

## The In-Person Education in the Islamic West During the Medieval Period and Distance Education Today (Historical Approach)

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### Abstract

The aim of the research is to study the transformation in the domain of education in the Islamic West during the medieval period and compare such education to modern distance education. The study is based on both historical and analytical methods utilizing Ibn Sahnun and Ibn Khaldun. The results suggest that traditional education is marked by several principles, such as progressive instruction, importance of memory techniques, and elaboration of the role of the teacher, that allow developing both intellect and the whole society. Unlike traditional education, distance education relies on modern technologies and allows making learning process flexible and accessible. Key words: Islamic medieval education, distance education, educational systems.

**Keywords:** Traditional education, Distance learning, Teaching methods, Educational development, Pedagogical systems.

### Introduction

The Islamic West witnessed brilliant scholars in various sciences and fields of knowledge, and their works have preserved for us the diverse sciences, literature, and arts in which they engaged and mastered the resolution of their complexities. They delved into educational curricula, their types, and objectives. Although the clear emergence of schools began during the Almoravid period (the School of Al-Sabirin), teaching methods were well-known and detailed, including methods of memorization, retention, listening, reading, and

instruction. These works also discussed academic licenses (ijazat), teachers' and educators' fees, academic titles (Aziz, 2016, pp. 284-288), and other important details related to curricula and teaching methods. From this perspective, we pose the main research problem, which can be summarized in the following question:

- What was the reality of the educational process in the Islamic West between the 3rd and 9th centuries AH?
- What was the status of scholars among the general public?
- What were the main motivations of Moroccans for seeking and teaching knowledge?
- What was the influence of Muhammad ibn Sahnun and his status among Moroccans?
- What were Ibn Khaldun's views on the educational movement?
- To what extent did the religious-cultural school play a role in advancing the scientific and educational movement in the Islamic West?
- How can a realistic picture be drawn from the works of Ibn Sahnun and Ibn Khaldun?

### **In-Person Education**

The educational stages among Muslims in the Islamic West evolved with the transition from nomadism to civilization. Education generally began with the elementary school (kuttab) or private tutors and ended with study circles in mosques, later developing into organized schools. As for curricula and teaching methods, they differed slightly from one region to another; however, religious sciences held precedence among the various sciences. The scholars of the Islamic West in general composed significant works containing important theories about the educational process and its necessary curricula, such as Ibn Sahnun, Ibn al-Jazzar al-Qayrawani, al-Qabisi, al-Maghrawi, and many others. They elaborated on the conditions of the teacher and the learner, as well as the required curricula. They did not neglect even the disciplinary process, its conditions, and its place in the educational process. Through this study, we will examine the characteristics of the educational process and its curricula according to Ibn Sahnun and Ibn Khaldun, and we will attempt to identify points of agreement and disagreement between them. Although they differed in time, they agreed in place, and their exceptional genius in the field of education will become evident.

The scholars of the Islamic West in the medieval period established educational and pedagogical laws that collectively formed an integrated system of pedagogical procedures regulating the relationship between teacher and learner, clarifying essential subjects in terms of their importance and stages across educational phases, and considering the hierarchy of priorities to ensure the desired educational effectiveness, so that students' personalities would be fully developed and benefit from a high level of knowledge. To achieve the desired educational goals, educational thinkers were keen to follow effective pedagogical methods for raising children according to a perspective that takes into account the psychological and social aspects of learners from different groups and social classes (Boussaid, 2016, p. 111).

#### **1. The Educational Process According to Ibn Sahnun (Al-Qadi, nd, p. 105), (Al-Dabbagh & Ibn Naji, 1968, p. 124)**

There is no doubt that Ibn Sahnun's book "The Etiquette of Teachers" (Adab al-Mu'allimin) is considered one of the oldest known educational works to this day. The book includes issues related to teachers and what they must do regarding the education and discipline of children, containing prophetic hadiths and supported traditions, and numerous

issues in the chapters of education and upbringing that he had presented to his father, Imam Sahnun. Therefore, the work can be considered an important reference for the education of children in Ifriqiya in the mid-3rd century AH (Smayri, 2021, p. 79), at a time when conflict was intense between the Maliki and Hanafi schools. The book contained several themes that the author elaborated upon within the following chapters:

- What has been narrated regarding teaching the Holy Quran.
- What has been narrated regarding justice among children.
- Chapter on what is disliked to erase of the remembrance of God and what should be taught of that.
- What has been narrated regarding discipline, what is permissible therein, and what is not.
- What has been narrated regarding completion (khatm) and what is due to the teacher (in terms of compensation).
- What has been narrated regarding adjudicating a slave's gift.
- What children should be allowed to do during school holidays.
- What is incumbent upon the teacher regarding attending to the children.
- What has been narrated regarding the teacher's remuneration and when it becomes due.
- What has been narrated regarding the remuneration for the Noble Quran and books of jurisprudence.

