Introduction

This briefing paper focuses on children in the Sahelian countries, who are enrolled in Qur’ānic schools and beg as part of this education. In this region, Islamic education predates colonization and the establishment of mission and secular state schools. Ideologies about religion, politics and education have shaped how Qur’ānic schools have transformed and proliferated over time and have resulted in an enormous variety of schools today.

Some schools – the Daaras/ Makarantar - are founded on Islamic traditionalism and a Master-disciple pedagogy, while others - the Madāris/ Arabic schools - are founded on Islamic modernism and combine the study of the Qur’ān with subjects from the curriculum of state schools and the teaching style resemble that of state schools. Pupils in Madāris pay school fees and are not sent out to beg, whereas education in Daaras is often free or almost free but implies that pupils – Talibēs - may beg for alms. However, some Marabouts have found alternative ways of maintaining their Daaras and do not send their Talibēs out to beg. Thus, the specific focus in this paper on Talibēs who beg provides a partial picture of religious education in Qur’ānic schools.

International agencies, NGOs and media often equate the highly visible phenomenon of child beggars in the capital cities Dakar, Bamako, Ouagadougou, Niamey and Nouakchott and in large cities such as Kano and Maiduguri in Northern Nigeria with Talibēs, and with forced begging where children are coerced physically or psychologically into begging. Many Talibēs are also perceived to have been trafficked, because they have moved from rural villages to Qur’ānic schools in urban

Definitions and labels

Children attending Qur’ānic school go by different labels: Talibēs (Wolof); Garibous (Dioula); Al-majiri (Hausa); Almudos (Fulbe).

Teachers also are labelled differently: Marabout (derivative of the Arabic word Murābiṭ) is commonly used in Francophone countries; Mallam (Hausa version of the Arabic word Mu'allim) in Anglophone countries; and occasionally Alfa (Yoruba term for a Muslim cleric).

Qur’ānic schools are named differently according to the type and language: Traditional schools are usually called Daara (Wolof derivative of the Arabic word dar) or Makarantar (Hausa for a place of learning and reciting), whereas schools associated with Islamic modernism and incorporating other topics than the Qur’ān are called Madrasa/Madāris (Arabic for school), Arabic schools or Islamiyya schools.

In this paper, the term Talibé is used as a generic label for boys learning the Qur’ān in a traditional school, whether they are involved in begging or not. Marabout is used for the Islamic scholar leading the school and teaching children the Qur’ān with or without assistant teachers, and Daara for the school. Specific note is made when the information pertain to Talibēs who beg.
areas within their country or in neighbouring countries.\textsuperscript{[3, 15, 44, 51]}

Based on the review of a broad range of literature – spanning from newspaper articles, to reports of commissioned research, to Master and Doctoral theses, to peer reviewed academic publications - this briefing paper aims to unpick why children become \textit{Talibés} and the conditions in which they live including the time spent begging. The paper also raises a number of issues that need further investigation.

**Situating \textit{Talibés} in the 2000s**

A typical \textit{Talibé} is a young boy of school-going age but girls also attend Qur’ānic schools. Girls almost always study in \textit{Daaras} close to their home so they can continue living with their family and they are not sent out to beg.\textsuperscript{[3]} Boys also study close to home but may also relocate to Qur’ānic schools away from their family, in which case they are more likely to beg. Begging is usually done by younger students while older ones, who have advanced beyond memorization of the Qur’ān to study mysticism and other core subjects, do not beg but help supervise younger students.\textsuperscript{[5, 15, 34]}

\textit{Talibés} come from all ethnic groups, especially in countries like Mauritania, Niger, the Gambia, Senegal and Mali and Guinea where over 85 per cent of the population are Muslims.\textsuperscript{[19]} Some parents use cultural explanations along the lines of ethnic origin to justify why their children are not sent to \textit{Daaras} where begging is part of the curriculum, e.g. the Felupe, Balantas and Papel of Guinea Bissau.\textsuperscript{[17]} However, the opposite – that children become \textit{Talibés} who beg because of their ethnic origin - misses important inequalities. Children from some regions are more likely to become \textit{Talibés} than those from other regions for reasons ranging from lack of provision of state schools in remote areas, to relative poverty, to child circulation within kin groups and to the importance given to religion.\textsuperscript{[15, 30, 49]}

Whether they beg as part of their education is linked with the wealth, reputation and moral stance of the \textit{Marabout}. When more Fulbe than Wolof children (\textit{Talibé} and non-\textit{Talibé}) beg in Dakar and two-thirds of the Fulbe child beggars are \textit{Talibés},\textsuperscript{[44]} it may suggest that they attend poorer \textit{Daaras}; that they primarily migrate to urban areas to pursue Islamic education; that demand for \textit{Daara} places is higher than the availability in well-established \textit{Daaras};

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**Benin.** In 2001, 89 per cent of the \textit{Talibés} were boys and 11 per cent girls. The \textit{Talibés’} average age was 12 years. Age at which children begin Qur’ānic school:

- 3-4 years: 12 per cent
- 5-8 years: 43 per cent
- 9-12 years: 30 per cent
- 13+ years: 15 per cent

(Sample N=485) \textsuperscript{[3, p. 10]}

**Senegal.** In 2009, 25 per cent of the children who left home, left to study the Qur’an. Among the boys, 43 per cent left for this reason compared to 4 per cent of the girls.

