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Temasektion

Between Term and Trope

The 'koranskole' in Norwegian Public Discourse

Keywords: Islamic religious education, Koranskole, Qur'anic school, mosques, Norway, terminology, conceptualization

Abstract The term *koranskole* has a prominent place in the public discourse on Islam and Muslim life in Norway. Despite being empirically imprecise, it is by far the most frequently used term in reference to non-formal Islamic religious education (IRE), but it is also used in other contexts with explicit or implicit referents, creating a polyvalent and at times contested concept. First coined by ethnographers studying Muslim societies, the term *koranskole* does not originate in Islamic educational traditions; however, it has been used both by researchers and practitioners, although today it occurs to a lesser extent among organizers of such educational enterprises than in public discourse. This article maps the use of the term *koranskole* in Norwegian public and scholarly discourses throughout the past century, preparing the ground for discussing the analytical vocabulary for research in this area.

Mosque-based afternoon or weekend classes for Muslim children have routinely been conceptualized by the term *koranskole* (pl. *koranskoler*) in scholarly and public discourse in Norway and in Scandinavia more broadly. The most comprehensive studies on the topic in recent decades use the term (Østberg 1998; Dahlin 2001; Østberg 2003; Leirvik 2009), as do some major studies on Muslim faith stance organizations (Vogt 2000; Elgvin 2020).¹ Arguably, Qur'anic instruction proper is a key element in different forms of denominational Islamic religious education (Berglund and Gent 2019; Berglund 2019) and includes skills like reading and recitation (*qirā'a*, *tartīl*, *tajwīd*), memorization (*ḥifẓ*), and interpretation (*tafsīr*) and reflection

¹ In this article, I do not make a normative distinction between the words 'Islamic' and 'Muslim'. The adjective Islamic in this context refers to faith-based and committed enterprises while the adjective Muslim likewise refers to faith-based enterprises and self-declared committed individuals.

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(*tadabbur*). However, in mosque-based education, the curriculum generally extends to other subjects, such as general Arabic language skills, other mother tongue languages, additional foundational texts (notably *ḥadīth*), and liturgical and devotional texts (*du'ā'*, *anashīd*). Considered equally important is reflective education on values and virtues, religious ritual skills, and history, in addition to topics complementing primary school education and extracurricular activities (Dahlin 2001; Østberg 2003). This raises the question of the suitability of the term *koranskole* for such a wide range of activities.

In the English research literature, one may observe a conceptual distribution wherein the term Qur'anic school seems dominant in historical or ethnographic studies of non-European contexts (Boyle 2004; Ware 2014; Hoechner 2018), whereas Islamic religious education is commonly used for the Muslim minority context in the West (Daun and Arnjand 2018; Franken and Gent 2021). In the former usage, the term may appear to be vernacular, a translation of the informants' own terminology, although, as this article demonstrates, it was actually coined in early modern Western historical and ethnographic studies. The second term, on the other hand, is univocally an analytical category created for comparative purposes within the contemporary field of Religious Education. In the Danish and Swedish research literature on the Scandinavian context, generic terms like 'leisure time education' (*fritidsundervisning*) or 'instruction' (*opplæring*) are used at times but without completely replacing *koranskole* (cf. Bisbjerg 2011; Magaard 2011; Berglund in this issue).

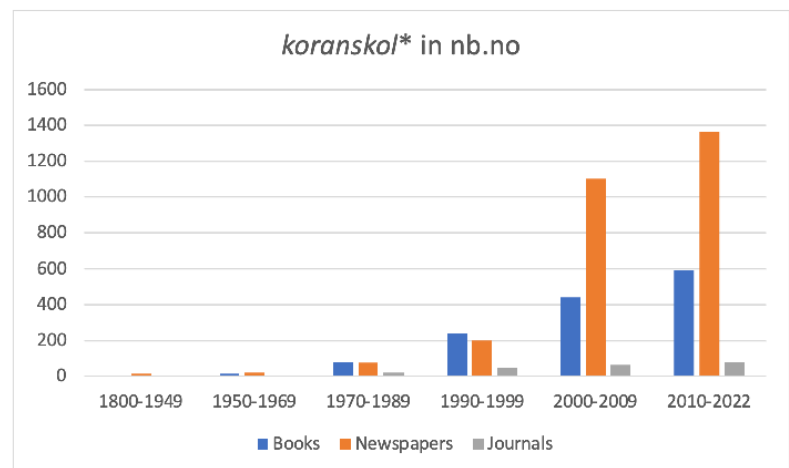
In the rather limited Norwegian research literature (Eggen 2023b), it is not possible to identify a similar form of conceptual distribution; rather, *koranskole* remains a term with multiple uses and referents. Its suitability has rarely been discussed, although at times it has been put in quotation marks, expressing a form of conceptual caveat.² Moreover, in this literature it is not clear whether *koranskole* is being used by the informants on their own initiative, a term the researchers introduce to the informants or use analytically,³ or a sort of negotiated term testifying to its intertwined conceptual history.

In this article, I describe the development of the use of the term *koranskole* in Norway. To this end, I map and analyze its use in written discourse throughout the past century in a wide range of media texts, academic literature, prose, and fiction. My

² See, for instance, a presentation of the research project of which my study is a part. *FAITHED: Non-formal faith education, the public school, and religious minorities in Norway*, running 2021-2025, at Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences

³ For instance, in the latest survey of the habits and everyday life of Muslims in Norway, the term is used as a separate category, an alternative to *islamundervisning*, without further explanations or definitions of either term (Rafoss 2023, a KIFO report presented at the seminar *Mangfold blant norske muslimer* 21.03.2023).

main source for harvesting the empirical material in this study is the National Library database of digitalized written material (www.nb.no), which divides the material into books (including reports, fiction, and general prose), newspapers, and journals. I have also consulted other bibliographical and full text databases belonging to the university and research institute sectors. The main search term has been *koranskole* with variations, as well as a variety of combinations of words like education or instruction and Muslim organizations or mosques. A frequency report generated by the National Library database (generated 17.01.2023) showed that the quantitative increase in the occurrence of the term *koranskole* has been substantial, probably due to changing demographical circumstances, the socio-political situation, and public interests. Notwithstanding possibly irrelevant occurrences and repetitions, the following diagram also demonstrates the importance of newspapers and general publications in establishing the term.



More importantly for my concern in this article is the observation that the thematic distribution demonstrates both consistencies and shifts, which I found by selecting and examining the relevant parts of the total material. Corresponding roughly to a chronological development in the use of the term this may be summed up as follows: up to around 1980, the *koranskole* was perceived in Norwegian written sources as a phenomenon belonging to foreign times, places, and cultures; from the 1980s, mosque-based education in Norway emerged as a topic, and by the mid-1990s, the word *koranskole* was established as the designated descriptive term for such mosque-based learning. In the debates on the role of formal religious education in the

Norwegian primary school system in the early 1990s, the *koranskole* epitomized a contested field. Conflicting views suggested, on the one hand, that mosque-based education could function as a supplementary resource for the children of Muslim immigrants, and, on the other, that it represented an impediment for their successful integration into Norwegian society and its work force. Following the turn of international events, with the Global War on Terrorism following the World Trade Centre and Pentagon attacks in 2001, the term *koranskoler* began to appear in the media coverage of international and transnational events and debates on extremism and radicalization.