This book serves as a comprehensive and complete program in the field of education and instruction, which we will demonstrate through our reading of "The Etiquette of Teachers." Given the scholarly value of this work, it has been translated into many foreign languages, including French and English.

## 2. Conditions of the Teacher and His Duties:

Ibn Sahnun believed that the success of the educational process begins first with the **teacher**, who must possess a set of conditions and controls without which success cannot be achieved. Among these, he mentioned full dedication to the profession and teaching, so that he can educate and discipline them when necessary. Our jurist also held that the teacher must attend to his students by ensuring they reach their homes (in the case of children), not expelling them during lessons, and he is not permitted to occupy himself with anything other than the children except at times when it would not expose them to harm (Ibn Sahnun, 1972, p. 80).

According to Ibn Sahnun, the educational process is based first and foremost on the Holy Quran. In fact, this matter was a point of consensus in all the works that detailed the educational process, such as Al-Qabisi (Al-Qabisi, 1986, p. 79), through its writing and recitation according to the reading of Nafi' as a necessary condition. In this regard, he states: "He should teach them the grammar (i'rab) of the Quran, and that is incumbent upon him... and vocalization (tashkil), spelling, good handwriting, good recitation, proper timing, and tartil (slow, measured recitation) are incumbent upon him" (Ibn Sahnun, 1972, p. 82).

On this basis, teaching the Quran falls within the compulsory basic curriculum, with an optional branch beneath it that includes arithmetic, learning Arabic poetry, calligraphy, and grammar. Ibn Sahnun considered this type to fall under the conditions of the child's guardians.

The objectives of education according to Ibn Sahnun can be summarized as:

- Teaching the Holy Quran.
- Disseminating and spreading religious sciences among all Muslims.
- Acquiring knowledge and gaining understanding.
- Attaining social status among the elite and the general public.
- Earning a livelihood (Ma'touq, 2015, p. 12).

All of these are important chapters with detailed discussions, and they have their religious and moral foundations.

### 3. The Educational Process According to Ibn Khaldun:

Ibn Khaldun is considered one of the most famous social scholars who engaged with various historical, philosophical, jurisprudential, and Sufi issues. He is regarded as one of the later scholars (from the chronological period of the 8th century AH/14th century AD) who spoke about education and upbringing in an analytical and critical manner, based on his expertise in Maghrebi society. He elaborated on these issues (Boussaid, 2016, p. 118) in his famous book "The Muqaddimah" (Introduction).

Thanks to his exceptional genius, he was able to analyze many phenomena across various levels and specializations. Among his interests were knowledge, education, and what relates to them. He delved into the classification of sciences and their relationship to human civilization (umran). Some scholars even considered his approach to constitute a distinct educational and pedagogical theory with its own components, foundations, and methodologies. Ibn Khaldun did not merely present his philosophy of education and upbringing from a theoretical perspective; rather, he experienced this profession and endured its challenges. His educational experience was not limited to the Maghreb; he also taught in major schools of the Islamic East, such as the Qamhiyya School in Egypt, established by Salah al-Din ibn Ayyub and endowed to the Malikis for their study, in addition to the Zahiriyya School and others (Ba'li & bin Awn, 2018, p. 36). This allowed him to observe many important details that only an expert could discern. Therefore, he dedicated more than eight chapters of his Muqaddimah to the educational process and related matters, which undoubtedly indicates the value he recognized in this great undertaking.

