

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Educational Systems and Pedagogical Practices of the Azzaba in Central Maghreb during the Medieval Period

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Abstract

This study, entitled "Educational Systems and Pedagogical Practices of the Azzaba in Central Maghreb during the Medieval Period," aims to shed light on one of the most prominent religious and social institutions responsible for managing the educational system within Ibadi society. It does so by analyzing the institutional structure of the Azzaba system and examining the practical aspects of the educational process through a review of the principal pedagogical measures and teaching methods employed. The study also explores the ethical and value-based framework that regulated the conduct and etiquette of the various actors involved in education (teachers and learners), in addition to investigating the assessment and disciplinary policies implemented within this system.

The significance of this study lies in highlighting the distinctive nature of the Azzaba as a fully developed educational institution that contributed substantially to preserving the intellectual and social identity of the Ibadi community in the Central Maghreb throughout the medieval period and up to the present day.

Keywords: Systems – Education – Pedagogy – Azzaba – Central Maghreb.

Introduction

The Azzaba system is closely associated with the Ibadi doctrine. It emerged approximately a century after the fall of the Rustamid State in the Central Maghreb. It is known as the Azzaba System or the Circle System (Nizām al-Ḥalqa), a designation derived from the circles of learning from which it evolved. Initially conceived as an educational system, its scope gradually expanded into a comprehensive educational, pedagogical, and social institution.

This system successfully filled the political vacuum left by the absence of the Imamate of Manifestation (Imāmat al-Zuhūr) by ensuring the continuity of the Ibadi doctrine and safeguarding the distinctiveness of Ibadi society. Through its educational framework and the pedagogical systems, curricula, institutions, and teaching methods it developed, the Azzaba system succeeded in

disseminating knowledge and virtue, integrating all segments of Ibadi society, and even exercising effective authority within it.

Thus, the Azzaba system was not merely an institution for managing religious and social affairs; rather, it constituted a comprehensive educational and pedagogical framework that effectively regulated the finest details of the educational process in the Central Maghreb. Hence, the importance of studying this system lies in moving beyond the boundaries of conventional historical narrative and entering the field of the History of Education, through an analysis of educational structures, prescribed curricula, and the pedagogical practices and teaching methods adopted by Azzaba scholars in their various centers of learning.

In order to define the dimensions and objectives of this study, the following central research question is posed:

To what extent was the Azzaba system in the Central Maghreb able to establish a comprehensive educational and pedagogical framework? Furthermore, how did its institutions, curricula, pedagogical practices, and disciplinary measures contribute to shaping the intellectual and behavioral formation of Ibadi society during the medieval period?

This main question gives rise to several subsidiary questions:

What are the terminological and historical meanings of the term "Azzaba"? What were the principal areas of Ibadi presence in the Central Maghreb?

What was the nature of the institutional structure and educational curricula within the Azzaba system?

What were the most significant pedagogical mechanisms, educational practices, ethical norms, and disciplinary policies adopted within this educational system?

These questions constitute the focus of the present research paper.

First: The Azzaba System (Concept, Significance, and Geographic Environment in the Central Maghreb)

1. The Linguistic, Terminological, and Historical Concept of the Azzaba System

The Azzaba system emerged within the Ibadi community of the Central Maghreb during the Middle Ages, specifically at the beginning of the 5th century AH / 11th century CE. Linguistically, the term Azzaba is derived from the Arabic verb 'azaba¹, meaning "to be distant" or "to move away." Ibn Manzur explains that 'azaba, ya'zabu signifies remoteness and separation, while 'uzbah denotes isolation, and 'uzūbah similarly refers to being apart or absent.²

Terminologically, the Azzaba system acquired this name because it required its members to detach themselves from worldly affairs, avoid excessive social interaction, and devote themselves to learning

¹ Ibn Manzur, *Lisan al-Arab*, edited by Abdullah Ali al-Kabir, Muhammad Ahmad Hasab Allah, and Hashim Muhammad al-Shadhili, n.p., Dar al-Ma'arif, Cairo, p. 2924.

² Zayn al-Din Muhammad ibn Abi Bakr ibn Abd al-Qadir al-Razi, *Mukhtar al-Sihah*, edited by Hamza Fath Allah, new edition, Mu'assasat al-Risalah Publishers, Beirut, Lebanon, 2001, p. 378.

and worship. Al-Darjini states: “This name is derived from distancing oneself from something; thus, it was metaphorically applied to those who distanced themselves from worldly matters that distract from the Hereafter.”¹

This system established itself within Ibadi society during the period of concealment (*Kitmān*) that followed the fall of the Rustamid State and the disappearance of the Manifest Imamate (*Imāmat al-Zuhūr*). Its primary objective was to preserve the continuity of the Wahbi Ibadi doctrine. However, this task was far from easy due to the absence of political authority, the deterioration of security conditions, and the spread of competing religious doctrines in the Maghreb, including Shi‘ism, Wasilism, and Maliki Sunnism. Consequently, Ibadi scholars and shaykhs recognized the importance of education in preserving their doctrine and the distinctiveness of their community. They therefore organized scholarly circles (*ḥalaqāt*) within their settlements for this purpose.

The scholarly circle represented the nucleus of the Azzaba system. As its administrative structure developed over time, it gave rise to a distinct institution governed by strict regulations. This enabled it to encompass and regulate Ibadi society for extended periods and eventually became known as the “Azzaba System,” which effectively assumed many functions traditionally performed by governing authorities in organizing and managing Ibadi communal affairs.

It should be noted that scholarly circles had existed among the Ibadis since the era of the Rustamid State and continued after its fall. Nevertheless, fairness requires acknowledging that the effective organization of these circles during the period of concealment was initiated by Imam Abu Abd Allah Muhammad ibn Bakr al-Farsata’i, named after the town of Farsata in Jabal Nafusa. He is described as “the first to inspire the method through which God preserved this doctrine.

For this reason, Imam Abu Abd Allah al-Farsata’i is regarded as the true founder of the Azzaba system. Indeed, the term Azzaba itself only appeared following his establishment of the scholarly circle. Al-Darjini writes: “The first use of this title occurred during the time of Abu Abd Allah Muhammad ibn Bakr, may God be pleased with him, when he established the circle and organized its regulations.”² Thereafter, the term Azzaba came to designate this educational, social, and religious institution as a whole, which served as a protective stronghold for the Ibadis of the Central Maghreb for many centuries and continues to exist today in the region known as the Mzab Valley.

2. The Geographic Scope of Ibadi Settlements in the Central Maghreb during the Medieval Period

¹ Abu al-Abbas Ahmad ibn Sa‘id al-Darjini, *Tabaqat al-Mashayikh bi al-Maghrib* (Classes of Scholars in the Maghreb), edited by Ibrahim Tallay, Vol. 1, p. 4.

² Mas‘ud Mazhuri, “Cultural Relations among the Ibadis of the Central Maghreb during the Fourth and Fifth Centuries AH,” *Journal of Human and Social Sciences*, University of Batna, No. 2, 1994, University Publications Office, Constantine, p. 158.