Throughout the period the different constellations of meaning have also to some degree remained consistent, and, as shown in this article, the various semantic contents are continuously activated side by side. Thus, the term *koranskole* functions as a suggestive concept: ambiguous, contested, and open to positive and negative connotations. Currently, it is found in popular as well as academic discourse, although in media discourse, the term itself is seldom discussed and its meaning seems to be taken for granted, or it is left an ambiguous buzzword.⁴ In academic literature, reference is made to the media discourse and the term is mostly retained, although the buzz quality of the term is not necessarily adopted, and at times be explicitly rejected. The term seems to be used to a lesser extent by the Muslim organizations facilitating educational activities for children,⁵ and some Islamic religious education organizers and attendees express a certain unease with it.⁶ Because Qur'anic instruction is only part of the activity, the term is not considered adequate, notwithstanding the indisputable and undisputed centrality of the Qur'an. More importantly, practitioners are acutely aware of the stereotypical, often negative and potentially stigmatizing ideas associated with the term.

Islamic religious education in Norway

The common research concept religious education (RE) includes several categories. One is the formal, institutionalized, mandatory, state-supervised, and sometimes state-funded education in public or private schools; other categories are the non-formal, non-mandatory, but institutionalized

4 Some analyses of religion in media mention the term *koranskole*, but neither it nor its coverage are discussed further (Døving and Kraft 2013, Lundby 2021, Strømme 2022).

5 In Nora Stene's recent interview-based report on female representation in mosque leadership, the general term *undervisning* (education) is used, as well as the specific term *koranundervisning*, but not *koranskole* (Stene 2020).

7 This observation is based on interviews for a report on child education in mosques (Eggen 2023a).

supplementary education offered by civil society organizations, and the informal education outside institutional frames such as in the family or through media outlets (Schweitzer 2017). Following this, the concept Islamic religious education (IRE) is polyvalent, referring either to denominational or non-denominational formal education, or to denominational non-formal education, in addition to informal educational activities in the private sphere (Franken and Gent 2021, 8–9). It is worth noting that these categories are primarily relevant in the context of a functioning, state-governed school system and a highly organized official authorization system.

In Norwegian public schools, as in those of the other Scandinavian countries, denominational IRE is not an option. Since it was first made mandatory in 1739, denominational Christian education was considered a preparation for confirmation and, although the confessional aim (baptism instruction – *dåpsopplæring*) was removed following the 1969 code, formal religious education in public schools remained denominational into the 1990s, with an increasing number of exemption clauses and alternative programs. In 1998, a new Education Act introduced nondenominational mandatory religious education in Norwegian public schools, with the Christian faith allotted an exceptional role in the capacity of heritage (Opplæringslova 1998; Andreassen 2021; Skeie 2022). Unlike Denmark and Sweden, where private Muslim schools have been operative since 1978 and 1993 respectively (Berglund 2010; Simonsen and Daun 2018; Berglund 2019), in Norway only one private Muslim school initiative has been successful in terms of receiving state approval and funding (Leirvik 2009; Strand 2012, 434–445).

In Norway, just as in many other Muslim minority countries, non-formal, denominational IRE typically consists of faith community initiatives that offer regular afternoon or weekend classes or courses. These have been recognized as a crucial element in the development of institutionalized Islam in Norway over the past five decades (Vogt 2000; Elgvin 2020). Likewise, the importance of the knowledge acquisition and the sense of belonging – or alienation – developing out of attending mosque-organized religious education has regularly been raised in the literature discussing young Muslims in Norway, highlighting reports of fond memories and appreciation as well as sore memories or critical reflection (Jacobsen 2002; Østberg 2003;

Kavli 2007; Sandberg et al. 2018). Additionally, informal forms of tutoring in small neighborhood groups may replace or augment mosque-based instruction (Østberg 2003; 59–61), as do semi-structured educational initiatives outside the faith stance organizations. In recent years, online courses have grown popular, often with teachers based in other countries. Online Qur'anic instruction is mostly individual and can easily be fit in between school, homework, and other leisure time activities (Aarset 2016). In the pandemic situation of 2020–2022, institutionalized, mosque-based teaching also used various online solutions, but only as a temporary arrangement.

Conceptualizing Islamic religious education

The first component in the *koranskole* collocation originates in the Arabic *qur'ān*, which refers to the reading or recitation of the revelation (*qirā'a*). The aural-oral aspect is thus intrinsic to the term *qur'ān*, while the determined form al-Qur'ān (*Koranen*) conventionally refers to the collected text in the material book (*kitāb* or *muṣḥaf*). The second component in *koranskole* denotes 'educational institution', which is semantically close to the Arabic word *madrasa*, 'a place for conducting studies' (cf. *tadrīs*, 'teaching' and *dirāsa*, 'studying') (Lane 1984, 1, 871).⁷ Historically, the term *madrasa* was used for an institution of higher learning, while a facility for elementary learning was called a *maktab*, which refers in this context to 'a place where the art of writing is taught', with the synonym *kuttāb*, which is short for *mawḍi' al-kuttāb* – 'a place where pupils learn how to write' (Lane 1984; 2, 2591). Here the pupils would learn how to write and read by working with the Qur'an and other texts foundational to Islam, thus providing basic literacy as well as basic religious literacy.

Organized education for children dates back to the seventh century, and historical records provide evidence that in the subsequent centuries, it developed into an established practice (Arnjand 2018; Ayyad 2021). Children's education was not government enforced, but striving for a certain level of literacy was highly recommended, and learning the Qur'an and basic tenets of Islam was considered a religious duty. Extensive medieval writing in the genre *adab al-mu'allim wal-muta'allim* sheds light on the philosophy of education, pedagogy, and didactics in the early Islamic societies, as well as suggesting some

⁷ Lane notes the correspondence with the Hebrew *midrāsh*, a place for studying the Jewish scripture.

traits of actual practice (Cook 2010; Günther 2020).

In one of the earliest extant works in this genre, Ibn Saḥnūn (d. 256/870) held that although the responsibility for educating children lay upon the parents, and the informal setting was recognized as of primary importance, a formalization of the educational situation was beneficial, and he recommended that a teacher should be hired for the actual teaching (Ibn Saḥnūn in Cook 2010, 1–19). He proposed that the children should be taught to recite the Qur'an by heart, to read and write, orthography, grammar, basic mathematics, and basic ritual knowledge, with the addition of poetry and Arabic literary language. A committed group of children would meet with a teacher in a semi-formal structure and a more or less permanent location (*mawḍi' al-kuttāb*) for a more or less specified amount of time. Later, the word *maktab* (pl. *makātib*) would come into more frequent use, suggesting a permanence of location (*maktab* = place for writing).