Ibn Khaldun considered the educational process a societal craft par excellence. He elaborated on different educational curricula, acknowledging that the people of the Maghreb limit themselves to teaching the Quran, while the people of Andalusia teach the Quran, poetry, and good calligraphy, and the people of Ifriqiya teach children the Quran and the noble prophetic hadith. He explained that this different development across regions occurs gradually according to the necessities of life. Thus, crafts in civilized societies are complex perfectionist crafts, which only emerge in such societies, including the arts and teaching of sciences. The pursuit of knowledge, according to him, is a means of earning a livelihood in society. He also discusses the concept of "malaka" (habitual competence), summarizing it psychologically as follows: every action, whether material or spiritual, intellectual or physical, leaves an impression on the soul. When the action is repeated and its impression on the soul is repeated, a quality is generated from that, and when that quality becomes firmly established, it forms a malaka (al-Husari, 1967, p. 424). Therefore, Ibn Khaldun considers all

languages to be malakat similar to crafts, as they are competencies of the tongue for expressing meanings (Ibn Khaldun, 2004, p. 554).

### **Gradualism is a Necessary Matter in Teaching Sciences**

Ibn Khaldun held that the learner must not move from one scientific issue to another before understanding the first. Therefore, he must continue teaching the single issue until it is completed and he is assured that the learner has understood it. He warned against interrupting sessions and separating them, as this leads to forgetfulness first and to the lack of connection between issues second. This is found in his statement: "Likewise, you should not prolong the teaching of a single art for the learner by separating sessions and interrupting between them, because this leads to forgetfulness and the disconnection of the issues of the art from one another" (Ibn Khaldun, 2004, p. 590). He advises that if teaching is done gradually, little by little and bit by bit, the learner should first be presented with issues from each chapter of the art that are the foundations of that chapter, and the teacher should simplify their explanation in a general manner, considering the learner's intellectual capacity and readiness to receive what is presented, until reaching the end of the art, at which point the learner acquires a malaka in that science.

### **The State of Readiness is the Key to Attainment:**

The author of the Muqaddimah explains that this is the state in which the individual is capable of learning a task or experience, and it is linked to the factor of maturity. The learner must be prepared for learning and fully devote themselves to knowledge, staying away from worldly temptations and pleasures: "For the acceptance of knowledge and readiness to understand it develops gradually, and the learner is initially incapable of understanding in general except to a small extent, and on the basis of approximation, summarization, and sensory examples. Then readiness continues to develop in him gradually" (Ibn Khaldun, 2004, p. 587).

### **Gradualism and Repetition:**

The basic principles of learning according to Ibn Khaldun can be summarized as gradualism with repetition and centered expansion, and not mixing the discussions of one book with another. He also held that severity in using punishment is harmful to the learner, and he added that traveling in search of knowledge is a further perfection in learning (Al-Hasan, 1959, p. 10).

### **Learning Arithmetic and Writing:**

If, according to Ibn Khaldun, memorizing the Quran develops perception and strengthens memory, then the mental process involved in writing—from written letters to the pronunciation of those letters and from there to the mental image that leads to meaning—increases the learner's insight and intelligence through rapid mental transition between signifier and signified. He also emphasized in his educational method the necessity of learning arithmetic (Sayoud, 2014-2015, p. 145).

### **Not Overextending in the Study of Instrumental Sciences:**

He divides sciences into philosophical (wisdom-based) and transmitted (positive). In another context, he divides them into those intended for their own sake and those that are instrumental, meaning they are tools for studying the first type and are not intended for

themselves. In this context, he argues that one should not overextend in studying and teaching them (Ibn Khaldun, 2004, p. 591).

#### **Traveling in Search of Knowledge:**

Ibn Khaldun explicitly states regarding travel: "For traveling in search of knowledge and meeting with senior scholars is a further perfection in learning" (Ibn Khaldun, 2004, p. 254),(Al-Kindani, 2000, p. 22).

In general, the educational process according to the scholar Ibn Khaldun requires "gradualism and repetition in presenting the scientific material, adherence to the principle of motivation, consideration of learners' readiness, taking into account individual differences among learners during the teaching of sciences, in addition to his clear distinction between language as a special malaka and language as a craft; that is, between two types of information—information related to Malaka and information related to craft—that is, between the two aspects of research and application" (Sari, 2002, p. 93), without neglecting the role of scholarly travel in consolidating constants. The curricula of these scholars remain in need of further studies to shed light on what remains hidden and to apply them in our current educational curricula.