The mean age for beginning Qur’ānic school was 7.2 years; two in three had begun before the age of 8 years but only 14 per cent had begun before they turned five. There was a noticeable decline in \textit{Talibés} over the age of 12 years. (Sample N=2,400 households) \textsuperscript{[26, p. 32, 49]}

**Mauritania.** In 2006, 40 per cent of the \textit{Talibés} interviewed were aged 6-8 years; 48 per cent 9-10 years and 12 per cent 11 years or above.

(Sample N=300 \textit{Talibés}). \textsuperscript{[5, p. 12-13]}
and for non-Talibés that they either have few urban-based relatives or that these relatives are unable to mediate employment for migrant children. It is therefore important to examine in more detail why uneven representation of ethnic groups occurs and look into issues like gender, age, inequality and processes of marginalization.

Apart from small-scale studies, little statistical information is available for the different types of Qur’ānic schools, e.g. in census data and UNESCO’s education database. Unsystematic examples offer some indication however. In Niger, for example, more than 40,000 Qur’ānic schools existed in the early 2000s and in Chad 45 per cent of the children in education attended Qur’ānic schools.\[19\] Similarly in Senegal, around the same number of children were educated in Qur’ānic schools as in state schools in 1991,\[39\] though in two of the sufi city-states – Touba of the Murides (Wolof) and Medina Gounass of the Tijaniyya (Fulbe) – the Caliphs closed state schools in the 1990s due to the fact that the number of children attending Madāris was decreasing.\[30\]

The rejection of state schools cannot be explained by Islamic traditionalism. The first Madrasa in Touba in Senegal opened in 1969,\[37\] and in northern Nigeria the Fityan al-Islam organization is behind a great proliferation of Islamiyya schools (Madāris). They opened the first school in 1972, by 1983 they ran 183 schools and taught 11,835 students in Kano state alone, and by 2000 they had 2,881 schools with 302,514 students across northern Nigeria.\[48, 49\] In Mali and Burkina Faso Daaras are important educational institutions, whereas in northern Ghana, Côte d’Ivoire and Cameroon they have gradually been replaced by Madāris.\[19, 35\]

Without reliable statistical data, it is difficult to assess the importance of Qur’ānic schools vis-à-vis state schools and the degree to which children enrolled in state schools also pursue religious education outside school hours, as studies in Cameroon\[20\] and Ghana\[13\] show. Furthermore, it is impossible to assess the number of pupils enrolled in different types of Qur’ānic schools, let alone in Daaras which are among the most marginalized institutions in the educational system.\[30\]

*Reasons Why Children Become Talibés*

Some reports argue that poor parents send children away, among others to Daaras, to reduce the number of mouths to feed within the household.\[15, 44, 46\] This is a utilitarian but too simplified view of long-standing child circulation and fostering practices, reducing the decision to pure economics without considering the importance for both children and parents of strengthening social alliances, the prospects for education that such relocation engender,\[24, 34, 38\] and, in certain communities, of dissociating themselves from the stigma of slave origin.\[28\] Moreover, this kind of narrative assumes that children are net consumers not producers.\[34\] Although parents often mention poverty as a reason for sending children to Qur’ānic schools, *poverty cannot be used as an explanatory factor in isolation.* The decision to send one or more children through education in a Daara is intertwined with religious and moral norms, pedagogical beliefs, parents’ own experience and broader processes of marginalisation and exclusion.\[13\] Moreover, Talibés are not only the children of the poorest percentile.\[17, 26\]
The long history of Islam in the Sahelian countries implies that learning the Qur’ān has legitimacy and is given priority by many parents. In fact, the Daara system is deeply embedded in how many people think about education.[5, 15, 16, 28, 44] Parents’ motivations for sending a child to distant Qur’ānic schools are linked with their own religious position vis-à-vis Allah. Through ensuring the reproduction of religious practices and sacrificing their emotional and material benefits of keeping children home, parents hope to be recompensed by Allah.[17, 34] Their religious position vis-à-vis their local community of Muslims may also inform educational choices, as the family’s social standing may increase if their children study the Qur’ān successfully or they have good relations with a powerful Marabout.[17, 34] Finally, parents are motivated by aspirations on behalf of their children, as they believe Talibé achieve life skills and come closer to Allah through studying the Qur’ān. If children advance in their studies, their knowledge will earn them respect and enable accumulation of symbolic and material wealth through leading prayers, writing charms and making protective amulets, and through being part of vibrant and influential networks of Islamic scholars.[34, 38] Parents thus sent away their children for educational purposes with the children’s best interests in mind.[17]