Some centuries later, Ibn Khaldūn (d. 808/1406) wrote about the regional differences in child education. At this point in history, it seems to have become customary for children to spend time in an educational facility. One of the main regional differences, Ibn Khaldūn held, is the sequence of topics, whether reading and writing should be learnt first, followed by more specific Qur'anic instruction, or vice versa. Starting out with the Qur'an ensures a minimum of religious education, Ibn Khaldūn noted, while holding that the second method is pedagogically and intellectually sounder. Incidentally, Ibn Khaldūn's text is the only Arabic text in this field which is translated into Norwegian, and the translator uses the term *koranskole* (Ibn Khaldūn 1997, 417, transl. Ibn Khaldūn 2012, 2, 1103).

Notwithstanding the variation over time and space, it seems appropriate to speak of a semi-formal, premodern elementary IRE system: not obligatory although highly recommended, and not fully institutionalized, although highly organized. When children's education was made mandatory in state-governed schools in modern times, this system was replaced by two new systems (Akkari 2004; Daun and Arjmand 2018). Reading, writing, mathematics, and other skills and fields of knowledge were relocated to a formal educational system, while some of the literacy training, together with religious education and more specifically Qur'anic education, was relocated to the non-formal system. In many Muslim majority societies today, IRE is taught

in primary schools, while the non-formal system has become part of the preparatory education in kindergartens or takes place in supplementary, non-mandatory, afternoon and weekend classes. In Muslim minority societies, the non-formal system mainly consists in afternoon or weekend classes.

The *madrassa* was historically an institution of higher learning, established in connection to a main mosque or, especially from the eleventh century, as a separate institution with a separate architectural construction (Makdisi 1981; Pedersen 2023). These institutions were known and recognized in early modern Europe. For instance, while there is no entry for the terms *kuttāb/maktab* in the encyclopedic European work on the Oriental world, Barthélemy d'Herbelot's (d. 1695) *Bibliothèque Orientale*, the *madrassa* is explained as a "college established for the disciplinary studies for the Muslims" (d'Herbelot 1777, 504).⁸ The first edition of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (printed between 1913–1936), on the other hand, has entries for both *maktab/kuttāb* and *madrassa*. The latter is understood in historical terms, as a separate institution of higher learning contained in a separate architectural construction (Brunot 1936). The term *maktab/kuttāb* is explained semantically as a school in which one learnt how to write but "in reality", the author held in a somewhat reductive vein, "it was a Qur'anic school, since it is the Muslim opinion that children should start by learning the Qur'ān" (Pedersen 1936, 193).⁹ The perspective is almost exclusively ethnographic, and the practice of reading the Qur'an and learning it by heart is understood in terms of notions like blessings and magic, placing the activity in a primitive stage in the evolutionary approach to the study of religion which was dominant at the time (Styers 2023).

The *koranskole* collocation has no lexical equivalent in the premodern Islamic tradition. Referring to ethnographical studies, J.M. Landau asserts matter-of-factly that *maktab/kuttāb* denotes "a type of beginners' or primary school" that "European writers have often called... 'Qur'anic school'" (Landau 2023, first printed 1986). In modern times, as a result of the translation process, Muslims started to use equivalents of this originally European term not only in European minority contexts but also in Muslim majority contexts in countries where similar educational traditions extend further back in history than the European descriptions. Thus, today one finds the notion of *madrassa qur'āniyya* in Arabic speaking countries, in addition

8 D'Herbelot reflects Kâtip Çelebi's (d. 1657) bibliography of the sciences, *Kashf al-zunūn*.

9 All translations into English in this article are mine.

to the traditional Arabic term *kuttāb/maktab* and a host of other local variants, like *mekteb* (Turkey, Balkans), *madrassa/madrassa* (South Asia), *msid* (Morocco), *dugsi* (Somalia), *pesantram* (Indonesia).

Koranskole as an Oriental Trope

The first Norwegian reference to *koranskole* is found in P.A. Munch's (d. 1863) work of world history (1849). Here we read about how the powerful Seljuk caliph Jalāl al-Dawla (r. 1055–1092) restored the derelict *koranskoler* in Baghdad (Munch 1948, 283). Munch's work was an adapted translation of Otto von Corvin (d. 1886) and Friedrich W.A. Held's (d. 1872) *Illustrierte Weltgeschichte für das Volk*, published in several volumes from 1844, in which the German *Koranschule* referred to a building housing an institution of higher learning, a *madrassa*. The *koranskole* in P.A. Munch's historical account is thus an architectural site, a building set up particularly for the purpose of higher education.

This architectural *koranskole* turns up repeatedly in newspaper articles and books on distant places, times, and traditions, as a recurring Oriental trope. The *koranskole* is explained as a “sort of a university” (*Bergens tidende* 04.08.1882), or, more often, is left unexplained, such as when Bagdad is identified as the city of a thousand and one nights which once had a million inhabitants and “lots and lots of mosques and *koranskoler*” (*Morgenposten*, 29.04.1917). While sometimes referring to shifting political circumstances, travel reports from Marrakech, Fés, Cairo, Damascus, Baghdad, Samarkand, and Bukhara demonstrate a remarkable consistency over the decades, framed by notions such as past splendor, exotism, and nostalgia, sometimes mixed with a certain unease. In *Aftenposten* (28.11.1966) we can read that while Bukhara alone used to house 150 *koranskoler*, in the whole of the Soviet Union only one is left open, and the dull Soviet city is contrasted to the vibrant Oriental city of the past (*Aftenposten* 12.12.1966). Later, a cautiously optimistic article from Samarkand in 1993 reports that after the Soviet collapse, *koranskoler*, identified as ‘*madrassaer*’, have reopened, and the interviewees assure the journalists that they feel the role of the *madrassa* is to neutralize extremism, not to encourage it (*Klassekampen* 16.11.1993). Notwithstanding that

some of the sites have undergone huge restoration and the travel accounts have become glossier, the tone and content throughout the century are remarkably similar. Recent travel reports from cities like Fés, Damascus, and Uzbekistan also portray the “impressive mosques, mausoleums, and koranskoler” as natural parts of the cityscape (*Aftenposten* 16.11.2002; *Dagbladet* 30.11.2005; *Telemarksavisa* 23.08.2014).

In early ethnographically oriented reports, the term *koranskole* was used for elementary education. When the geologist Hans Henrik Reusch (d. 1922) travelled in the early 1900s to Tunisia to study desertification, he also made some observations on the educational system. In an article in the pedagogical trade journal *Norsk skoletidende*, Reusch noted that the education system has two levels, holding that the whole system is religious in nature and based on the Qur'an. The first level, “the so-called koranskolen”, comprises elementary education for young boys focusing on learning how to read and write, and learning (at least parts of) the Qur'an by heart. The second level is a “muhammedan university or high school of religion” situated at the mosque (Reusch 1906). Reusch followed closely an article by Louis Pierre Machuel (d. 1922), an Orientalist scholar and member of the academic institute L'Institut de Carthage in Tunis, who refers to the local terminology of *kouttab* pl. *ketateb*, glossed in French as *école coranique* (Machuel 1897). In Machuel's text, it remains clear that *école coranique* operates as an analytical term, meant to capture what the observer finds characteristic in the object of study, and reserving it for the elementary level of the educational system. Reusch does not provide us with this local nomenclature, but by preceding it with the qualifier “so-called” (*såkalte*), he does express a vague caveat.

