

Profit, Politics, and the Call for Prayer: An Ethnographic Study of Tutoring Centers in Lower-income Cairo

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Religion is an important and pervasive aspect of everyday life in contemporary Egypt, and references to Islam abound in all realms of society, not least in the education system. In the context of economic liberalization and structural adjustment policies, especially since the 1990s, the privatization of schooling has been encouraged by the Egyptian government, and a variety of actors have become involved in the provision of education, among them religious associations, civil society organizations, and private investors.

A less desired informal process of privatization and marketization of education has taken place at the same time, and the increasing heterogeneity of formal schooling is mirrored in the informal education sector, where various forms of private and group tutoring cater to students of different socio-economic backgrounds. Tutoring, although officially outlawed, has become an extremely widespread practice among teachers and students, which commonly takes place in private homes or in specialized tutoring centers that have been established all over Cairo (and other Egyptian cities) during the last decades. Especially in lower and middle income neighborhoods, these centers are often associated to mosques, churches, and religious charity organizations.

Based on participant observation in several tutoring centers located in lower-income neighborhoods of Cairo, interviews with students, teachers, and center managers, as well as a review of media coverage of the issue, the proposed paper takes a closer look at the rules and dynamics that govern this informal education sector, focussing on the intricate interplay between political, economic, and religious logics and motivations.

Why is tutoring offered, by and for whom? Are mosque-affiliated centers part of a „parallel Islamic sector“, used by religious groups to gain popular support and „indirectly promote partisan ideologies“ as has been suggested? Or are religious references and labels employed by profit-oriented entrepreneurs in order to attract students, obtain parents' trust, and increase their legitimacy vis-à-vis the state? How are neoliberal market principles on one hand and religious references and values on the other hand negotiated (and reconciled) in the context of education?