Despite religious and moral motives, parents rarely send all their children through Qur’ānic school education. In poor communities, it is common to diversify children’s educational paths by enrolling at least one child in formal education, sending one or more children to a Qur’ānic school, arrange apprenticeships, asking some to stay home to work on the farm while permitting others to migrate for work or to help out relatives.[26, 28, 31, 42] Many parents carefully consider whether a child can endure the hardship of living in a Daara and whether the chosen Marabout has a good reputation of providing his student with opportunities for a better future.[14, 17, 28] They also value other educational paths, especially vocational and technical training.[26]

Poverty plays a role at a more structural level. The generally poor socio-economic situation of most countries in the region, and in particular of rural regions, which means the rural population has access to few state services.[17] The choices surrounding relocation for educational purposes are not necessarily between enrolling a child in the local school and sending a child to a Daara elsewhere. It may be between sending a child to a relative to get access to formal schooling and sending a child...
to a Marabout, or sending a child away to pursue formal education instead of being in the local Qur’ānic school.[15, 17, 57] Decisions are rooted in the availability and quality of education.

The appeal of state schools may have decreased due to spending cuts, deregulation and privatisation following neo-liberal economic principles[30, 49] and to young people’s difficulties finding paid employment.[16] However, parents are sometimes critical of the local Qur’ānic schools too and use low quality in teaching to justify sending children to distant Daaras.[17] Generally parents would appreciate a broader education of their children, combining the study of the Qur’ān with literacy, numeracy and other skills that enhance the children’s job prospects.[3, 15, 17]

There are few indications in the reviewed literature of children’s own reasons for pursuing education within Islamic institutions. Some children do so at the wish of a parent despite having other preferences, others may be motivated by the prospect of future travels.[3, 17] Given the importance of migration for rural, and perhaps also urban, children[21] and the number of West African students enrolled in Islamic colleges and universities in Morocco,[10] programming needs to examine children’s motivations for doing Qur’ānic school even when they are sent by a parent.

Ways in Which Talibés Become Beggars

Many children are placed with a Marabout by their parents or, occasionally, by another relative who takes responsibility for their education outside the home.[3, 5, 15, 17, 26, 31, 34, 46] A small number of Talibés join a Marabout on their own account.[3] Although research focusing on Talibé beggars has examined parents’ motives for sending children to Qur’ānic schools and Marabouts’ teaching practices, little is known about how parents choose a Daara for their children or how Marabouts recruit students for their Daara.

Explanations of why Talibés beg range from accentuating the heavy burden placed on Marabouts’ shoulders by poor parents placing their children in a Daara without offering gifts or support to the Marabout[3, 17] to drawing attention to ‘false Marabouts’ who force children to beg by issuing harsh punishments if they do not bring back a fixed amount of money every day, and who do not teach the Qur’ān.[22, 44, p. 41]
At one end of this spectre, Marabouts are represented as having no other choice than sending Talibé out to beg. This is linked with deteriorating rural economies over the past forty years or more. In the past, many Qur’anic schools were farm schools, where students lived on the Marabout’s farm, took a place similar to that of an unmarried son in terms of productive activities and learned the Qur’ân at dawn and dusk. Generally, the local community supported Marabouts’ work, and some Daaras housed up to 100 Talibés. The severe droughts in the 1970s and 1980s, persistent economic crises and the effects of structural adjustment programmes have decreased people’s ability and willingness to support large Qur’anic schools, resulting in the size of schools shrinking and more expenses being shouldered by Marabouts. Alongside the migration of rural people to cities and rural towns, the adverse economic climate has also prompted transformations in the economic base of many Marabouts. Brotherhoods, like the Muridiyyah of Senegal which was founded on groundnut cultivation, have shifted their base from rural to urban economies, and in this process different forms of Qur’anic schools have been established. This transformation is often used to explain the increasing numbers of Talibés begging in the streets, however, as not all Qur’anic school students beg, it is important to examine whether Talibés are involved in other types of remunerative activities.

At the other end of the spectre, Marabouts are represented as exploitative and of recruiting Talibés with the purpose of increasing their revenues by forcing the children to beg. If Talibés are accepted, or actively recruited, by a Marabout for material gains, his behaviour may be driven by greed and his ability to continue attracting Talibé to his Daara by the deceit of parents and/or children. Evidence of Talibés spending time begging instead of receiving an education has been documented for more than a decade in Senegal and Nigeria. As such malpractice may be possible due to lack of state regulation, it is important to examine the political economy of education in each country to understand why the state has not issued, or does not enforce, legislation to regulate religious education.
At this end of the spectre, children’s relocation to urban Daaras is often analysed through the lens of trafficking. Contrary to migrant children working in cocoa who are described as having been bought, migrant Talibés are seen as victims of trafficking primarily due to the begging. Relocation to neighbouring countries or over long distances adds to the perception of these children being vulnerable. The prevalence of migrant Talibés differ tremendously from one country to another, but existing studies do not allow to say whether this is linked to general migration patterns or other dynamics.

The importance of social relations between the Marabout and his Talibés is rarely mentioned despite the fact that around half the children learn the Qur’ān under a Marabout with whom they are related, or with whom older siblings or children from the village have studied. Many of the children travelling from their home to the Daara with the Marabout are thus travelling with a close or distant relative in agreement with their parents or guardians.