Several subsequent articles and books presented similar images. The *koranskoler* are portrayed as simple educational facilities gathering children or youth after early morning prayers to “repeat the monotonous incantation of the teacher” (*Adresseavisen* 04.05.1935). The painter and writer Ferdinand Finne (d. 1999) reports admiringly from the great library in the Zāwiya Nāṣiriyya in Tamgroute, Marocco, housing thousands of centuries old manuscripts, a rich heritage in contrast to the material poverty of the *medersa*, glossed as *koranskole*, where serene pupils sit reading out the texts for memorization (*Aftenposten* 14.03.1959). The competition between educational systems in the colonial period is evident, reported in often

translated newspaper articles. In Peshawar, a journalist stumbles upon a British-style college, where the English language and different sciences are taught in English, while the *koranskole* and Islamic theology department remain a world untouched by the British college (*Dagbladet* 15.11.1930). Typically, the *koranskole* is the only means of education, in spite of colonial efforts to further the intellectual level (Heggøy 1949, 93–94). A talented young person could have received only some cursory education in a *koranskole*, before being discovered and brought to France for appropriate intellectual and physical training (*Arbeider-Avisa* 18.10.1949). At other times, articles hint at there being something covert in the *koranskolene*, locations in which oppositional movements could find a fertile breeding ground (*Stavanger Aftenblad* 09.11.1937, cf. Oppegård 1937). The *koranskole*, with rather cursory descriptions of the practice therein, was thus portrayed as passive, monotonous, cumbersome, outdated, ungovernable, and represented by the locals, in contrast to the vivid, active, engaging, and modern represented by the European colonizers. The two motifs, the splendors of the past and the primitivism of the present, conflated into one term, *koranskole*, which functions as an Oriental trope.

From the early 1970s, teaching on religions other than Christianity was included in the religious education program in the Norwegian high school. One textbook portrait of Islam is, on the one hand, ideologically framed, stating that in Islam religion and politics are highly integrated and political leaders are also religious leaders, and that the Qur'anic teacher sort of takes the role of the priest (Hellern, Notaker, and Stubbraaten 1971, 31). On the other hand, the book contains ethnographic descriptions from Nigeria where boys learn the Qur'an in a *koranskole* writing on little wooden boards. The text creates an image of strict ideology and simplistic, disciplined tradition. A couple of decades later, Jan Opsal holds in his introductory book on Islam that attending a *koranskole* is part of an Islamic life cycle that may either be supplementary or the only education that children receive as they are socialized into Islamic rituals (Opsal 1994, 71). In addition, *koranskolen* may teach writing and reading Arabic, but the emphasis is on learning by heart rather than translating and understanding. When the pupil has learned the whole or a portion of the whole text, a celebration is held in his honor. The description seems ethnographic, although the geographical context for this description is not very clear. This

form of decontextualized idea about Islamic practice is typical of this genre in this period, and the description is quite similar for a section of Muslims in Norway (Opsal 1994, 303–4). The assumptions feed into a conception of the *koranskole* as a timeless, spaceless notion, a frozen practice, unchanged and unchangeable.

The *koranskole* also figures prominently in the missionary literature. Sometimes local *koranskoler* are perceived as competitors to Christian mission (Agder 20.11.78), and childhood attendance in a *koranskole* is often presented as one of the central elements in the genre of conversion reports (Opsal 2003, 157). What is highlighted in these accounts is not so much the intellectual and educational shortcomings as the spiritual fruitlessness. In the individual testimonies of Christian converts from Islam, the *koranskolen* is repeatedly presented as a place where the individual had sought spiritual guidance, without success; there was nothing speaking to the heart or nurturing a sense of peace (Kirkengen 1987). Again, there is a remarkable continuity in these reports over time (*Vårt Land* 19.01.1996; Kaldhol 2007; Eikje 2020). When the *koranskole* is brought home to Norway in the 1980s, so is the missionary concern (*Vårt land* 20.11.1981).

***Koranskolen* brought Home**

Towards the end of the 1970s, a few references to the phenomenon of *koranskole* are found in books and articles describing the situation for immigrants in European countries. Characteristically, these are community-based, leisure time, weekend, or afternoon courses for children. The *koranskole* is thus brought closer to home, and from the 1980s, a new set of *koranskole*-related motifs are found in Norwegian printed material.

By the late 1970s, a few thousand immigrant children of different backgrounds lived in Norway and their educational needs became a topic in both the formal educational system and in society. In this connection, the term *koranskole* occurred in media coverage, in political discussions, and in professional and scholarly deliberations on the immigrant children's social situation. It was normally framed by an assumption of the impermanence of their stay in the country (*Bergens tidende* 01.10.1977). This marks the beginning of two long lasting, partly

overlapping discussions in the Norwegian educational field during the 1980s and 1990s: the place of mother tongue instruction and the form and content of religious education in the formal education system. The constitutional guarantee of freedom of religion was confirmed in the law on religion, *Lov om trdomssamfunn og ymist anna* (1969), which, along with the law on education, *Grunnskolelova* (1969), set the frame for exemption from Christian instruction.

In the same period, Muslim immigrants, predominantly from Pakistan, Turkey, and Morocco, had started to organize cultural associations and faith stance organizations in which religious instruction for children was an important activity and concern. One newspaper reported that around 200 children assembled on a weekly basis in an Oslo primary school (Tøyen) for a two-hour lesson every Saturday (*Verdens Gang* 13.01.1978). The organization Islamic Cultural Centre gathered for prayers and teaching children in a rented space in a downtown building (Karl Johan's street) in Oslo (*Dagbladet* 12.09.1979). The reports do not tag or describe in further detail what the teaching sessions contained, but the source's comments suggest the centrality of the Qur'an to the educational programs.

In a publication providing an overview of public services and community organizations relevant to immigrants in Oslo in 1983, several organizations report educating children as one of their main activities. The educational programs are described as concentrating on Arabic and/or national languages, Islam, Islamic and/or national culture, in addition to the Qur'an (*Hvem gjør hva?* 1983). None of the organizations presented in this catalogue use the term *koranskole* to describe their educational activities, which are rather referred to in terms of education (*undervisning*), instruction (*opplæring*) or schooling activities for children (cf. *Aftenposten A-magasinet* 03.11.1984).

The first occurrences of the term *koranskole* I have found used in connection to these local educational initiatives is in a report published by the Oslo Peace Research Institute in 1980, in which the researchers were particularly interested in mother tongue instruction, but also note that Muslim children generally attend *koranskolen* on Saturdays (Heiberg, Kapoor, and Mathisen 1980, 30). Anne Hvenekilde also refers to the *koranskole*, glossing it with the notion of Sunday school (Hvenekilde 1980, 41–42). However, neither the report nor the book offer any further detail about actual attendance at these schools or their content. Bente

Punternvold Bø noted in 1982 that this field had not yet been studied, and she included it in her broader study *Nabolagsundersøkelsen* from 1984, in which she introduced the term 'Koran-skole' (with quotation marks). To her, the term denoted religious education in the form of a daily routine of reading the Qur'an after school hours in private, but organized arrangements involving the children of Muslim immigrants, at the time most notably from the Pakistani community, but to some degree also the Turkish and Moroccan communities. According to the very limited empirical material Bø was able to gather in 1984, about 25% of the children attended this educational arrangement and 25% did not attend, while the question was not relevant to about 50% (Bø 1982, 123–125; Bø 1984, 86–89).