#### **Distance Education:**

##### **Introduction:**

Technological developments in the field of information technology and social networks have led to the emergence of modern methods and strategies in education, especially in colleges, institutes, and universities. Higher education institutions have become in need of distance education to be employed in educational institutions around the world. Distance education has become a new model adopted by many educational institutions worldwide, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic. This measure represents a radical transformation and change in teaching methods and curricula, and this type of education has become a competitor and, at other times, a complement to traditional in-person education. Educational activities in distance education have relied on digital platforms such as web-based learning, e-learning, or online learning.

Given the rapid technological development the world is witnessing and the tremendous information explosion due to the expansion of the use of information and communication technologies in various aspects of life, including the field of education, this has resulted in the employment of innovative educational patterns that rely on technical means for transmitting information. Distance education is the most famous of these patterns, whose application has been increasingly adopted day by day. It is considered a process of transmitting information and knowledge from the teacher to the learner at their location, without resorting to face-to-face communication. This pattern of education includes any educational process in which there is no direct contact between teacher and learner, with each party being distant from the other, so that communication between them is limited to electronic media.

##### **Definition of Distance Education**

Holmberg defines distance education as that type of education that covers various forms of study at all educational levels in which the educational process is not subject to continuous and direct supervision by teachers in classrooms, meaning there is a separation between teacher and learner in all forms of distance education. This arrangement determines the role of

technical media in the educational process and their role in achieving communication between teacher and learner without face-to-face meeting. It is also defined as that type of education in which the teacher or the educational institution providing education is distant from the learner either in place, time, or both, and this entails the necessity of using multiple communication media, including printed, audio, visual, and other media (Ammouch, 2022, pp. 93-104).

From this definition, it becomes clear that distance education is a mass educational system open to all, not limited to a specific time or category of learners. It is compatible with the nature, needs, and aspirations of individuals. It also provides more learning opportunities by resorting to alternatives different from traditional meetings in classrooms between teachers and students, using electronic means to connect teacher and learner and transmit educational material.

This pattern of distance education is connected to other educational patterns, overlapping with them in purpose and means. Perhaps the most famous of these patterns is what is called e-learning. This latter does not synonymize distance education, although some practitioners in the field of education combine the two terms, saying "electronic distance education." However, the difference between them is clear. While the educational process in distance education does not necessarily rely on electronic media and technical means—it can be achieved simply by the teacher uploading printed files containing course materials through educational platforms—in contrast, the process cannot succeed in the e-learning pattern in the absence of e-learning media such as computers, internet networks, and others. Thus, e-learning becomes a form of distance education, not its entirety. On this basis, e-learning can be defined as: "a form of distance education that uses modern communication mechanisms to deliver information to learners in the shortest time and at the lowest cost, in a manner that enables the management, control, measurement, and evaluation of learners' performance" (Boulkhatout, 2022, pp. 70-79).

#### **Advantages of Distance Education:**

The advantages of distance education can be summarized in the following points:

- **Enjoyment of learning:** Technology motivates learners and attracts them toward learning. **Individualized self-learning:** Due to the diversity of students' abilities and backgrounds, it becomes necessary to give them individual freedom in self-learning. The possibility of teaching some topics that were previously not teachable through the computer's capacity for simulation and modeling.
- **Diversity:** E-learning strives to provide a diverse learning environment with multiple educational alternatives and options for the learner to choose what suits them from the activities.
- It contributes to creating an environment of collaborative learning opportunities, thereby transforming the school environment into a more realistic one. It moves away from the artificial environment that isolates students within classrooms and provides significant flexibility through flexible, open, and distributed education. Education surpasses classroom walls, exceeds the fixed time of the school day, and transcends the limited content of books and available resources within the school.
- It contributes to reducing the cost of the educational process by reusing educational content.

- Meeting students' needs: Distance education is characterized by considering the diversity of learning styles among students, enabling them to play a more positive role, allowing for active and effective education, facilitating student interaction with each other, and supporting them in taking responsibility (Tariq, 2014, p. 42).
- Providing learning opportunities for all individuals, regardless of work constraints or distance.
- It has become a challenge due to the massive knowledge explosion in the modern era.
- Enhancing life skills for learners, given the ease of doing so with distance education, which is faster and less costly.
- Flexibility: Distance education takes into account distance and work hours for each student.
- Effectiveness: This has been proven by recent studies.
- The possibility of diversifying educational curricula with greater freedom.
- Independence for each learner individually, and thus the possibility of considering each student's circumstances and capabilities individually.
- Low cost, which positively reflects on the number of learners.