Before the fall of the Rustamid State, the city of Tahert was the most important center of Ibadi activity in the Central Maghreb. However, following the destruction of their state and the collapse of their rule at the hands of the Fatimid Shi'ites in 296 AH / 909 CE, the Ibadis began migrating southward in order to preserve both their lives and their religious beliefs. They settled in Wargla (Ouargla), which had previously belonged to the Rustamids. Among these migrants was Prince Ya'qub ibn Aflah.¹

At that time, the affairs of Wargla were administered by Shaykh Abu Salih Janun ibn Yamriyan. The term Wargla (present-day Ouargla) referred not only to the city itself but also to the surrounding region, which was bordered by the Ziban to the east, the Mzab Valley to the west, and Sedrata and its villages to the south.²

Throughout the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th centuries AH (8th–10th centuries CE), Wargla remained an important center of Ibadi settlement in the Central Maghreb. In addition to its indigenous Ibadi population,³ waves of Ibadi refugees from the northern regions of the Central Maghreb strengthened the communities established in the oases of Wargla and Righ Valley⁴.

Alongside Wargla, Sedrata also constituted an important Ibadi center. Located approximately fourteen kilometers southwest of Wargla, it was founded by the Ibadis during the 4th century AH and remained inhabited until it was destroyed by the Almoravid armies in the 7th century AH.⁵

Thus, up to the 4th century AH, Wargla and Sedrata represented the largest concentrations of Ibadis, in addition to smaller Ibadi communities found in various regions of the Central Maghreb, including the Aurès Mountains, Baghaya, the Ziban, M'sila, and others.⁶

However, at the beginning of the 5th century AH, this demographic map began to change as Ibadi populations migrated from Sedrata, Wargla, Oued Righ, and Oued Souf toward the Mzab Valley.⁷ This migration was prompted by severe drought and deteriorating security conditions. Despite its difficult terrain and arid environment, the Mzab Valley was chosen because it provided a secure refuge and natural protection against external threats that could endanger the community's existence.

¹ Samia Maqri, *Education among the Ibadis in the Maghreb from the Fall of the Rustamid State to the Establishment of the Gharabah System (296–409 AH / 909–1018 CE)*, Master's Thesis, supervised by Bouba Majani, Mentouri University, Constantine, 2005–2006, p. 17.

² Al-Darjini, *Tabaqat al-Mashayikh bi al-Maghrib*, Vol. 1, p. 167.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁴ Bakir ibn Sa'id A'wusht, *The Mzab Valley under Islamic Civilization: Religious, Historical, and Social Perspectives*, n.p., Arab Printing House, Ghardaïa, 1991, p. 95.

⁵ Mas'ud Mazhuri, *The Ibadis in the Central Maghreb from the Fall of the Rustamid State to the Hilalian Migration into the Maghreb (296–442 AH / 909–1058 CE)*, Arab Printing House, Ghardaïa, Algeria, 1996, p. 27.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Tadeusz Lewicki, *Comprehensive African Studies: Collected and Translated Research with Historical, Social, and Linguistic Dimensions*, translated by Ahmed Boumezgou, 1st ed., Al-Dhamiri Library for Publishing and Distribution, Seeb, Sultanate of Oman, 2008, p. 98.

The Mزاب Valley lies approximately 190 kilometers west of Wargla and is also known as the region of Banu Mus‘ab. It is characterized as a mountainous desert area.¹ Furthermore, the region was not unfamiliar to the Ibadis, for Abu Abd Allah al-Farsata’i and his disciples regularly traveled there every spring in order to spread the Ibadī doctrine among its inhabitants, many of whom had previously adhered to the Wasilite school.²

In conclusion, the Ibadī community that had migrated from northern regions to southern settlements such as Wargla and Sedrata from the 3rd century AH onward, as well as to other areas including the Ziban, the Aurès, and Oued Righ, ultimately relocated almost entirely during the 5th century AH to the Mزاب Valley. There, it established a lasting settlement and succeeded in preserving the fundamental principles of its doctrine up to the present day.

Second: The Institutional Structure and Educational Approaches in the Azzaba System

1. Educational Institutions and Learning Centers among the Azzaba

Mosques and Congregational Mosques

Mosques served as gathering places for shaykhs, scholars, students of knowledge, and ordinary people alike. They hosted scholarly councils (*majālis al-'ilm*) where students received their lessons, while the general public attended to benefit from religious exhortations and to learn matters of their faith.³ Al-Wisiyani reports that Sulayman ibn Abdullah ibn Sukkar al-Fatnasi al-Mazati said:

"I lived in Fatnasa, which was a small Mazata tribe, and there were twelve mosques there, all active with the call to prayer, congregational worship, and scholarly gatherings."

Al-Shammakhi also mentions that:

"A group of shaykhs gathered in the Great Mosque of Ouargla... when a man asked them about a legal issue: whether payment may be taken for teaching the Qur'an."⁴

Mosques represented the second stage of education. Once a child had completed the *kuttāb* (Qur'anic school), memorized the fundamentals of Arabic and the Holy Qur'an, and reached puberty,⁵ he was permitted to attend the scholarly councils held in mosques. Congregational mosques, however, constituted the highest level of education, where advanced scholarly circles were conducted by leading Ibadī scholars and jurists across various disciplines. These mosques thus functioned much like universities or higher institutes.⁶

Kuttābs (Qur'anic Schools)

¹ Bakir ibn Sa'id A'wusht, *The Mزاب Valley under Islamic Civilization*, p. 59.

² Mas'ud Mazhuri, *The Ibadis in the Central Maghreb*, p. 123.

³ Bakir ibn Sa'id A'wusht, *The Mزاب Valley under Islamic Civilization*, p. 62.

⁴ Mas'ud Mazhuri, *The Ibadis in the Central Maghreb*, footnote no. 2, p. 27.

⁵ Al-Darjini, *Tabaqat al-Mashayikh bi al-Maghrib*, Vol. 1, p. 183.

⁶ Abu al-Rabi' Sulayman ibn Abd al-Salam ibn Hassan al-Wisiyani, *Siyar al-Wisiyani*, edited by Omar bin Luqman Hamou Hamza Suleiman Bouasbana, 1st ed., 2009, Vol. 2, pp. 828–829.

The term *kuttāb* refers to "a place where children are taught."¹ Its origins in the Maghreb date back to the Islamic conquest, when the *kuttāb* was attached to the mosque. It was the primary educational institution and corresponded to the elementary stage in modern terms.²

During the medieval period, "Ibadi children learned in the *kuttābs* to memorize the Holy Qur'an, acquire the basic principles of jurisprudence, and learn horsemanship.³ Thereafter, the child would advance beyond the first stage of education." This stage was compulsory for all children without exception.

Al-Shammakhi recounts the story of Shaykh Maksan, who lost his sight at an early age:

"His mother took him to the mother of al-Mu'izz ibn Badis and informed her of what had happened to her son. She replied: 'Return him to the *kuttāb*, for he will benefit from it,' having observed his sharp intellect, attentiveness, understanding, and intelligence. She did so, and he memorized the Qur'an through oral instruction in a remarkably short time."

This account also indicates that rote instruction and oral transmission were the primary teaching methods in the *kuttābs*. Children learned "the fundamentals of the Arabic language, memorization of the Holy Qur'an, and the noble Prophetic traditions through oral repetition and recitation."⁴ Consequently, this stage was demanding and intellectually intensive, yet extremely important, since success in later stages of education depended on the knowledge acquired during it.