Meanwhile, the term *koranskole* was getting into circulation in media discourse in the context of these local educational activities. One article reports that around 200 children pour into the Jamaat ahl al-Sunna mosque in Oslo in the afternoon to learn the holy book of Muslims by repeating it with a teacher piece by piece (*Aftenposten* 23.11.1985). The article is illustrated with a Norwegian News Agency photo showing imam Chishti (d. 2002), with a group of children in a disorderly flock around him sitting on the ground. He sits with a book in hand, the children, boys and girls of around 6–7 years, are without books and are looking to him for instruction with open and smiling faces. This photo was used time and again in numerous reports and articles on Muslims in Norway, but also in more general articles on Muslims, on Muslim everyday life in Norway, and even on immigrants in a more general sense. The *koranskole* had taken on the role of a standard illustration, much in the same way as a photo of Muslims in congregational prayer.

The media coverage of Muslims in this period almost invariably features Pakistanis. The Pakistani community constituted the largest group of Muslim immigrants in Norway (Daugstad and Østby 2009), but different groups of Arabs (Moroccans), Turks, and others had also started organizing themselves in faith stance communities. A certain competitive situation developed between the faith communities, and the *koranskole*, most often free of charge, also had the function of drawing new members to the mosque (*Ny tid* 30.04.1988). Providing educational activities for children was considered an asset to a faith organization, not only for the members it already served, but also as a way to recruit members (Vogt 2000).

The Norwegian public school curriculum of 1987 (M87)

introduced an option for parents to replace the school religious education classes with state-funded classes run by the faith or life stance organizations (NOU 1995, 9; Leirvik 2009). In a temporary experiment, non-formal, denominational religious education in faith stance organizations replaced the formal denominational Christian religious education, but the quality and the quantity of the education offered by various organizations around the country was obviously neither guaranteed nor easy to ensure. The arrangement was discontinued, but the experience informed the discussions leading up to the complete restructuring of the religious education in public schools culminating with the new Educational Act in 1998, which made nondenominational religious education mandatory in primary schools.

Conceptual Consolidation

Throughout the early 1990s, ongoing debates generated professional, scholarly, and political disagreement on the role of mother tongues in primary school pedagogical methods and the content of religious education in primary schools, as well as concerns over social problems and the integration of immigrants and children of immigrant descent. The *koranskole* became one of the conceptual axes around which these discussions evolved, yet empirical insights into mosque-based IRE remained limited, although academic interest was manifested.

Commenting from the perspective of migration pedagogy, in the late 1980s a group of textbook writers had criticized what they found to be a widespread tendency to see bilingualism as a social, emotional, and academic impediment for minority children. They asserted that sending children to the *koranskole* in the afternoons could be a manifestation of genuine religious interest which could function as a cultural element around which these ethnic minority societies might gather. It was suggested that what they called 'religious language' could serve as a potential resource and that one could consider the *koranskole* as having a stabilizing effect. In addition, they asked whether the pedagogical tool of rote learning might even have some benefits (Bjørnæs, Hauge, and Strandnes 1988, 209; Hauge 1988).

In her 1989 master's thesis, Sidsel H. Grande studied activities in the mosques, including educational activities (Grande 1989, 1990; see also Grande 2008). Reporting from her fieldwork in

the Jamaat ahl-e Sunnat mosque, where around 500 children attended a *koranskole*, in addition to classes in Urdu, she noted that 42 pupils were dedicated to learning the whole of the Qur'an by heart (becoming *ḥāfiẓ*). In Grande's description, the term *koranskole* is self-explanatory, and she observed a resemblance to traditional Norwegian catechism training, with supervised recital that involved repeating after the teacher (Grande 1989, 215–16; Grande 1990, 11; cf. Grande 2008).

An important contributor to the emerging academic interest was Sissel Østberg, who published a book on pluralism in Norwegian public schools in 1992, with contributions from Berit Thorbjørnsrud, Pål Wiik, and Oddbjørn Leirvik. It is the first attempt to discuss the pedagogical dilemmas systematically, taking into consideration the different needs of the pupils in an increasingly multicultural school system. In addition to informal instruction in the families and homes, the book emphasizes the *koranskole* activities in the mosques as an important arena for knowledge transmission. Reflecting on the situation in primary schools in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Østberg argued that although at that point the religious education offered in *koranskoler* was considered a possible substitute for those children exempt from religious education in public schools, the public school's mandate should be to convey broader academic knowledge as well as provide an arena for discussing ethical issues (Østberg 1992, 57). Østberg's work introduced the *koranskole* in the Jamaat ahl-e Sunnat mosque (Østberg 1992, 95–99), which was dominated by Pakistani members and organized in the same way as such supplementary non-formal educational activities would be in Pakistan. While it is not clear whether her sources used the term *koranskole* or she introduced it, she points out that in Pakistan, the word *madrassa* is separate, referring to boarding schools for children (Østberg 1992, 96).

Just as in the media coverage from this period, the 1992 book's studies concentrate on a mosque with Pakistani members. Østberg's observations inspired a student assignment in migration pedagogy, in which Berit Alnæs, Unni Lian, and Jorunn Sundby broadened the scope to include two other, multilingual mosques. Their activities are somewhat more varied, although learning the Qur'an in Arabic remains a principal aim. They found that conveying knowledge on religion and culture, and learning to be a good Muslim, were equally important (Alnæs, Lian, and Sundby 1995, 16), yet the established

term *koranskoler* is used without reservation. Likewise, in Kari Vogt's ground-breaking and influential books on Muslims in Europe (Vogt 1995, 43–46) and Norway (Vogt 2000), the term *koranskole* seems unquestioned and consensual. In a major Norwegian lexicon, the entry 'koranskole' is included in the 1997 edition, explained as an "institution where Muslim children learn suras ('chapters') of the Qur'ān by heart" (*Aschehoug og Gyldendals* 1997, 9, 82).

Debate and Controversy

Different positions on the *koranskoler* crystallized in the public debates during the early 1990s. Kamil T. Øzerk argued that attending *koranskolen* hinders children's participation in 'Norwegian leisure time activities', thereby hampering their school results (*Aftenposten* 26.06.1992), while Zahid Mukhtar held that the needs of Muslim children should be catered for in formal education, but their Islamic religious education is a responsibility for the mosques and cannot be left to the schools (*Vårt land* 4.7.1994). A group of Pakistani-Norwegian politicians asserted that the *koranskole* was not beneficial for the children, (*Aftenposten* 16.01.1995), while a group of Pakistani-Norwegian parents responded that they found this claim shocking (*Aftenposten* 19.01.95). Newspapers presented estimated numbers of children attending mosque-based afternoon *koranskoler*, and they featured some stories of individual children and their experiences. A young girl reported on her busy day, happy to conduct her daily Qur'an lesson in her neighborhood (*Aftenposten* 15.01.1995). According to a group of young boys meeting once a week for lessons in the mosque, the most important benefit was just to get together and meet each other (*Vårt Land* 09.03.1996).