To avoid blanket accusations of trafficking, parents’ response to situations in which children are exploited need to be examined, as do the ways in which this may transform educational strategies in the long run. Important questions to ask are whether parents send their children to other types of schools, to other Marabouts, travel to the urban Daaras to check on the conditions and, if their practices appear unchanged despite reports of maltreatment of children, why they do not believe such reports.

Terms of Learning and Living in Daaras

Traditionally, the education offered in Daaras is at the elementary and slightly advanced level. Students begin to learn the Qur’ān by rote and then gradually learn to read and write Arabic through writing verses on wooden slates. The most common pedagogical methods are one-to-one teaching or small-group teaching of students at the same level of learning but of different ages. This is a significant difference from state schools where the teacher-to-pupil ratio often is considerably higher. In Burkina Faso, for example, the average ratio was one teacher to 55.3 pupils in 2007/2008. Like in state schools, some Marabouts use corporal punishment to discipline their students when they recite verses from the Qur’ān incorrectly or misbehave. The length of elementary education varies between four and ten years, depending on the child’s aptness, the Marabout’s pedagogical skills and the time consecrated to studying. Only the youngest students (under 15 years of age) beg, older students are less numerous as they have proceeded
to more advanced studies or have left the Daara to work.\[^{5,15,34}\]

In the literature focusing on forced begging the time dedicated to studying is often used as an indicator of whether a Marabout has genuine educational motives or primarily is interested in the money Talibés can beg. Talibés who study the Qur’ān most of the day and only beg around meal times\[^{15}\] are usually seen as being in accordance with tradition and not as involved in forced begging.

The Talibés who study primarily at dawn and dusk or in the evening are more difficult to assess. First, Daaras do not offer full-time education only. In some places, traditional Qur’ānic schools have transformed to give children the possibility of studying the Qur’ān outside normal school or work hours, as is the case in Ghana\[^{13}\]. In Benin, Marabouts sometimes support Talibés’ formal education but it is also common that parents or other relatives pay for the expenses related to formal education,\[^{3}\] and in Côte d’Ivoire, migrant children sometimes combine work with religious education.\[^{57}\] Daaras organised around children’s work or begging for Marabout are in line with the way in which rural farm and itinerant Qur’ānic schools functioned in the past\[^{28,38}\] but Talibés may also spend so much time begging that it is at the expense of their achievements in school.\[^{16,22}\]

Second, a comparative analysis has not been undertaken of study hours in countries such as Senegal where Talibés often beg,\[^{17,22,47}\] Ghana where Daaras provide after-school religious education\[^{13}\] and the Gambia, where a ban on begging is enforced and Marabouts are interviewed by the police if any of their students are found begging.\[^{17,52}\] Study hours then are just one indicator among others, since diversity in educational practices makes it an inadequate indicator of exploitation in itself.

Talibés begging in the street walk long distances to stand at crossroads, mosques, pass restaurants, markets, banks and bus stations where people congregate and many eat a meal or a snack, of which they may give the leftovers to the boys in an act of charity.\[^{3,5,34,46}\] Talibés may also work in the urban informal economy or collect firewood to sell for the Marabout. Talibés interviewed by Human Rights Watch in 2010 revealed that while some Talibés only beg a couple of hours per day, others beg up to 10 hours most days.\[^{22}\]

Some Marabouts in Senegal set begging quotas which they expect their students to meet. Such quotas include rice, sugar and/or money.\[^{22}\] The sums Talibés earn through begging are relatively small and few marabouts make large

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**Senegal.** According to tradition, a Talibé spend one hour per day passing from house to house reciting verses from the Qur’ān to receive small gifts that contribute to the subsistence of the Daara. In this context, begging is a means to teach the child simplicity and humility. But the way that begging has become the primary activity of Talibés today cannot be understood as an element of religious education.\[^{44,p.24}\]

**Guinea Bissau.** According to a Marabout, begging does not belittle a child but makes him humble and resistant and therefore it cannot be considered exploitation or suffering.\[^{17,p.36}\]

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**Benin.** 46.2 per cent of the Talibés also pursued formal education and of these 68.5 per cent were supported by their Marabout while 24.3 per cent were supported by others, 2.8 per cent had their school fees paid by an NGO and 2.2 per cent paid their own school fees.\[^{5,p.16}\]
profits, though in some of the very large Daaras the sheer number of Talibés means that some Marabouts earn more than is needed to maintain the Daara.[15]

Certain Marabouts demand higher quotas on Thursdays and Fridays to benefit from the piety of people attending the mosques, which in turn required Talibés to beg up to 16 hours on those days.[22] This practice is most common in Dakar where the average begging quota is 40 per cent higher on Fridays, whereas in other large cities the quota is unchanged or only slightly higher. It is therefore important to examine local practices surrounding begging in each context.