Schools

Ibadi society possessed schools and scholarly circles throughout its territories since the Rustamid era, particularly in well-known Ibadi centers such as Ouargla, Wadi Righ, Wadi Souf, and later the Mزاب region.⁵ These areas produced eminent scholars who authored works in a wide range of disciplines and fields of knowledge.

The Ibadis established a school for children and scholarly circles for adults adjacent to every mosque, whether large or small.⁶

Caves

The Azzaba used caves as places of instruction in order to maintain secrecy and avoid the threat posed by the Shi'a. Al-Darjini records that after Abu Abdullah Muhammad ibn Bakr and his companions agreed to establish the Azzaba circle, he sent a messenger to Abu al-Qasim Yunus ibn Wizkan al-Waylili, requesting him:

¹ Ahmad ibn Sa'id Abd al-Wahid al-Shammakhi, *Kitab al-Siyar*, edited by Ahmad ibn Saud al-Siyabi, Ministry of National Heritage and Culture, 2nd ed., Sultanate of Oman, 1992, Vol. 2, p. 70.

² Bashir ibn Omar Marmouri, *The Girl in M'zab: Her Upbringing and Education between Constancy and Change*, Heritage Association Publications, 1st ed., Arab Printing House, Ghardaia, 2005, p. 80.

³ Bashir Ramadan al-Tilsi, *Cultural Trends in the Islamic West during the Fourth Hijri/Tenth Century CE*, Dar al-Madar al-Islami, 1st ed., Beirut, Lebanon, 2003, p. 391.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 365.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 396.

⁶ Al-Shammakhi, *op. cit.*, Vol. 2, p. 83.

"To prepare a cave where the students could gather, reside, study, and devote themselves to learning in seclusion, thereby strengthening their determination and diligence."¹

This description effectively provided a conceptual design for the cave and outlined its intended purpose. The cave became known as Ghar Tin Yasli.²

Caves were considered the most suitable locations for concealment and isolation.³ Dr. Mazhoudi notes that scholars adopted caves as special educational centers after the followers of the Ibadi school returned to a period of secrecy under the Imamate of Concealment.⁴ Education was not conducted publicly, especially during the Fatimid period. Their commitment to preserving the Ibadi doctrine led them to "hold councils and schools in complete secrecy... and to choose caves as centers of learning."⁵

Houses

Historical sources provide information about scholarly circles held in private homes, which were often the residences of shaykhs or scholars.⁶ One example is Abu Muhammad Wasilan, of whom Al-Darjini writes that when he noticed "the small number of students studying legal branches under him, he moved them to his house opposite the Great Mosque."

This practice was not unusual. In the Nafusa Mountains, a stronghold of Ibadi Islam, Abu Zakariyya relates that an elderly learned woman opened her home to students of knowledge:

"The people of that village would gather around her seeking religious guidance, and there was a prayer space within her house."⁷

Tents

The Azzaba would travel to certain desert and rural regions as part of what they called ziyārah (visitation). During these journeys, they invited local inhabitants to embrace the Ibadi doctrine and instructed them in religious matters. The residents would erect tents to host them and learn from them.

Dr. Mazhoudi explains:

"Scholarly circles were organized in tents because it was customary for the Azzaba, when they traveled to the desert regions, to move among the settlements, inspecting the religious and worldly affairs of the people of the da'wah."

As a result, the local population constructed these tents to accommodate the visiting scholars and facilitate educational activities.

¹ Bashir Ramadan al-Tilsi, *ibid.*, p. 370.

² Suleiman Daoud, "The Efforts of the Rustamid State in Spreading and Consolidating Islamic Civilization," *Al-Asala Magazine*, Nos. 49–50, Ministry of Religious Affairs, Algeria, September–October 1977, p. 95.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 95–96.

⁴ Al-Darjini, *op. cit.*, Vol. 1, p. 170.

⁵ Al-Wisiyani, *op. cit.*, p. 820.

⁶ Mas'ud Mazhudi, *Jabal Nafusa in the Medieval Islamic Period (21–442 AH / 642–1053 CE)*, Al-Dhamari Library for Publishing and Distribution, 1st ed., Sultanate of Oman, 2010, p. 386.

⁷ Mas'ud Mazhudi, *Cultural Relations...*, *op. cit.*, p. 159.

Religious and Secular Matters The inhabitants would build these tents as previously mentioned.¹

2. Educational Systems and Methods among the Azzaba

A. Educational Means and Tools Used by the Azzaba

The educational tools employed in the Azzaba system during the medieval period were generally simple and rudimentary. Among them were:

- Wooden Tablets (Lawḥs):

These were primarily used by beginners studying the Holy Qur'an and literature. Students were even identified by them and referred to as "the owners of the tablets." They would write their lessons on these tablets and then memorize them. The instructor (‘Arīf) would dictate the lesson, after which he would "correct their tablets and require them to memorize the text by heart." This indicates a transition from purely oral instruction and memorization to copying and written documentation.²

- Pens and Inkwells:

Students also used "pens and inkwells" for writing on the tablets. Naturally, these tools were not commercially manufactured. Pens were made from sturdy reeds, which the student or teacher would cut at a specific angle to produce clear handwriting. Inkwells were containers used to hold ink, which was traditionally prepared from natural materials.³

- Qur'ans (Muṣḥafs):

The Holy Qur'an formed the foundation of elementary education. Students relied on copies of the Qur'an for memorization and revision. Al-Talisi states: "The study tools did not go beyond copies of the Qur'an and a number of wooden tablets."⁴

- Books:

Students who advanced beyond the stage of learning the Qur'an relied on books in their studies and were likewise referred to as "the owners of books." Most of these books were authored by Ibadi scholars and jurists to ensure the consolidation of Ibadi jurisprudence among students. According to al-Shammakhi, the founder of the educational circle possessed "numerous works in every field of knowledge." Other Ibadi scholars also exerted great effort in writing books during this period to preserve the Ibadi creed from extinction. At the same time, students were prohibited from reading the works of scholars belonging to other doctrinal schools.⁵

- Educational Visits (Scholarly Journeys):

¹Al-Darjini, *ibid.*, Vol. 1, p. 193.

² Abu Zakariyya Yahya ibn Abi Bakr, *Kitab Siyar al-A'imma wa Akhbaruhum* (The Book of the Imams' Biographies and Their Accounts), edited by Ismail al-Arabi, Algerian National Library, Algeria, 1979.

³ Mas'ud Mazhudi, *Jabal Nafusa...*, *ibid.*, p. 77.

⁴ Al-Darjini, *op. cit.*, Vol. 1, p. 177.

⁵ Bashir Ramadan al-Tilsi, *op. cit.*, p. 367.