In the discussions, the question of religious education was entangled with the question of mother tongue language learning. Unni Wikan argued that striving for multilingualism through state school, mother tongue learning along with afternoon *koranskoler* impeded social development, integration, and the general wellbeing of the children (Wikan 1995, 58–59). Inger-Lise Lien similarly argued that, above all, *koranskolen* represented an intellectual and educational impediment for the young generation Muslims of Pakistani descent in Norway, as the

cultural capital they accrue by learning the Qur'an by heart was of no value in the Norwegian context, nor did this year-long commitment have any intellectual benefits (Lien 1997, 146). Lien interprets the attendance and learning in the *koranskole* exclusively in terms of honor and blessing. In Walid al-Kubaisi's (d. 2018) writing, a similar argument is cast in the genre of a parable. The character Sindbad is led to believe that there is a magic code to be learnt in the *koranskole*, only to be disappointed because the teacher in the *koranskole* has a very limited and strict definition of what constitutes a legitimate code and does not permit the seeking of knowledge outside the tradition (al-Kubaisi 1997). This impression of a strict, stern, and unpleasant educational setting, in which there is little room for either individuality or intellectual development, coincided with many of the impressions created by the earlier accounts in books and articles. When Mah-Rukh Ali discussed the public and media discourse on Muslims in 1997, *koranskole* featured in her catalogue of stereotypical images (Ali 1997, 95). In the following years, this mimetic *koranskole* trope appeared repeatedly in fictitious as well as biographical and autobiographical childhood memory, often serving as a background against which the main character positioned him or herself.

***Koranskolen* as a Literary Trope**

The literary childhood memory motif of attending Qur'an lessons, was most famously introduced to European readers in translations of books by the Egyptian writer Taha Husayn (d. 1973). In his book *al-Ayyām*, Husayn described how he learnt the Qur'an by heart as a young child by attending the *kuttāb*, where a group of young boys would gather around the teacher. With a generic translation choice, the *kuttāb* becomes 'a village school' (*landsbyskole*) in Einar Berg's translation of *al-Ayyām* in 1973, which was the first fictional book to be translated from Arabic into Norwegian (Husayn 1973). As Gunvor Mejdell notes, Berg often avoids both loan words and any explanation of cultural markers, thus inviting a cultural and literal rather than ethnographic reading (Mejdell 2011, 2020).

In the first novel written by an author of immigrant background, Khalid Hussain's book *Pakkis* published in 1986, a young man is conflicted by internal and external aspirations and expect-

¹⁰ Orhan Pamuk also uses the term *Kuran okulu*. With thanks to Pamuk translator Ingeborg Amadou Fossetøl for this information.

tations and confronted by his father with his poor knowledge of the Qur'an. The young man imagines himself seated in a mosque and the embarrassment of not being able to recite as well as others his age. Interestingly, though, there is no use of the term *koranskole* in this context.

In 1973 and 1986, references to the *koranskole* were limited in the general public discourse in Norway. A few decades later, when Berg's translation of Taha Husayn's book was reprinted in 2010, the scene was different, and the term *koranskole* had become interwoven into several local debates and new global concerns. It was no longer mainly associated with a nostalgic distance, but also with an ambiguous nearness cherished by some but regarded with mixed feelings by others. In 2010, Berg's insisting on the generic understanding of the term *kuttāb* in his translation of Husayn's book seems refreshing. In the meantime, several other fictional translations had chosen the term *koranskole* to translate the Arabic *kuttāb* (Naguib Mahfouz), the Turkish *medrese* or *mektepe* (Orhan Pamuk),¹⁰ or the English *Koran school* (Abdulrazak Gurnah). When this childhood memory or milieu-describing element appeared in original Norwegian writings from the mid-1990s, the term *koranskole* was readily at hand. Thus, Torgrim Eggen's main character imagines the nature of violent punishment meted out in the many *koranskolene* around Oslo (Eggen 1995, 80). In Nasim Karim's novel *Izzat*, attending *koranskole* is portrayed as one of the typical features of a traditional Pakistani girl's life (Karim 1996, 43), while in one of Elin Brodin's books, attending the *koranskolen* becomes an issue when a group of kids is planning leisure time activities (Brodin 1997, 51). Replicating the debated issues, from this period childhood *koranskole* attendance becomes a standard, and mostly self-explicating, motif in fiction.

The term *koranskole* is found detached from the lexical content, taking on metaphorical qualities, although occasionally, in some of the writings, one finds the term *koranskole* glossed as a "muhammedansk bibelskole" (*Gudbrandsdølen* 14.04.1976). However, some decades later the notion of *koranskole* seems to be perceived as more familiar, as in the question "Bible school? Is that a Christian koranskole?" (*Dagen* 22.02.2021). In another reversed comparison, the *koranskole* is used to evoke a pedagogic method of rote learning (Hasle 2015, 21), and a description of the early Norwegian primary schools preparing illiterates for

confirmation is said to bring the *koranskoler* to mind (*Aura avis* 05.11.2019). The term even takes on a metaphorical life of its own, as when Aslak Nore chattily compares his set of values to a *koranskole* curriculum, obviously without any reference to actual Qur'anic content (*Aftenposten* 07.08.2020).

An Emerging Field of Research

By the mid-1990s, the term *koranskole* was well-established in the local context in Norway; however, the debates were only based to a limited degree on empirical knowledge about the different forms and content of the IRE offered to Muslim children in non-formal educational settings in Oslo and the countryside. This situation prompted the motivation among some researchers in fields like religious sciences, migration pedagogic, and religious pedagogy to undertake research on the subject (Eggen 2023b).

In her doctoral thesis and subsequent book, Sissel Østberg widened the scope of her previous engagement, with an ethnographic study of children of Pakistani descent in Oslo in which the educational complex was both very central and an important factor in the children's lives. In it Østberg presented an in-depth analysis of mosque-based education in a small selection of Oslo mosques, in addition to the classes given in private homes. Applying the most dominant concepts, *Qur'an school* (1998) and *koranskole* (2003), Østberg found in her study that these educational activities served multiple purposes: emotional, social, and sensory. In addition to the educational instruction, they offered important arenas for religious socializing and religious practice for the children of Pakistani descent, and she argued that they deserved recognition as such. Østberg further held that the children experienced a sense of belonging through the Qur'an classes (Østberg 2003, 235).

With Camilla Elizabeth Dahlin's master's thesis from 2001, we get the first comprehensive overview of the different forms of non-formal, mosque-based religious education, albeit limited to Oslo. Dahlin mapped educational activities in more than 30 organizations, along with an ethnographic study of four different *koranskoler* (Dahlin 2001). She emphasized the variations between the different institutions with regard to both content and methods, finding that the curriculum extended over

a number of topics and themes, including the Qur'an, values, practice, and languages. Much like Østberg, Dahlin also noticed the social and cultural function of the activities; nevertheless, she uses the term *koranskole* throughout, and without reservations. It seems as if, at this point, the term *koranskole* does not require delimitations, specifications, and definitions, but has in fact been coined as a technical term in the academic literature.

