or the lived experiences of people within each country's education system. As a result, future research would benefit from deeper engagement with primary source evidence, especially French colonial archives as well as records of Islamic educational institutions, to better understand how these systems developed and interacted over time.

In addition, there is a gap in the academic literature at the intersection of Islamic colonization, West Africa, and French colonial influence. Existing research has extensively examined French education systems, but research on earlier Islamic educational traditions in countries like Niger and Côte d'Ivoire, and how they were affected by and adapted to colonial rule, remains comparatively limited and should be further explored.

Finally, future research should delve further into the coexistence of Islamic and colonial education models in West Africa through both empirical and archival investigation. Using historical records from French colonial administrations in parallel with indigenous and Islamic educational sources could provide deeper insight into how these systems functioned alongside one another and interacted over time. This work may also help build a better understanding of how education can support cultural coexistence and social cohesion while improving equitable outcomes.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflicts of interest related to this work.

AI DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

During the preparation of this work, the author used Claude (Anthropic) to identify supporting sources and draft citation text for statistics flagged during peer review, and to assist with formatting the manuscript to journal specifications. Following the use of this tool, the author carefully reviewed, verified, and edited the content as necessary and took full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and integrity of the published work.

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