Scholarly journeys undertaken by Azzaba shaykhs together with their students constituted one of the most important educational methods, as they facilitated direct interaction between students and scholars. Ibn Khaldun states: “Traveling in pursuit of knowledge and meeting scholars adds perfection to learning.” However, these journeys and exchanges were restricted to followers of the Ibadi school and Ibadi communities. They served as a form of practical training for students of the educational circle, providing hands-on experience in preaching, seeking knowledge, guidance, and social reform.¹

B. Teaching Methods and Approaches among the Azzaba

- The Gradual Method of Instruction

The gradual method of teaching is considered one of the modern approaches adopted by educational institutions around the world. Regarding its effectiveness, Ibn Khaldun states:

“Know that teaching sciences to learners is beneficial only when it is done gradually, little by little.”²

Although separated from Ibn Khaldun’s era by centuries, Abu Abdullah, the founder of the educational circle, recognized the importance of gradual instruction and incorporated it into his teaching methodology. He divided education into three stages and assigned to each stage the sciences appropriate to it, as follows:

The First Stage

This stage concerned young children who had been integrated into the educational circle. Due to their young age, their instruction was limited to literature and biographies, with the aim of familiarizing them with the rules and organization of the circle.³

The Second Stage

This stage was intended for beginner students. Instruction focused on the Holy Qur’an and some basic matters related to worship, such as purification and fasting, as well as elementary linguistic sciences like grammar and syntax.

Al-Darjini says concerning these beginners:

“They should not concern themselves with anything beyond the study of the Qur’an, except what pertains to worship and the obligations of Islam.”⁴

This was because students at this stage were not yet capable of understanding other sciences. According to Ibn Khaldun, understanding develops gradually:

¹ Ibid.

² Al-Shammakhi, op. cit., Vol. 2, p. 61; Mas‘ud Mazhudi, Cultural Relations, op. cit., pp. 159–160.

³ Abu Zayd Wali al-Din Abd al-Rahman ibn Muhammad, known as Ibn Khaldun, History of Ibn Khaldun: Kitab al-‘Ibar wa Diwan al-Mubtada’ wa al-Khabar fi Ayyam al-‘Arab wa al-‘Ajam wa al-Barbar wa Man ‘Asarahum min Dhawi al-Sultan al-Akbar, edited by Abu Suhayb al-Karmi, n.d., Bayt al-Afkar al-Dawliyya, Saudi Arabia, p. 294.

⁴ Mas‘ud Mazhudi, Cultural Relations, ibid., pp. 162–163.

“The capacity for acquiring knowledge and the preparedness to understand it develop gradually; at first, the learner is generally incapable of comprehension except to a limited extent.”

Thus, after completing this stage, the student would have memorized the entire Qur’an and acquired a linguistic foundation enabling him to comprehend the sciences prescribed for the next stage.¹

The Third Stage

In modern terms, this stage corresponds to higher education or university studies. It was intended for students specializing in the sciences and literature. Instruction was provided by leading scholars and jurists through scholarly circles held in major mosques. At this stage,² students could choose the specialization they wished to pursue.³

The sciences taught included:

Religious Sciences:

These included the study of the Holy Qur’an, Prophetic traditions (Hadith), and the various sciences derived from them, such as Qur’anic exegesis (Tafsir), Qur’anic readings (Qira’at), jurisprudence (Fiqh),⁴ and theology (‘Ilm al-Kalam).

Linguistic Sciences:

These comprised disciplines related to the Arabic language, including grammar, linguistics, rhetoric, and literature.

At this stage, students remained closely attached to their teachers and accompanied them on their journeys, known as “ziyārah” (visits).⁵

- The Dictation Method

Among the instructional methods employed in the Azzaba educational system was dictation. Al-Darjini refers to it in the following statement:

“Each Qur’an instructor was associated with a group of tablet-bearing students. He would dictate lessons to them, correct their tablets, and require them to memorize the material by heart.”⁶

The dictation method was a crucial educational tool during periods when books and manuscripts were scarce. It was primarily used in the early stages of education to ensure the accurate preservation of texts and the memorization of Ibadi traditions.⁷

- The Lecture Method

The lecture is considered one of the traditional methods of teaching. It is an ancient approach that has long been used at all educational levels. It relies on oral presentation and explanation and assumes

¹ Ibn Khaldun, *ibid.*, p. 290.

² Al-Wisiyani, *op. cit.*, Vol. 1, p. 86.

³ Al-Darjini, *op. cit.*, Vol. 1, p. 178.

⁴ Ibn Khaldun, *op. cit.*, p. 290.

⁵ Bashir Ramadan al-Tilsi, *op. cit.*, p. 392.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Al-Darjini, *ibid.*, Vol. 1, p. 177.

that students possess a high capacity for comprehension and concentration. Therefore, it was particularly suited to advanced students who had moved beyond mere memorization and now required a deeper understanding of intellectual and jurisprudential content.

Consequently, lectures among the Azzaba were delivered by shaykhs to students specializing in the sciences and literature. Al-Darjini states:

“They must have a designated time during which attendance before the teachers is scheduled.”¹

The scholarly gatherings mentioned in historical sources were, in essence, lectures. These lectures were held in mosques and attended by students of knowledge. Ordinary members of the public could also attend and benefit from them. Women were likewise present, as Ibadi women enjoyed considerable access to education.²

Al-Shammakhi states:

“Among the distinguished women of Jalu was Aisha bint Mu‘adh... She acquired knowledge from Shaykh Tabghurin ibn Isa. Whenever a scholarly session was held, she would bring a mat, wrap it around herself as a screen for modesty, and sit in the gathering.”

The Debate and Discussion Method:

This represents the pinnacle of the educational hierarchy within the Azzaba system. It is based on presenting a controversial jurisprudential (fiqh) or doctrinal (aqidah) issue and giving students the opportunity to express their opinions, support them with evidence, discuss them with their peers, or even engage in dialogue with the shaykh himself through proofs and arguments.

Debate and discussion were considered among the most effective methods for acquiring knowledge and developing the learner. They break the rigidity of rote instruction, foster intelligence, enhance the ability to express opinions and provide arguments, and cultivate critical thinking—that is, the development of an independent scholarly personality.³ Debates were usually held between followers of different schools of thought, especially since the period under study witnessed considerable doctrinal diversity in the Central Maghreb. Some references indicate that students who possessed scholarly books relied on debate as a learning method during their studies. It was customary for them to gather without a shaykh for research, review, and debate, provided that differences of opinion did not lead to hostility or resentment.⁴ Al-Darjini stated:

“It was deemed commendable for them to gather for research, study, and debate, so long as this did not result in bitterness of hearts; rather, this should be their constant practice.”⁵

¹ Ali Ahmad Madkour, *Educational Curricula: Foundations and Applications*, Dar al-Fikr al-Arabi, Cairo, 2001, p. 237.

² Al-Darjini, *op. cit.*, Vol. 1, p. 179.

³ Al-Shammakhi, *op. cit.*, Vol. 2, p. 89.

⁴ Al-Darjini, *ibid.*, Vol. 1, p. 179.