Much focus has been on the time Talibés spend begging to meet their Marabout’s quota and to obtain sufficient food for themselves.[cf. 22, 46] This tends to overshadow information about Talibés’ other activities. In Burkina Faso, a study shows that 98 per cent of the Talibés do not work[40] but given the transformation of Daaras in other countries, it is important to examine the extent to which Talibés also work or attend other forms of education. Talibés interviewed in both Senegal and Burkina Faso revealed Talibés also spend time on leisure activities with or without their Marabout’s accept.[40].

**Risks, Abuse and Punishment**

Talibés can be subject to abuse at many levels. A number of studies suggest that sending children to Qur’anic schools amounts to child abuse because of the begging involved, the fact that many Talibés are dirty and wear rags when they are on the streets to beg, and Marabouts’ use of corporal punishment.[3, 15] Furthermore, it is suggested that many Talibés are trafficked[see 17]. Such broad generalisations are not useful because they ignore the diversity in children’s experiences. While some Talibés find the living conditions in the Daara so deplorable that they return home or choose to live in the streets, others find they are treated appropriately even if punished from time to time.[17, 22, 40]

Parent’s acceptance of different forms of suffering must be understood in its local context. First, parents who perceive begging as work, as is the case when comparing streets with fields and money with peanuts,[34] are not necessarily concerned about that their children spend more of the day working than studying, especially not if the children retain some of the money they get. As a contrast, parents who draw on cultural qualities to explain why their children do not beg[17] are unlikely to choose Daaras where begging is involved.
Second, the issue of appearance may result from poor living conditions and the Marabout’s negligence but it may also be the ‘dress code’ for beggars in general to increase their chances of receiving alms. Elsewhere it has been shown that the right demeanour is important and also that young children are successful in begging due to people feeling pity for them, whereas older children earn much less because people think they are lazy or delinquent (Ethiopia[2], Haiti[27] and Indonesia[9]) The differences between Daaras with regard to how Talibés are treated, the sufficiency of food and treatment in case of illness determines whether a child’s development is hampered or supported whether they beg or not. Research suggests that Talibés may be stunted in their growth due to malnutrition, endemic and untreated diseases. While such evidence should influence policy responses, it is also important to examine the impact on children’s physical development comparatively to ascertain whether siblings at home or living with other relatives are better off.

Third, the issue of corporal punishment needs to be analysed in comparison with the conditions in state school and with children’s socialisation in general. Adults generally find the sanctions they inflict on children as part of their socialisation have a positive effect on children’s behaviour. Disciplining may involve deprivations of various types – from withholding food to barring the child from watching TV – corporal punishment such as a slap or a beating and verbal abuse and, in its most severe form, curses.[18, 28] If the discipline exerted by the Marabout is mild, it may not be perceived as radically different from the way in which parents would try to instil in a child the importance of being humble and of working well. Just like the Talibés experiences are diverse, so are parents’ views on harsh disciplining. Some fathers have themselves been severely beaten in Qur’anic schools in the past but are not deterred from sending their sons to a Marabout, and yet not all approve of the harsh treatment of Talibés.[17, 28]

Some studies interpret the punishment of Talibés, who do not bring back the quota of alms in cash and kind as an outcome of the Marabout’s greed and malpractice.[8, 15, 22, 46, 51] This may be the case in some Daaras, but if begging is equated with work the quota and punishment set a standard for, and enforcement of, the amount of work Talibés are required to do despite not being supervised directly by the Marabout. Punishment thus has as its aim to discipline Talibés to become diligent workers and should be treated differently in programming than enrichment on the back of children.

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**Burkina Faso.** In the presence of the Marabout, 74 per cent of the Talibés said they were not mistreated. Corporal punishment seems to be inherent in studying the Qur’ân for the Marabouts’ declare that the knowledge of the Qur’ân is so precious that it cannot be learned with ease.[40]

**Mauretania.** Beatings are the most common type of punishment by far in Daaras. 213 of 300 Talibés had received a beating of some form, followed by 84 and 37 of 300 who had been intimidated or deprived of something respectively. The three most common reasons for such punishment were absence (288 of 300 Talibés), faulty recitation of the Hadiths (175 of 300) and lack of attention (68 of 300).[5, p. 18]

**Benin.** 98.3 of the Talibés have been told off during their studies; 94.5 per cent have received a slap; 48.6 per cent slaps on the head; 12.2 per cent have had to restudy a wrongly recited verse, while 3.9 per cent have been denied food.[3, p. 17]
Finally, apart from the risks, abuse and violence inflicted by a Marabout, children begging in the street are vulnerable to the same risks as others trying to make a living at traffic lights and other busy areas where they may be involved in accidents because they are overlooked or do not take enough care in the traffic. Additionally, Talibés may be abused verbally in the streets when begging. Despite being in education Talibés are subject to social risks through their exposure to children living on the streets. Some studies document that Talibés often become street children if they leave the Daara and do not feel they can return home. Given the high level of migration from rural to urban communities and across borders, a third option may be available for children. They may join kin or other social relations in the migrant community, as young Burkinabé migrants do in Abidjan and thereby turn adverse circumstances into a path towards being successful migrants. To find children integrating into the migrant community is much more difficult but would be of interest for programming.