The term *koranskole* is readily available, easily recognized, with an assumed content that makes it flexible and useable almost on a generic level. For instance, a media representation of a report from 1995 about employment among refugees, in which there was nothing about Muslim children and no particular focus on Muslims in general, was illustrated by a depiction of a class in the “World Islamic Mission Koranskole” (*Verdens Gang* 17.11.1995). An *Official Norwegian Report* from the same year noted that some of the approximately 5–6% of the pupils exempt from the (at that time Christian) religious education in school, attended classes organized by their faith community. This is described respectively by the term *koranskole* and by the generic notions “education in the synagogue” and “the education Jehova’s Witnesses give their children” (NOU 1995, 8, 60). In a later *Official Norwegian Report*, it is asked whether children with an immigrant background participate in *koranskole* or in “activities in the Catholic community” (NOU 2011, 14, 305). The particularity in the terminology when it comes to Muslim leisure time activities may reflect the catch-all quality of the term, or it might suggest to the reader that all spare-time Muslim activity is set in an educational frame. The term has become generic, to a certain extent ambiguous, and in some instances, the *koranskole* has been turned into a symbol of immigrant lives.

In discussions on the educational, intellectual, and social value of mosque-based children’s activities, however, mosque attendance was not always considered on a par with other leisure-time pursuits. When Hanne S. Kavli investigated such activities among children of Pakistani and Somali descent, attending a *koranskole*, without further qualifications of the concept, was not categorized as an organized leisure time activity (like sport, clubs, and band practice) but treated as a separate category (Kavli 2007). Consequently, one of the conclusions was that children attending *koranskole* were less inclined to participate in organized leisure-time activities (Kavli 2007, 46),

and Kavli's report was predictably presented in the media discourse with headlines like "Koranskole rather than friends and leisure time" (*Dagsavisen* 17.12.2007). In this report, the social, emotive, cultural, even sensory and spiritual potential benefits pointed out by Dahlin (2001) and Østberg (2003), are reduced to a notion of tiresome swotting that is epitomized by the term *koranskole*.

The Global in the Local

By turn of the millennium, the formal religious education in public schools had become a non-confessional, non-denominational, comparative subject with a focus on all religious traditions, although weighted in favour of Christianity. There were continued debates on the quantitative and qualitative distribution between the religions and life stances (Skeie 2022), but a standard repertoire of Qur'anic stories and even descriptions from *koranskoler* were used in textbooks (Breilid and Tove Nicolaisen 2003). The role of mother tongue teaching was reduced in order to support Norwegian language training (Bakken 2003).

Non-formal religious education, along with mother tongue teaching, remained supplementary and based on parental choice, and educating children continued to be a major concern for Muslim organizations. In 1993 the inaugurating statutes of the first Muslim umbrella organization, the Islamic Council of Norway (Islamsk Råd Norge, IRN), stipulated the aim of providing a thorough education for Muslim children in Norway in faith, history, and culture; indeed, one of the conditions for membership in the umbrella organization was the provision of regular *koranskole* for children and adults (Elgvin 2020, Appendix A, 378–396). In the 2002 revision, the wording is slightly amended to *koranundervisning*, while in the 2006 and 2021 revisions, the Council's aim to work toward such education is still stated, but it is no longer a condition for membership that it is offered (<https://irn.no/irn-vedtekter/>). Some attempts have been made to produce a uniform educational curricula (Leirvik 2009), while the Muslim Dialogue Network umbrella organization (Muslimsk Dialognettverk, MDN) has also voiced a concern for children's education since its inauguration in 2017.

From the start, transnational connections have been

11 From a handful in the late 1960s, by 1980 Muslims of primarily Pakistani, Turkish, and Moroccan background amounted to around 14,000. With new groups from countries like the Balkans, Somalia, Iraq, Syria, and others, as well as converts, the numbers had by 2016 grown to around 200,000 individuals or around 4% of the population. However, with no official registration of faith, only organisational belonging, the numbers are increasingly difficult to estimate (Dalgard and Østby 2009; Østby and Dalgard 2017).

important for most of the mosques in terms of children's education, as the first generations of Muslims were predominantly immigrants.¹¹ By the 2000s, several generations of Muslims had been born and raised in Norway, and to some of these, attending mosque activities as children was a habitual part of their lives. Some of the teachers in the mosques had gained experience from public schools, others had received university training abroad. Nevertheless, the framing and perception in the context of the wider society continued to be contested, with the media regularly featuring stories presenting the 'closed world' of the *koranskole*.

As we have seen, in some of the early writings, the *koranskole* was equated with the *madrassa* as an institution of higher learning. However, in the media discourse from the late 1990s, *madrassa* or its variant *madrassa*, glossed as *koranskole*, was associated first with the local advancements of the Taliban movement in Afghanistan, then with training facilities recruiting for international terrorism, and, from the 2000s, with debates on extremism and radicalization. Its gloss of *koranskole* was connected to transnational movements, and it was inscribed in discourses of caution and suspicion, especially after the U.S.-initiated Global War on Terrorism from 2001, following the World Trade Centre and Pentagon attacks (Fair 2012).

In 2006, a lexicon entry explained the term as an institution for higher Islamic learning, but also pointed out the use by some movements of the age-old institution (*Aschehoug og Gyldendals* 2006, 10, 25), an image of a violence-mongering enterprise that was soon picked up by popular culture. Thus, for instance, in a 2008 novel by Ørjan N. Karlsson, one of the central characters, after losing his parents and relatives in American bombardments in Iraq, travels through several Arabic countries until he is initiated into a terrorist network through attendance at "en *koranskole*, en *madrassa*" (Karlsson 2008, 106–7).

Norwegian writers respond to these suspicions and allegations in different ways. When Bushra Ishaq investigated Norwegian Muslims' attitudes in 2017, one of the questions in the questionnaire addressed whether "religious activity in the form of a *koranskole* (*madrassa*) should be more regulated" to hinder terrorism (Ishaq 2017, Appendix two, 8). In the responses, apparently this solution was barely, if at all, supported by the interviews. Both the question and the vocabulary were clearly inspired by recent events and media coverage.