⁵ Asmawi Salih ibn Omar, *The Azzaba System...*, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

The shaykh also employed the discussion method by allocating a special session for questions, held after the morning study period until mid-morning (duha). He made it a space for scholarly dialogue, where he would:

“Follow the method of dialogue, discussion, and inquiry, allowing students to ask questions and engage in conversation, then responding, correcting, and enriching their understanding.”¹

The Method of Parables, Wisdom, and Stories:

Shaykh Abu Abdullah adopted highly effective teaching methods aimed at simplifying concepts and conveying information to learners, especially when addressing ordinary people. Among these methods were:

1. The Use of Parables

The use of parables is fundamentally a divine method. The Holy Qur’an contains numerous parables presented by Allah to clarify meanings and admonish people. Allah says:

“And Allah presents examples for the people so that they may take heed.”²

Among the many parables used by Shaykh Abu Abdullah was his response to a man who asked whether it was permissible to consume wealth that had become mixed with unlawful earnings. The shaykh replied:

“Suppose you saw a burrow into which a mouse or a jerboa had entered, and then a snake entered it as well. Would you put your hand inside to pull out the mouse or the jerboa?”

The man answered, “No, for fear of the snake.”

The shaykh then said, “Such is the case with the lawful and the unlawful.”³

2. Wisdom and Admonitions

Wisdom and admonitions occupied an important place in education. Special sessions were devoted to moral and ethical training, during which various sermons and maxims were delivered. These sessions were held on specific days, such as Friday, when the shaykh would preach between the Friday prayer and the afternoon (Asr) prayer. This gathering was known as the Council of Admonition (Majlis al-Wa‘z), and attendance was obligatory for students, while members of the general public also attended.⁴

Similarly, on Mondays and Thursdays, the shaykh held sessions in the study circle known as al-Mi‘ad (“the appointed gathering”), which consisted of:

“Gathering them together for an exhortation that benefits them or to remind them of an important matter.”⁵

¹ The Holy Qur’an, Surat Ibrahim, Verse 25.

² Abu Zakariyya Yahya ibn Abi Bakr, op. cit., p. 175.

³ Al-Darjini, op. cit., p. 178; Al-Shammakhi, op. cit., p. 88.

⁴ Al-Darjini, ibid., p. 5.

⁵ The Holy Qur’an, Surat Yusuf, Verse 3.

Sources suggest that there were also specialized books of sermons and admonitions that were consulted and read on such occasions.

3. Storytelling

Teaching through meaningful storytelling is one of the methods employed by the Qur'an. Many chapters contain stories of prophets and past nations, intended to engage the intellect and impart lessons. Stories have a profound effect on the human soul, which is naturally inclined toward this method. Allah says to His noble Prophet (peace be upon him):

“We relate to you the best of stories through what We have revealed to you in this Qur'an, although before it you were among those unaware.”¹

Shaykh Abu Abdullah incorporated storytelling into education within the Azzaba circle. However, he limited it mainly to ascetic stories that criticized worldly life and glorified spiritual existence. He would recount these stories alongside parables, wisdom, and admonitions during the Monday and Thursday sessions, where he would:

“Preach, remind, warn, present wise parables, and relate ascetic stories.”²

C. Educational Activities and the System of Certification

Based on the information gathered from various sources and references, it becomes evident that the Azzaba educational system was characterized by a high degree of discipline and rigor.³ In terms of its organization, methodology, and regulations governing its scholarly circles, it was ahead of its time. These features reflect a remarkable level of intellectual development, as well as the quality and purposeful nature of its educational activities. In this section, we will attempt to provide a clear picture of these activities and their characteristics.

Daily Activities:

These activities were predominantly routine in nature, yet they were not without hardship, intellectual effort, and discipline. The daily schedule can be divided into two periods:

Morning Period

This period begins with the *Istiftāḥ* (Opening Recitation), a religious tradition that takes place during the last third or last quarter of the night. The session is led by the Sheikh of the circle himself. He comes to the place designated for the *Istiftāḥ*, seeks refuge in God, recites the Basmala ("In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful"), reads *Sūrat al-Fātiḥah*, and resumes recitation from the point where the previous night's session had ended.⁴ At that moment, all those who are asleep awaken; some join the gathering, while others go off to study on their own. They continue reciting

¹ Al-Darjini, *ibid.*, Vol. 1, p. 172.

² Al-Darjini, *op. cit.*, Vol. 1, p. 172.

³ *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, p. 5.

⁴ Mas'ud Mazhudi, *Ibadism in the Central Maghreb*, *op. cit.*, p. 231.

the Qur'an until the call to the dawn prayer (Fajr) is made. Thus, the day in the 'Azzābah circle begins very early.

After completing the dawn prayer, all members of the circle gather for what they call the Khatmah (Closing Invocation), the first of the day's invocations, held at sunrise.¹ Al-Darjīnī defines it as "their gathering to remember God and offer supplications at sunrise, as though they are concluding the work of the night."

Following the dawn prayer and the Khatmah, they gather for breakfast and then hasten to their lessons. There, the supervisor ('Arīf) begins by helping the students memorize what they learned in previous lessons and then dictates the material that must be memorized for the upcoming lesson. At the conclusion of the class, he gathers them to recite the morning Khatmah supplication, which serves as an announcement marking the end of the morning lessons.²

Immediately afterward, the Sheikh of the 'Azzābah meets with the students and learners to answer their questions on various branches of knowledge. This session, devoted to discussing lessons and clarifying information, continues until the Duḥā (forenoon) time. Once the questions have been addressed, they perform the voluntary Duḥā prayer with the Sheikh.³

It appears that this discussion session was intended primarily for advanced students of the sciences, while younger students who studied using wooden tablets received instruction from the supervisor assigned to them. He dictated lessons, corrected their tablets, and supervised their memorization during the forenoon period.⁴

After completing their studies and revision, the food supervisor provided a light meal consisting of seasonal fruits, especially dates, which were abundant in the southern regions. During this time, he would also test the students' memorization by asking each student three questions. Those who answered correctly received their share of fruit, while those who failed to answer were temporarily denied food as a form of discipline. A student could only receive his portion if he later remembered the answer, had a valid excuse, or had forgotten unintentionally and subsequently recalled it.⁵

With this, the morning activities came to an end. The supervisor responsible for rest periods would then call the students to take the Hājirah nap, also known as the Qā'ilah (midday rest). This was a mandatory period designated for the students of the 'Azzābah circle after the completion of the morning lessons. Anyone who was absent or late was subject to punishment and discipline.⁶

Afternoon Period

¹ Ibid., p. 231.

² Ibid., p. 232.

³ Ibid., p. 232.

⁴ Al-Darjīnī, *ibid.*, Vol. 1, p. 176.

⁵ Ibid., p. 177.

⁶ Mas'ud Mazhudi, *Ibadism in the Maghreb*, *ibid.*, p. 233.

The afternoon period begins immediately after the noon prayer (Zuḥr) and continues until the afternoon prayer (‘Aṣr). During this time, lessons are given to the Qur’an students who use wooden tablets. Al-Darjīnī states that they were required to recite their tablets between noon and afternoon prayers and were encouraged to do so again after the ‘Aṣr prayer.