**[Disadvantages of Distance Education (Boulkhatout, 2022, pp. 70-79):**

- Weak human interaction between teacher and student.
- Difficulty in transitioning from traditional teaching methods based on lecture delivery by the instructor and information recall by the student to electronic distance education, which relies on dialogue, discussion, and analysis of large amounts of information.
- A significant percentage of teachers and students lack experience in dealing with information and communication technology tools and educational software.
- The need for greater effort and financial cost for the instructor to prepare their lecture electronically, as well as greater effort and time required by the student to follow and understand the lecture.
- Insufficient availability of e-learning requirements, such as computers and electronic display media.
- Internet connectivity and communication networks between universities, research centers, and institutions, databases, halls, and appropriate furnishings.
- Weak English language proficiency among most students and a significant percentage of instructors, which creates obstacles to engaging in e-learning, as most software and information are in English.
- Lack of adequate funding and shortage of technical staff trained to operate and maintain communication and information technology equipment.
- Administrative obstacles sometimes represented by university leadership that is unaware and unenthusiastic about development, along with routine administrative procedures and rigid regulations that hinder development and do not allow flexibility in work.
- Intermittent power outages may constitute one of the most important obstacles and problems hindering the implementation of electronic distance education.

As for traditional in-person education, while it is characterized by a set of characteristics and advantages, it is also criticized for a series of deficiencies and disadvantages, the most important of which are:

- The learner's role in the educational process is passive, taking on the role of recipient.
- Emphasis on the mental aspect, with the greater part being the cramming of minds with knowledge.
- Neglecting activities that take place outside classrooms, which creates a generation that memorizes rather than innovates.

### **Objectives of Distance Education:**

The objectives of distance education include the following:

- Providing educational services to those who have missed educational opportunities at all levels of education.
- Creating appropriate educational conditions that suit the needs of learners to continue their education (lifelong learning).
- Offering cultural programs to all citizens, raising awareness, and providing them with knowledge.
- Contributing to women's education and encouraging them to pursue it.
- Keeping pace with continuous knowledge and technological developments.
- Contributing to literacy and adult education without the need to attend formal classes.
- Achieving the principle of educational democracy, equal educational opportunities, and equality among citizens without discrimination based on social or economic status, race, religion, or gender.
- Expanding university education opportunities for more students wishing to enroll in higher education institutions and responding to the growing social demand for this type of education.
- Providing opportunities for those who missed enrollment in higher education institutions due to personal, familial, economic, social, professional, spatial, or temporal circumstances.
- Responding to the requirements of national development plans for qualified and trained human resources.
- Providing continuous education, training, and professional development opportunities for employees and workers, helping them perform their duties, responsibilities, and professional roles.
- Enabling youth and adults, including the elderly and housewives, to invest their free time in education and acquiring beneficial habits and skills.
- Contributing to women's education and encouraging it in developing countries where women's education remains a significant problem, especially in some agricultural societies, contributing to high illiteracy rates in these communities.

### **Principles of Distance Education:**

There are several basic principles on which distance education is founded, the most important of which are:

- Accessibility Principle: This means that educational opportunities at the higher education level are available to everyone, regardless of all forms of constraints, spatial or objective.
- Flexibility Principle: This means overcoming all barriers arising from the system or its administrators. However, this aspect is approached with considerable caution in most contemporary distance education programs.
- Learner Control: This means that students can arrange the various curriculum topics according to their circumstances and abilities, and choose evaluative methods as well. However, this characteristic is viewed with great reservation in most contemporary distance education programs.
- Choice of Delivery Systems: Since learners do not learn in the same way, their individual choice of knowledge delivery systems—whether by correspondence, computer, software, satellite, or meetings—is a fundamental characteristic of this type of education.
- Accreditation: This refers to the appropriateness of study programs and their academic degrees for the intended purposes compared to others. From another perspective, it means the recognition of these programs and the transferability of their content to different institutions.