Implications for Children of Begging as Part of their Qur'ānic Schooling

The mediatised images of skinny Talibés in rags begging in the street give a very strong impression of the suffering to which these children are subjected. However, the images are offered without contextualising the importance of mobility in the Sahelian countries, local practices of child rearing, and general educational constraints shaped by economic hardship and government policies among others. Knowledge is also lacking about local norms that may protect children from a variety of risks in places of education, play and residence. As a consequence, the images of begging talibés often give rise to a critique of Muslim parents and Marabouts, which does not take fully into account changes that are already happening, e.g. the development of Madāris for full-time education and Daaras that are suited for children who attend state schools or work. The hazards should not be ignored but the failure to see that so-called traditional practices are changing in diverse ways, hinders identifying how best to protect and support these children and their families.

Child Development, Education and Learning

It is important to look at local practices of child rearing to understand the underlying ideologies among adults for the expectations they have of boys and girls of different ages but also for understanding the expectations children and young people have of their parents. The relocation of children for educational purposes is rooted in the view that children do not belong to the birth parents only but to the extended kin group. Consequently, a child’s socialisation and learning of various skills is the responsibility of a large group of people. This is particularly important when the child is related to the Marabout through kinship, as were at least one-fifth of the Talibés interviewed in Benin in 2001.

Educational relocation is also rooted in the belief that distance helps children to adapt to all kinds of situations and stand on their own feet. However, in some studies sending children away to Qur’ānic schools is represented as parents not caring about their children. Talibés are reported to miss their parents and parents to be withholding contact to prevent Talibés from running away from
the *Daara*, though parents are also reported to express how they miss and worry about children who do not live with them.\[3, 15, 17\] From a perspective on childhood where a child’s proper place is at the bosom of their family\[21\] such sentiments become a marker of children who do not have a proper childhood. However, among parents these expressions of longing for a child may be a manner of remembering and including an absent person in the family. For children talking about their parents and expressing the wish to support them is a sign of both emotional attachment and complying with norms for what it means to be a good child.\[21\] Moreover, parents and children regularly contemplate that good education involves repressing emotions and being able to endure, hence suffering in different forms is accepted as an indispensable part of acquiring knowledge.\[12, 16, 17\] The notion of suffering in this context is very broad: it spans from contending with the weather at one end of the spectre to being punished corporally.\[17, 34\]

Parents’ views on the virtues of Qur’anic schools vary. Generally, they are viewed as important educational institutions, and some parents in Senegal argue that in addition to learning the Qur’ân, rural children learn about the urban economy, other languages and cultures when studying away from home.\[17, 34\] In their view, urban and rural *Daaras* are similar and the only difference is that urban *Talibés*’ ‘farm’ is the street and their ‘crop’ money instead of groundnuts.\[34, p. 63\] Underlying this perspective is a conceptualisation of begging as work and reluctance to criticise a religious authority such as the *Marabout*.

However, other parents, as well as child rights advocates, stress that *Talibés* spend excessive amounts of time begging for alms and note that the children may not attain the level of religious knowledge they and their parents had hoped for.\[17, 46\] As these *Talibés* are also likely to miss out on technical training and on gaining skills in farming, it is argued that their Qur’ân studies may end up undermining their future possibilities.\[17\] Underlying this perspective is a broad critique of *Daaras*. Yet, it is questionable whether *Talibés*’ job prospects are undermined in reality. Many *Talibés* leave their studies in their early teens when they join the pool of young people with little education who compete for jobs in the informal economy. They are neither better nor worse off than other children and youth of this age when it comes to finding employment. Although recommendations were made in 2001 by an assembly of authorities from the Muslim community, law enforcing institutions and child protection officers in Benin to incorporate practical skills training in Qur’anic schools,\[3\] the reviewed literature does not address this issue.

**Educational Trajectories and Upward Social Mobility**

The narrow focus on *Talibés* who beg provides an account of living and learning conditions in *Daaras* that does not distinguish between students of different ages. Consequently, the change from being a student at the most basic level to learning more specialised topics within Islam and possibly becoming assistant teachers is overlooked. Moreover, apart from situations where *Talibés* leave their *Daara* to live on the streets, little is known about *Talibés*’ activities and trajectories once they
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finish Qur’ānic school and make the transition to income-earning activities and/or food production. To enrich the understanding of parental choices regarding the type of education they send their children through, it is important to identify how studying in a *Daara* may impact positively or negatively on children's prospects for the future.

**Policy and Programme Initiatives**

This paper examines recent child protection work implemented to protect children who beg on the streets as part of their education in Qur’ānic boarding schools and assesses the effectiveness of programme initiatives. Given the paucity in statistical data on children's education in religious institutions and the focus on one of several forms of Islamic education, **effectiveness cannot be measured in numbers of students. Nor is the number of children begging in the streets an appropriate measure, as it does not indicate whether a child begs for meals only or spends a considerable amount of time begging.** Instead a more qualitative assessment is needed of whether policies and programmes are premised on a nuanced understanding of the circumstances in which children are sent to *Daaras*, of local notions of childhood and education and of alternatives to education in urban *Daaras*.