The members of the circle then gather for the ‘Aṣr prayer and partake in a light meal similar to the one served during the forenoon period, consisting mainly of seasonal fruits. This is followed by a short period of review and study.¹

Afterward, the students are dismissed for rest and recreation. This break lasts until the call to the sunset prayer (Maghrib). Al-Darjīnī notes that the time for relaxation and personal activity occurs at the end of the day, during which students may go to places where such activity is permitted, such as water sources, groves of trees, and similar locations that provide comfort and refreshment to the mind.²

When the call to the Maghrib prayer is heard, they all return for prayer, which is followed by the evening Khatmah. This invocation marks the end of the academic day in the Ibadī tradition. The students then sit in a circle to recite the Qur’an until the time for the night prayer (‘Ishā’) arrives. After performing the prayer, they eat their evening meal. Al-Darjīnī explains that the time for eating, which pertains to each individual’s sustenance, comes after the night prayer, either alone or in the company of those whose temperament is compatible with his own, with moderation being observed.³

Before going to sleep, there is a brief concluding invocation. The supervisor then calls the students to supplication and announces bedtime. Thus, all retire to rest after a demanding day filled with scholarly and devotional activities.

Weekly Activities:

The weekly activities were assigned to specific days of the week, as follows:

Friday:

The exception on this day was the allocation of the afternoon period between the Friday prayer and the Asr prayer for the preaching session (Majlis al-Wa‘z). This was a weekly lesson devoted to moral education, held in the mosque and attended by students as well as members of the general public. Some laypeople were particularly keen on attending it, such as Shaykh Mu‘adh ibn Abi ‘Ali, about whom al-Shammakhi states that:

¹ Mas‘ud Mazhudi, *Ibadism in the Maghreb*, op. cit., p. 233.

² Collective Authors, *Dictionary of Ibadī Terminology*, Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs, 1st ed., Sultanate of Oman, 2008, Vol. 1, p. 896.

³ Al-Darjini, op. cit., Vol. 1, p. 178.

“Out of his determination and his pursuit of his Lord’s pleasure, he would never spend the night before Friday except in Aglou, where he would stay up with the students throughout the night and then attend the Friday gathering.”¹

Mondays and Thursdays: (The Appointment or Gathering)

On these two days, time was set aside for what was known as the Mī‘ād (Appointment) or Jam‘ (Gathering), which are:

“Different terms carrying the same meaning, namely that the Shaykh gathers them for an exhortation that benefits them, or to remind them of an important matter, such as consultation regarding the correction of corruption, preventing loss, enjoining good, or forbidding evil.”²

On these days, the Shaykh also evaluated the students and pupils in terms of both conduct and academic achievement. This process was called al-Tamhīṣ (scrutiny or examination). The Shaykh would examine all those present, asking about their conditions one by one and checking on the supervisors (‘urafā’). Whoever was found to be in good standing would be praised, and God would be thanked for his success. Whoever displayed shortcomings in any aspect of his conduct would be referred for disciplinary action, with the punishment determined according to the student’s age and the nature of the violation.³

Seasonal Activities:

According to the information provided by the sources, the most important seasonal activity of the ‘Azzāba circle was the ziyārah (visit), which functioned as a period of rest and recreation. Nevertheless, it was never devoid of scholarly and religious activities, which constituted an integral part of their lives whether settled or traveling.

Among the most significant seasonal visits was their journey to the Wadi of Banu Muṣ‘ab (Banu Mzab) to spend the spring season, where:

“The Shaykh (Abu ‘Abd Allah) used to spend the winter in Arigh and the spring in the wilderness among the Banu Muṣ‘ab.”⁴

In addition, they undertook other visits to regions within the Central Maghreb, such as Wargla (Ouargla), Sedrata, and the land of al-Zab, as well as beyond it, including Tripoli, the island of Djerba, and the region of al-Jarid.⁵

Third: Pedagogy and Behavioral Regulations in ‘Azzāba Education

1. Structure of the Educational System

¹ Ibid., p. 178.

² Ibid., p. 182.

³ Mas‘ud Mazhudi, *ibid.*, p. 234.

⁴ Al-Darjini, *ibid.*, Vol. 1, p. 182.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

The educational system of the ‘Azzāba was composed of two categories: those who commanded and those who obeyed, as follows:

A. The Commanding Group:

This refers to those responsible for managing the affairs of the circle. They were:

“Members of the ‘Azzāba circle entrusted with the authority to deliberate and make binding decisions.”

Their responsibilities varied according to the position held by each member and according to their scholarly rank. Among them were:

The Circle Sheikh (Head of the Educational Circle):

The Circle Sheikh served as the general director of the educational circle and its primary supervisor, owing to his high scholarly status. His responsibilities were not limited to the educational institution itself; rather, his duty extended to the entire Ibādī community. The Circle Sheikh was entrusted with major tasks related to organization, supervision, guidance, education, and instruction. These included establishing regulations and rules, determining disciplinary measures, and managing the affairs of the circle, including its material resources and other matters.¹

Among the duties mentioned by al-Darjīnī in his summary are:

Appointing the ‘urafā’ (supervisors).

Accepting or rejecting applications for membership in the circle.

Delivering lectures to students of the various branches of knowledge.

Examining students and pupils, reviewing their lessons, and evaluating their academic achievement.

Inspecting the ‘urafā’ and monitoring their pedagogical and educational performance.

Arbitrating disputes between litigants.

Distributing alms and endowment (waqf) funds allocated to the circle.

The ‘Urafā’ (Supervisors):

The ‘urafā’ functioned as directors of religious schools or as administrators and overseers (nāzirs, singular nāzīr), responsible for studies and educational affairs within the ‘Azzābah system.²

Within the ‘Azzābah system, the ‘arīf (supervisor) was divided into two categories: independent and non-independent.

The independent supervisors were of two types:

Supervisor of Qur’anic recitation sessions.

Supervisor of meal times.

The non-independent supervisors were also of two types:

Supervisor of study periods.

¹ Al-Shammakhi, op. cit., p. 88.

² Al-Darjini, op. cit., Vol. 1, p. 5.

Chief supervisor of the Qur'an memorizers.¹

The primary duties of the 'urafā' consisted of caring for students, monitoring them within the boarding school and outside it, and ensuring their welfare and service. Their responsibilities were comparable to those of residential supervisors in the institutes of the Mزاب Valley.

Their titles reflected the functions they performed. For example, the supervisor of meals was responsible for feeding the students, while the supervisor of sleeping hours organized students' sleeping arrangements and maintained order and quietness. Likewise, each supervisor had a specific duty assigned to him.²

The Subordinates (al-Ma'mūrūn):

This category referred to all students enrolled in the educational circle who were required to carry out instructions. They included pupils and students comprising tablet-holders (aṣḥāb al-alwāḥ), students of sciences and literature, book-holders (aṣḥāb al-kutub), and those classified as disabled or incapable.

The Circle Sheikh divided them into three age-based groups:

Juniors (Aṣāghir)

Intermediates (Awāsit)

Seniors (Akābir)

These groups corresponded to three educational levels.³

The juniors were young boys brought by their families and integrated into the circle to learn manners, ethics, and proper conduct.

The intermediates represented the second stage of education, during which they studied the Holy Qur'an, grammar, and syntax. They were known as the "tablet-holders" (aṣḥāb al-luwayḥāt).

The seniors, known as the "book-holders" (aṣḥāb al-kutub), represented the highest educational level. At this stage, students pursued advanced studies in religion, knowledge, and legal and doctrinal foundations.