### Conclusion

The present presentation illustrates the evolution of educational ideas in the Islamic West through the contributions of Ibn Sahnun and Ibn Khaldun. It illustrates how educational practices developed gradually over a period of time and reached an advanced stage. Scholars were important in society, as evidenced by the respect shown for Ibn Sahnun in whose lifetime and after, his ideas were acknowledged. It is important to note that the rise of Arabic literature has led to the emergence of scholars in different areas.

In addition, the educational reforms in the time of Ibn Sahnun gave rise to the new perspectives on education. Ibn Khaldun provided his analytical ideas about education and its development in his *Muqaddimah*. A long-standing scholarly tradition of education in the area continued to flourish and impact various educational institutions. Instruction process was changing due to the impact of theorists and their approach to education. Finally, ideas expressed and developed in the literature can serve as a resource for educational practice today.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 01: Text from Ibn Sahnun's Book

**He said:** I prefer that the teacher not delegate the disciplining of children to any of them, nor appoint a monitor from among them, except if the child has completed (memorization) and knows the Quran and is independent of teaching, then there is no harm in that, and that he should assist him, for that is beneficial to the child. It is not permissible to order anyone to teach any of them unless there is benefit to the child in his education, or the

parent permits that. And let him (the teacher) attend to it himself or hire someone to assist him if it is within his means.

### **What is Incumbent Upon the Teacher Regarding Attending to Children:**

It is not permissible for the teacher to occupy himself with anything other than the children, except at a time when he is not exposing them to harm. There is no harm in him conversing as long as he is looking at them and checking on them (Ibn Sahnun, 1972, p. 80).

### **Appendix 02: Text from Ibn Khaldun's Muqaddimah**

#### **[On the Education of Children and the Different Approaches of Islamic Cities in Its Methods]**

Know that teaching children the Quran is a ritual of the religion adopted by the people of the faith and practiced in all their cities, due to what it instills in hearts of firm faith and its beliefs through the verses of the Quran and some hadith texts. The Quran became the foundation of education upon which subsequent acquired malakat (competencies) are built. The reason for this is that teaching the young takes the firmest hold and serves as the basis for what follows, because the first thing to enter the heart is like the foundation for the malakat. Depending on the foundation and its quality, the state of what is built upon it will vary. Their methods of teaching the Quran to children differed according to their consideration of what arises from that education in terms of malakat.

**As for the people of the Maghreb**, their approach for children is to limit education to the Quran only, while during that time they engage them in studying its script, its issues, and the differences among its reciters. They do not mix this with anything else in their teaching sessions—neither hadith, nor jurisprudence, nor poetry, nor Arabic linguistics—until they become proficient in it or give up. In most cases, giving up means abandoning knowledge altogether. This is the approach of the people of the cities of the Maghreb and those who follow them among the Berber villages, the nations of the Maghreb, for their children until they pass the age of puberty and reach youth. The same applies to adults who return to studying the Quran after a portion of their life has passed. Therefore, they are more meticulous in the script and memorization of the Quran than others.

**As for the people of Andalusia**, their approach is to teach the Quran and writing as such. This is what they emphasize in education. However, since the Quran is the foundation, basis, and source of religion and sciences, they made it the basis of education. They do not limit themselves to it alone but mix in the education of children the recitation of poetry (mostly), composition, the study and memorization of Arabic grammatical rules, and the refinement of calligraphy and writing. Their concern in education is not limited to the Quran alone; rather, their concern for calligraphy is greater than all of these. By the time the child reaches youth, they have gained some knowledge of Arabic and poetry, developed insight into them, excelled in calligraphy and writing, and have generally attached themselves to the tail of knowledge, had there been a chain of transmission for teaching sciences. However, they cut off from that due to the interruption of the chain of teaching in their regions, and nothing remains in their hands except what was acquired from that initial education, which suffices for those whom God guides and who have the preparation if a teacher is found.

**As for the people of Ifriqiya**, they mix in the education of children the Quran with hadith (mostly), the study of the principles of sciences, and the teaching of some of their

issues. However, their concern for the Quran, having children memorize it, and their familiarity with its different recitations and readings is greater than other matters. Their concern for calligraphy is secondary to that. In general, their approach to children's education is closer to that of the people of Andalusia because the chain of their approach in this matter is connected to the Andalusian scholars who migrated after the Christian takeover of the eastern part of Andalusia and settled in Tunis, and from them their children later learned...