

From the Reform of Arabo-Islamic Education to University Innovation

The Contributions of Cheikh Mouhamadou Mourtada Mbacké and Serigne Mame Mor Mbacké Mourtada to the Transformation of Senegal's Educational Landscape

By Dr. Djily DIENE, Lecturer-Researcher and Director of the Internal Quality Assurance Unit at Université Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba

The modernization of Arabo-Islamic education in Senegal has often been approached through fragmented reforms. In contrast, the initiatives led by Cheikh Mouhamadou Mourtada Mbacké and later by Serigne Mame Mor Mbacké Mourtada represent a rare example of systemic transformation. Cheikh Mourtada, widely recognized for his international missionary activities promoting the thought of Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba, founded the Al-Azhar Institutes in 1974 to integrate religious sciences with contemporary disciplines. Decades later, Serigne Mame Mor Mbacké extended this vision by creating Université Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba (UCAB), a university designed to provide Arabic-speaking graduates with access to professional and state-recognized higher education. This article analyzes the institutional logic and outcomes of this dual reform, highlighting its significance for the evolution of Senegal's educational system



Cheikh Mouhamadou Mourtada Mbacké and the Modernization of Arabo-Islamic Schooling

Over fifty years, the Al-Azhar network has grown into the largest private system of Arabo-Islamic education in Senegal. In 2025–2026, it encompasses 507 institutions distributed across all regions of the country and abroad. This expansion includes preschools, middle schools, high schools, and 18 regional centers, as well as three international branches in Côte d'Ivoire and Cameroon. The network's growth reflects both institutional consolidation and sustained demand for an educational model combining religious values with modern academic standards.

The network's human resources have expanded from 436 teachers in the early 2000s to 2,600 educators in 2025–2026. Student enrollment has increased from approximately 24,000 to nearly 99,000 learners. Between 2013 and 2025, the Al-Azhar Institutes produced 7,941 graduates of the Arabo-Islamic baccalaureate, significantly widening access to higher education for Arabic-speaking students.

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The national Arabo-Islamic baccalaureate examination provides a clear measure of the reform's impact. Success rates rose from 44% in 2013 to 78% in 2026, with 1,403 admitted out of 1,774 candidates—the highest number recorded by the institution. Al-Azhar students have also excelled in national competitions, including the Army Health Service School, the Polytechnic School, and the National General Competition, where they secured seven of the eight Arabic language prizes in 2022 and 2023. These achievements underscore the emergence of Al-Azhar as a major contributor to Senegal's human capital formation.

Serigne Mame Mor Mbacké Mourtada and the Innovation of University Education

The establishment of UCAB represents a strategic extension of the educational vision initiated by Cheikh Mourtada. Rather than creating an isolated higher education institution, Serigne Mame Mor Mbacké designed UCAB as part of a vertically integrated system linking basic education, vocational training, and university studies. This model addressed longstanding barriers faced by Arabic-speaking graduates, including limited university pathways and restricted professional opportunities.

UCAB's most distinctive innovation is the preparatory year for holders of the Arabo-Islamic baccalaureate, aimed at strengthening competencies in French, English, and foundational sciences. This initiative facilitates academic integration and enhances student success. The university offers programs in engineering, management information systems, rural development, agro-food sciences, finance, religious studies, and the humanities, aligning its curriculum with national economic priorities.



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In 2025–2026, UCAB enrolled 2,784 students across its centers in Touba, Dakar, Bambey, and Saint-Louis. Since its partnership with the Senegalese government in 2013, more than 10,000 students have been directed to the university, making it one of the leading private partners of the Ministry of Higher Education. With 101 faculty members, UCAB continues to strengthen its academic governance and institutional capacity.

The Al-Azhar–UCAB system stands out for its vertical integration from preschool to higher education. This continuity ensures curricular coherence, facilitates student mobility, and promotes the development of human capital, combining scientific competence, ethical values, and civic responsibility. In contrast to fragmented reforms observed elsewhere, this model offers a holistic approach to educational modernization

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Conclusion

The contributions of Cheikh Mouhamadou Mourtada Mbacké and Serigne Mame Mor Mbacké Mourtada form a coherent historical trajectory of reform within Senegal's Arabo-Islamic educational sector. Cheikh Mourtada modernized school structures through the creation of a high-performing and accessible network, while Serigne Mame Mor consolidated this transformation by establishing an innovative university system aligned with contemporary demands for quality, employability, and research. Together, the Al-Azhar Institutes and UCAB constitute an integrated educational model that harmonizes religious identity, academic excellence, and pedagogical innovation. Their experience offers a valuable reference for countries seeking to modernize Arabo-Islamic education. Future prospects include strengthening research capacity, expanding international partnerships, and developing innovation hubs capable of positioning this model as a significant actor in the knowledge economy of the twenty-first century.

Dr. Djily Diene