They were also referred to as students of the arts of knowledge and literature. Over time, this group evolved into an institution known as the "Irwān" Council, which came to occupy the second rank in the ascending educational and social hierarchy of the Mزاب Valley, immediately after the 'Azzābah Council itself. In other words, it became the second most important body in society after the 'Azzābah.⁴

The Disabled and Minors Category:

¹ Ibid., p. 173.

² Abu Zakariyya Yahya ibn Abi Bakr, op. cit., p. 175.

³ Collective Authors, Dictionary of Ibadī Terminology..., op. cit., Vol. 1, p. 43.

⁴ Salih ibn Omar Asmawi, The Azzaba and Their Role in Ibadī Society in M'زاب, op. cit., Vol. 2, p. 776.

In addition to the aforementioned groups, there existed another category whose members possessed fewer educational qualifications due to physical or mental limitations. This group was known as the “disabled and minors” (al-‘ajazah wa al-qāširūn).

Members of this category were not required to adhere to the regular academic curriculum. Consequently, some lazy students occasionally attempted to feign disability in order to be exempted from academic obligations¹. Al-Darjīnī described those classified within this category as:

“The deaf, the blind, the chronically disabled, the elderly, and those of limited understanding. Sometimes a person possessing ability and potential might attach himself to this group. The role of these categories is to listen attentively so that they may acquire proper methods and moral conduct.” Since mere exemption was not considered sufficient, individuals belonging to this category were integrated into the educational system in ways compatible with their limited capacities. They were permitted to work and were organized into a distinct social class. Their primary responsibility was the preparation of food for members of the educational circle.²

Al-Darjīnī states:

“The service of preparing food should be entrusted to those upon whom God has not bestowed scholarly aptitude ... so that they may benefit through serving the people of virtue.”

Thus, the educational system of the ‘Azzābah appears to have preceded many modern systems in its approach toward individuals with special needs by integrating them into society and protecting them from marginalization and deviant behavior.³

2. Etiquette Related to the Educational System of the Azzaba

The Azzaba had their own distinct code of conduct, which they observed both inside and outside the study circle. These manners distinguished them from other members of society, as they were regarded as the elite class. Al-Darjīnī states:

“Know that this group possesses distinctive characteristics and manners by which they are recognized, and in which no one else surpasses them. This is reflected in their names, forms of address, dining habits, clothing, sleeping and waking times, devotional practices, fasting, and worship.”

Some of these practices have already been mentioned in the discussion of their daily activities. In this section, we will highlight the most important rules related to the organizational and educational aspects of the Azzaba circle.⁴

¹ Al-Darjīnī, *op. cit.*, Vol. 1, pp. 172–174; Salih ibn Omar Asmawi, *op. cit.*, Vol. 2, p. 777 (adapted).

² Ali Yahya Ma‘ammar, *Ibadism in the Procession of History*, Al-Istiqlal al-Kubra Press, Cairo, Egypt, 1964, Vol. 2, p. 140.

³ Al-Darjīnī, *ibid.*, pp. 174–175; Abu al-Qasim ibn Ibrahim al-Barradi, *Al-Jawahir al-Muntaqah fi Itmam Ma Akhalla Bihi Kitab al-Tabaqat*, Al-Azhar al-Riyadiyya al-Baruniyya Press, lithographic edition, Cairo, Egypt, 1885, pp. 207–208.

⁴ Al-Darjīnī, *ibid.*, pp. 177–179; Al-Barradi, *ibid.*, pp. 207–208.

A. Dress Code

Members of the Azzaba circle distinguished themselves from others not only through their behavior but also through their appearance. One of the first distinguishing features was the shaving of the head. Al-Darjini says:

“One of their characteristics is that, upon renouncing the ways of worldly people, he shaves his head and never allows his hair to grow long again.”

As for clothing, the regulations of the circle required students and pupils to wear a uniform during their studies. This attire had to be white, modest, and designed so that no part of the body was exposed.

Regarding the students of the Qur’an, it was said that they should:

“Wrap themselves in such a way that none of their bodies is visible.”¹

Concerning the color of the clothing, it was prescribed that:

“He should not wear dyed garments except white ones.”

The attire could consist simply of a cloak (aba’ah) or a wrap (milhafah), though a shirt might also be worn. Beginners, however, were not permitted to wear a shirt.

“If he limits himself to a cloak or wrap, this does not diminish his standing or bring him reproach; indeed, such attire is more fitting for him.”²

For more advanced students:

“Wearing these garments over a shirt is more complete, provided he is not a beginner. There is no objection if he wears only a shirt, or a shirt without wrapping or draping garments. If he wears a turban, it should be wrapped beneath the chin in accordance with tradition.³ However, wearing a turban is not obligatory, and there is no objection if he chooses not to wear one.”

The essential requirement concerning dress among the Azzaba was modesty, ensuring that no part of the body was exposed.⁴

B. Dining Etiquette

When attending meals, members were required to cover their heads with a shawl (shamlah). Al-Darjini explains:

“When they are properly seated, water is brought, and after washing, they put on the customary shawl worn at mealtimes. This is done by bringing the two ends of the garment over the chest after passing each end over the adjacent shoulder, leaving the hands visible while keeping the rest of the body covered.”

This practice helped maintain cleanliness and protected their clothing from food stains.

¹ Salih ibn Omar Asmawi, *ibid.*, Vol. 2, p. 779.

² Dictionary of Ibadi Terminology, *op. cit.*, Vol. 1, p. 49.

³ Al-Wisiyani, *op. cit.*, Vol. 1, p. 86.

⁴ Asmawi Salih ibn Omar, *The Ghuraba System*, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

During meals, they were also expected to display proper manners and good behavior, especially when non-members were present. The supervisor responsible for mealtimes organized seating arrangements, monitored conduct, and corrected inappropriate behavior. At times, he would use a code word agreed upon among them:

“If they were in a worldly setting, he strongly urged them to remain cautious and exceedingly careful. Their code word was ‘Hassan,’ and sometimes ‘Hassan ibn Thabit,’ meaning: improve your manners and conduct.¹ They used this expression whenever outsiders joined them, warning one another lest others notice any faults in their behavior.”²

However, when they were among themselves in an Azzaba setting, they were less restrained and might:

“Relax somewhat, maintain good assumptions about one another, and feel no embarrassment in requesting better food, additional side dishes, and the like.”

C. Etiquette of Attending Lessons

One of the most important rules during lessons was orderly seating and maintaining silence. Younger students were required to sit without leaning against anything so that they would remain more attentive to their studies, whereas older students who possessed books were allowed to lean for support. They were also expected to remain quiet and avoid causing disturbances during lessons; those who disrupted the class were punished.³

Another aspect of their etiquette, particularly during gatherings held after the completion of a lesson or recitation, was taking turns when asking the shaykh questions. If someone needed to leave, he was required to seek permission:

“He should not rise until he has obtained permission from the person sitting next to him. If permission is granted,⁴ he may leave; otherwise, he remains seated.”

In their dealings with the shaykh, they were expected to display the highest degree of respect. One sign of honoring him was accompanying him when he departed. Al-Darjini states:

“When the shaykh prepares to leave, if he does not mind being accompanied by his close students, he performs the Duha prayer, and his companions also perform it, then they escort him as a mark of respect and companionship. If he prefers not to be accompanied, he performs the prayer, they perform it as well, bid him farewell, and do not escort him.”⁵

D. Etiquette of Conduct in Public

¹ Al-Darjini, op. cit., Vol. 1, p. 180.