International policy is premised upon the idea that many *Talibés* have been trafficked and that children are forced out to beg at the expense of their education. Furthermore, the presence of children in the streets during school hours supports the perception of children not being protected. However, this perception is based on a globalised notion of childhood according to which children should have a care-free childhood and spend their time in the school environment and in leisure activities. Programmes funded by international donors mostly aim to rescue children from exploitation and lack of protection, but have given rise to opposing views among *Marabouts* and parents on the one side and child rights advocates, NGOs and civil servants on the other. While the former are concerned about the politico-religious motives behind attempts to curb children’s education in Qur’ānic schools and rarely see children’s mobility as trafficking, the latter are concerned about deep-rooted practices which they find are in breach with the Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC).[17, 30]

National policy environments are ambiguous. On the one hand, several countries have legislated to address the problem of *Talibés’* begging[15] and the trafficking of children linked with *Daaras*. However, it is important to bear in mind that religious education has changed over a long period of time and the proliferation of different forms of Qur’ānic schools is, indeed, a response to changing political economies, whether driven by Islamic clerics, the state or the international community.

**Preventing *Talibés* from Begging: prohibition, awareness raising and education**

Formal programmes to address *Talibés’* begging began several decades ago but the international push for child protection legislation increased after the ratification of the CRC in 1989.[47] **The only country in West Africa to implement an outright ban on begging is the Gambia** and security forces routinely interview the *Marabout* of *Talibés* found begging in the streets to enforce the law.[17, 52] International organisations advocate similar measures in other countries to meet the requirements of the CRC[15] but, although it seems an effective measure to prevent *Talibés* from begging, it might not be equally effective if the population did not see the policy as acceptable, or if Gambian...
Marabouts whose provision for their Talibés depends on begging were not able to migrate to Senegal. Thus, the efficiency of a ban is not guaranteed.

Most preventive measures stop short of a ban and instead target the issue of trafficking. In Senegal the 'Law to Combat Trafficking in Persons and Related Practices and to Protect Victims' of 2005 devotes a section to forced begging and the vulnerability of children. Accordingly anyone found guilty of organising or pressuring another person to beg can be fined or imprisoned. However, considering the scale of Daara education involving begging, few persons have been persecuted. This suggests that the government is taking some action but falls short of protecting Talibés because of lacking state resources and the political thorny issue of addressing problems in religious education.\[^{[15]}\]

Another set of interventions seek to prevent begging by subsidising Daaras through food aid, clothing or assistance to construct better sleeping facilities. Some Marabouts also have received assistance for their own maintenance. However, these interventions have given way to interventions that targeting the Talibés directly because of moral concerns that the assistance to Marabouts would result in more Marabouts relocating their Daara to urban areas.\[^{[34, 44]}\] Essentially, assistance to Marabouts can be seen on a par with Universal Primary Education policies that provide school lunches, school infrastructure in the form of school buildings and furniture and salaries for teachers. This is not only a thorny political issue globally but also nationally. Countries like Senegal, Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso and Chad have secular public education systems which their governments have protected despite the popularity of Islamic schools. This has hindered state-driven reforms of religious education\[^{[50]}\] and interventions driven by international organisations are likely to be seen as unwelcome interference with sovereign politics.\[^{[30]}\]

Anti-trafficking initiatives supported by IPECs LUTRENA programme have focused on capacity-building within the government and non-governmental agencies likely to address the trafficking of children. Current policy recommendations point to the need for further capacity-building in the services dealing with children who beg as part of their Qur’anic studies.\[^{[15, 45, 46, 47]}\] In Guinea Bissau, for example, some police officers only became aware of the issue of trafficking at a seminar in 2004 and have since been trained to be vigilant and intercept groups of children who are, or are perceived to be, trafficked within the country or between countries.\[^{[17, 47, 52]}\] These children are repatriated to their village after a short stay in a NGO-run transit centre while their parents are located.\[^{[17]}\]

Interventions also include awareness-raising campaigns targeting the 'supply-side', namely the parents/guardians who are assumed to be unaware of the extent to which their children beg, the level of corporal punishment and/or low attainment of religious knowledge among Talibés who

\[^{[8]}\] Please note that academic research is underway on the issue of parental preferences and religious education in Senegal, Mali and Niger. See http://www.institutions-africa.org/page/religious-education.
spend long hours begging. However, **this approach fails to take into account the diverse reasons underlying parents’ decisions to send a child to a Qur’anic school.** Therefore a hostile feeling may be created among parents towards civil servants and NGOs implementing anti-trafficking measures, not least if the parents feel that their children’s opportunities for receiving education are shrinking.\(^16, 17, 34\) Awareness-raising campaigns also target the ‘demand-side’\(^11\) to make the general public aware of exploitative practices and the fact that the alms they give may not benefit the *Talibé*.\(^{15, 16, 34}\)