In 2016, Masoud Ebrahimnejad wrote a report on mosques in Oslo for the newspaper *Utsyn*, including what he termed “education in Islam outside of the Norwegian school” (Ebrahimnejad 2016, 12). The terminology in the report is sometimes selected on the basis of a temporal criterium (*kveldsskole* – evening school, *helgeskole* – weeked school), sometimes on a content criterion (*koranundervisning* – Qur’an instruction, *språkundervisning* – language instruction). However, *koranskole* is Ebrahimnejad’s overall term, although it is not clear whether this is the author’s or his informants’ preference. One of the claims in the report is that the instruction of children and young people in *koranskoler* and in weekend schools takes place in closed or relatively closed environments (Ebrahimnejad 2016, 8, 64). In the media outreach, the author raised concerns that children are being influenced without any governmental control (*Verdens Gang* 01.11.2016). Breaking with a tradition of autonomy for religious organizations, some politicians suggested surveillance and control of the *koranskoler* in particular (*Vårt Land* 24.05.2019; *Aftenposten* 04.11.2019). Others reacted to the sweeping generalizations or to the illiberal targeting of Muslims (*Vårt Land* 03.06. 2019, *Utrop* 06.02.2020), and it became an issue in the discussions leading up to the new law on faith and life stance organizations. However, there is no condition of governmental approval of educational activities attached to receiving state funding in the current law, which merely has a general clause stating violation of children’s rights as a probable cause for withdrawal of financial support (Trossamfunnslova 2020, §6). An obligation to report on “the amount, content and form” of “educational or faith instructional and other activities” for children is stipulated in the law’s regulations (Trossamfunnsforskriften 2020, §15).

Another form of global concern has been transnational schooling, which is practiced by some minority families (Ahmad et al. 2006), although motivated by different reasons and taking on different forms. As demonstrated by Reisel, Bredal, and Lidén (2018), Qur’an instruction in non-formal educational facilities and Islamic religious education in formal school settings varies in the countries where Muslim families have travelled or sent their children for education. In 2017 and 2018, Norsk Rikskringkasting (NRK) uncovered a series of severe cases of deprivation of liberty and violence against young people in co-called educational facilities in different countries. Tagged

koranskolesakene (the Qur'an school cases), the facilities in question were labelled *koranskoler* (collective web page 01.11.2016–31.03.2020 *Koranskoler – Siste nytt – NRK*). The term *koranskole* was sometimes the informant's choice, at other times it is unclear whose term it was. At times there were caveats presented, with the qualifier 'so-called' preceding it or with quotation marks around it; however, mostly the facilities were simply tagged *koranskoler*, without further qualifications. A report from an expert group shows how these particularly brutal cases in the media were connected to a general concern about negative social control, forced marriage, and the risk of encouraging extremist viewpoints and radicalization (Bredal et al. 2020), and they were soon politicized in the general debate. Thus, in this context a dubious and possibly stigmatizing quality is added to the term *koranskole*, and some of the young people interviewed spoke of a double stigma (Bredal et al. 2020, 64). As one of the informants put it, "He said it was a *koranskole*, but that was totally wrong. It was more like a disciplinary facility" (Bredal et al. 2020, 74). This young person had a different conception of the *koranskole*, possibly he had already attended one. In the public discourse, however, the term may potentially be more permanently tainted, casting Islamic religious education in a suspicious light and potentially adding to a widespread negative sentiment towards Muslims (Moe 2022).

Concluding Remarks

In Norway, the term *koranskole* has become synonymous with non-formal Islamic religious education. Although other terms, like education and instruction, do occur, and are often used by the organizers, *koranskole* is the most prevalent term in academic and public discourse, and is often perceived as self-explanatory. While some academic texts nuance this, one seldom finds extensive discussions of the suitability of the term, and few choose to discard it altogether. Already used ethnographically to refer to practices in other countries, during the late 1980s and early 1990s the term was introduced to describe a local educational practice foreign to established Norwegian culture. The source material, as well as informal conversations with individuals attending these facilities in the 1980s, confirm the impression that the Norwegian term *koranskole* was not

common among Muslims at that time. Nevertheless, some of their own preferred terms, like *dars al-Qur'ān* - Qur'an lesson, emphasized the focus on the Qur'an in this form of instruction.

As the term *koranskole* became widespread toward the mid-1990s, Muslim children, parents, and organizations also started using it, mainly to communicate with the broader society. I argue that the interconnectedness between different parts of the public discourse – in academia, politics, media, and prose – has been instrumental in prompting this widespread use of the term and in providing the diverse range of associations and functions demonstrated in this article. Today, however, although the term is sometimes used among Muslims, a number of educational facilitators express an ambivalence (Eggen 2023a). The Qur'an remains at the heart of the educational concerns and programs, but the term *koranskole* is not perceived to give an accurate description of the vast range of content and activities that are offered. Moreover, some organizers hold that the term is today associated with negative practices or politicized discourses and potentially carries a stigma.

The different uses of the term *koranskole* were all established in the early stages of the public discourse in Norway, and the dominant conceptualizations, motifs, and tropes keep recurring, with some context-specific variations, throughout the period. Within the last few decades, the *koranskole* has been one of the touchstones in several highly politicised debates concerning Muslims in Norway. However, the term continues to be a standard reference in travel reports and in childhood memories, also bearing witness to mystery, nostalgia, sensation, unrest, and suspicion. The term works in different contexts as an image, a metaphor, or a trope. After investigating the appearance of the term *koranskole* in the material, I suggest the following typology for its meanings and functions: 1) It is used as a specific technical term, denoting what I have called Qur'anic instruction proper as it is offered in some mosques. 2) It is also used as a metonymical technical term, denoting any kind of non-formal educational activities in a Muslim faith-based organization (mosque or other organization). 3) It is used as a generic term with a metonymic or symbolic quality for any kind of minority community-based children's activity. 4) The term *koranskole* works as an Oriental trope, evoking images of past grandeur in distant times, places, or cultural contexts, and present stagnation. 5) It works as a nostalgic, dismissive, or mixed memory trope, to

which an author can pin a past and assume a position for a character, in fiction as well as in biography or autobiography. 6) Lastly, the term *koranskole* seems to have taken on a metaphorical quality detached from its lexical content, evoking an image of rigidness or stagnation.

For generalized analytical and comparative purposes, denominational religious education is an established term, and my aim here is not to argue for a new analytical framework in the field. However, due to the lack of precision of the concept *koranskole* particular to Islamic religious education, I call into question the suitability of its continued use in research and academic discourse. Vernacular terms, like *maktab* or *madrassa*, are to some extent used by practitioners in the Islamic religious education field in Norway, but other terms, like 'school' with a variety of qualifiers, are more common (Eggen 2023a). The current legal framework in Norway uses the term faith instruction (*trosopplæring*). This is derived from the terminology adopted by the Church of Norway following a parliamentary decision, in replacement of the term baptism instruction (*dåpsopplæring*) in church-based Christian religious education (Johnsen 2015). However, within the Church of Norway this terminology is currently debated.

With regards to the particularities of Islamic religious education, one option is to differentiate between generalized and specialized activities. Thus, while the very specialized instruction in Qur'an recitation skills could, for instance, pertinently be termed Qur'an instruction (*koranundervisning*), a better suited general terminology needs thorough conceptual discussion. Such a terminology could be coined on basis of the content in question, such as language training, Islamic education, or Qur'an instruction. However, the characteristic nature of these educational enterprises is precisely to combine different topics. Another option is to coin a temporal term, such as afternoon, weekend, or leisure time religious education. This notion could cover educational enterprises outside of the framework of the institutionalized faith community, as in informal religious education. Emphasizing the organizing entity – for instance, faith stance organization education – ties in with the legal framework, while lacking the spatial perspective inherent in the term mosque-based education, which I have used in this article.

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