² Asmawi Salih ibn Omar, *ibid.*, p. 87.

³ Al-Darjini, *ibid.*, p. 181.

⁴ Al-Darjini, *ibid.*, Vol. 1, p. 4.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 171.

Members of the ‘Azzāba were expected to limit their interaction with ordinary people. No one should become aware of any fault or deficiency among them, as they represented the elite of society; even the younger members were regarded as the future ‘Azzāba. Therefore, whenever they had to mingle with people in public places or while attending to their needs,¹ they were required to observe a set of manners described by al-Darjīnī:

“Among the etiquettes of the road and their conduct is that one should not be arrogant toward the humble, nor humble himself before the arrogant. They should not mix with the people of this world nor sit with them unless necessity leaves no alternative. They may sit with them only to derive a religious benefit through knowledge or righteous action. The elder is more excused in associating with them, for he may guide them, whereas the youth is more liable to go astray.”²

Thus, mixing with the common people was generally considered reprehensible. As for associating with women, this was regarded as a prohibited matter that could result in permanent expulsion from the circle. Al-Wisyānī mentions that Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad ibn Bakr expelled one of his students from the circle because he paused briefly to speak with a female servant who had come carrying firewood.

E. Etiquette of Visits

During visits and journeys, members of the ‘Azzāba were required to maintain proper conduct and good manners. During one of their excursions to Wargla (Ouargla), Abū Zakariyyā’ reports that when they approached the boundaries of the city, the shaykhs gathered the students and warned them against inappropriate behavior. They established guidelines that the students were required to observe:

“They should speak about the people of Wargla only within the context of visitation, admonition, enjoining what is right, forbidding what is wrong, and upholding the rights of God Almighty. They were forbidden from vile manners, evil conduct, and everything that defiles the religion of God or leads to its corruption through worldly desires.”³

3. Behavioral Regulations and Disciplinary Measures (al-Khiṭṭa) in the ‘Azzāba Educational System

Maintaining order and correcting the behavior of students required the imposition of penalties upon anyone who violated the laws and regulations of the educational circle (ḥalqa). In the ‘Azzāba system, these penalties were known as al-Khiṭṭa, or abandonment and exclusion.

This occurred whenever:

¹ Ibid., p. 178.

² Al-Darjini, op. cit., Vol. 1, p. 171.

³ Al-Darjini, ibid., p. 5.

“One of the people of the path committed an offense, displayed disgraceful behavior, committed a fault in word, deed, or negligence. In such a case, all righteous people would boycott him: he would not be spoken to, would not attend communal gatherings, would not lead prayers, would not share meals, nor sit with others.¹ A barrier (khiṭṭa) would stand between him and the people of virtue. If he repented and sought forgiveness, he would be accepted once more and reinstated.”

For this reason, the punishment was called khiṭṭa, “as though a dividing line had been drawn between him and the rest of society.”²

The violations that warranted such punishment were numerous. Any action contrary to the regulations of the educational system was considered an offense. Examples included absence from lessons without a valid excuse, negligence in memorizing lessons, causing disturbances during classes or sleeping hours, displaying poor manners while eating, and other behaviors that contradicted the teachings and regulations of the ḥalqa.³

The first person to establish a disciplinary code for the educational circle was its founder, Abū ‘Abd Allāh. Accordingly, al-Khiṭṭa is considered:

“One of the most important principles of the educational circle established by the founder of the ‘Azzāba system at the beginning of the fifth century AH.”

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has examined a unique historical and educational experience in the history of the Islamic Maghrib. The ‘Azzāba system was not merely an institution responsible for managing the social and religious affairs of the Ibādī community; rather, it constituted a fully developed pedagogical institution that succeeded in preserving the intellectual legacy and cultural identity of the region throughout the medieval period.

Among the most significant findings of this study are the following:

First: The study demonstrates that the ‘Azzāba system possessed a clearly defined institutional vision. Its educational structures were primarily centered around the mosque, which served as a space for advanced scholarly circles, and the kuttāb schools, which formed the initial foundation for the education and upbringing of children, in addition to other educational settings necessitated by external circumstances.

Second: The educational curriculum of the ‘Azzāba was comprehensive and progressive. It was not limited to the religious and doctrinal sciences of the Ibādī school but also encompassed rational sciences, practical disciplines, literature, and linguistics, thereby contributing to the balanced development of the learner’s personality.

¹ Dictionary of Ibadi Terminology, op. cit., Vol. 1, p. 343.

² Salih ibn Omar Asmawi, *The Azzaba and Their Role...*, op. cit., pp. 794–795; Al-Darjini, op. cit., p. 178.

³ Mas‘ud Mazhudi, *Jabal Nafusa...*, op. cit., p. 393.

Third: The pedagogical practices and teaching methods employed by the ‘Azzāba were diverse and adapted to students’ levels. These methods ranged from dictation for preserving foundational texts, to lectures and explanations for analyzing content, and ultimately to debate and discussion, which served as advanced tools for developing critical thinking among students.

Furthermore, the system paid particular attention to the education of women and granted them a social status that contributed to the advancement of Ibādī society and the preservation of its distinctive identity over many centuries. The system also anticipated modern educational approaches by integrating minors and individuals with disabilities or special needs, providing them with opportunities for learning, work, and personal development, thereby protecting them from social deviance and marginalization.

Fourth: The study reveals the depth of the ethical framework that governed the educational relationship between teacher (shaykh) and student. The internal regulations of the ‘Azzāba emphasized values such as humility, respect for the tools of learning, and the utilization of knowledge for the common good.

Fifth: The disciplinary and evaluative policies within the ‘Azzāba system combined both corrective and deterrent functions. Specific mechanisms were established to monitor behavioral and educational violations, and punishments progressed from moral reprimands and verbal censure to regulated corporal punishment and, in serious cases, exclusion from the institution. The primary objective was to preserve institutional discipline and moral integrity.

Accordingly, the findings of this study confirm that the ‘Azzāba system represents an advanced model of what may be termed “Medieval Islamic Pedagogy.” It successfully reconciled the authenticity of traditional instruction with the flexibility of dialogue, and combined strict behavioral regulation with broad intellectual development.

Nevertheless, this does not negate its sectarian particularity. Educational circles within the ‘Azzāba system closely resembled centers for training religious preachers. The sciences taught were primarily religious in nature, while the emphasis on strict moral discipline and intervention in social affairs through the principles of enjoining good and forbidding evil demonstrates that the educational system of the ‘Azzāba was fundamentally a missionary (da‘wa-oriented) system. Its principal aim was to cultivate an elite group of preachers, promote the Ibādī doctrine, and contribute to its revival. It would not be an exaggeration to state that such a system was suitable only as a solid foundation for a society organized according to Ibādī principles in matters of creed, social structure, economics, and politics. However, this particularity does not diminish the importance of recommending further research into local educational systems throughout the Islamic Maghrib. It is equally important to re-examine the available Ibādī biographical and historical manuscripts through the lens of modern educational

sciences in order to uncover additional pedagogical treasures that remain hidden within the history of Maghribi civilization.

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