Awareness-raising campaigns include press releases and public statements featured in national newspapers and on radio and TV programmes.\(^{34, 47}\) Child rights activists may frame awareness-raising in terms of children’s rights to education or to have a childhood. This framing is premised on a globalised notion of childhood according to which children lack protection and suffer when they are away from the bosom of their family. Local authorities, including some *Marabouts*, are more likely to stress institutional failures pertaining to the under-performance of some Qur’anic schools or the malpractice of *Marabouts* who are more interested in material gains than in teaching the Qur’ān to the students.\(^{17, p. 57}\)

Finally, anti-begging measures supported by international organisations have focused on education. **Recent interventions have been targeted directly at *Talibé*, supporting that they pursue schooling in secular schools alongside studying the Qur’ān,\(^{16, 17, 53}\)** as well as second chance education in the form of a condensed curriculum, a shorter alphabetisation programme or technical training.\(^{44, 45}\) Furthermore, interventions aim to enhance the access to education in rural areas. This is done by aiding parents economically through micro-finance to ensure they can afford to keep children in school\(^{47}\) and by assisting *Marabouts* to return to rural areas.

**Child Protection Services**

By the late 1990s child rights organisations and NGOs had taken over policy responses to *Talibé* begging and implemented programmes that put *Talibé* on a par with street children.\(^{34}\) NGO-driven response services to assist *Talibé* and other children begging on the streets have proliferated and a large number of NGOs are involved in the provision of such services under the aegis of child protection.\(^{17, 47}\)

The provision of drop-in centres, shelters and telephone hotlines is aimed at all children in emergency or vulnerable situations but the staff working in these centres may do out-reach work

\(^{11}\) ‘Demand-side’ should be understood very loosely. It is not a question of a real demand for recipients of alms but rather of a significant proportion of the population taking pity on *Talibé* and giving them food, money or clothes.
with Talibés and street children in general. The centres often provide material support in the form of food, clothing and soap, health care, psychological and legal advice.\cite{17,22,44,47}

Another initiative is to find 'foster mothers' for Talibés, i.e. to find a woman who is willing to take on the charitable responsibility of feeding one Talibé every day, provide him with some clothes occasionally and if means permit and support the child emotionally.\cite{47} By providing health and educational services to child beggars to improve their lives may also provide a means to pick up on children who are coerced to beg by violence violent means.\cite{15}

Finally and closely linked with anti-trafficking interventions, some NGOs work with the repatriation of Talibés found begging in the streets. Such programmes are often represented as rescue missions aiding children at risk who would like to be helped to return to their families, whereas others describe a process of deceiving and locking up children before obliging them to be repatriated. Sometimes children are repatriated without specialised health care and education for children who have been abused and assisting their reintegration in the family and the wider community.\cite{17} Programmes such as these are ineffective because they do not consider the educational aspirations behind parents' decision to send a child to a Daara. Moreover, when children are repatriated against their wish or when NGOs use a 'mobilisation of shame' strategy to broadcast the names of repatriated children, the sense of stigmatisation and shame adds to the disappointment of being denied the opportunity for a child to finish his studies and perform the ritual ceremony that confers respect and social status on him and the parents.\cite{16,17}

**Regularisation of Education in Daaras**

The reform of traditional Qur’anic schools has created a viable alternative to secular state schools in some countries.\cite{16,29} Yet, Marabouts are divided on the subject of regularising education in Daaras by integrating subjects form the public education system. Some see state schools as corrupting and uprooting children from their cultural values and Qur’anic schools as places that teach humanistic values, while others see the advantage in combining Qur’anic studies with a broader curriculum.\cite{1,5} However, in countries such as Benin and Guinea Bissau, the transformation of Qur’anic schools to regularise the curriculum, methods of teaching, etc. is broadly supported. Consultations with Marabouts reveal that they ask for assistance to provide the basic needs for children which normally are met by parents and guardians, or demand the same subsidies as government schools.\cite{cf.3,5,16,17} With regard to the curriculum, such schools resemble Madāris.\cite{16}

Reformed Qur’anic schools, such as the Arabic schools put emphasis on religious studies and some secular topics but use Arabic as the language of instruction, while modern schools, such the Arabic
English and the Franco-Arab schools, cover most or all of the government curriculum in addition to studying the Qur’ān.\cite{1, 13, 17, 19, 29, 34, 50} Some countries also have government schools offering a programme of religious and Arabic language studies, which is a trade-off between having teachers and textbooks paid by the government and a curriculum that curtails how many hours can be allocated to studying the Qur’ān; this is the case in Ghana.\cite{13} In Mali, Chad and Senegal students in Franco-Arab schools sit exams recognised by the state.\cite{16, 19, 50} As these are private schools, fees are paid; in Senegal, for example, fees of $5 to $15 were paid per seven-month school year.\cite{34} The teaching in these types of schools resembles the way in which children are taught in secular schools. As corporal punishment is used with varying degrees of frequency in state schools, an interesting question to explore is the extent to which physical punishment is used in reformed and modern schools.

Parents are generally positive about transformed or modern Qur’ānic schools because they see them as more efficient time-wise, as teaching children additional subjects to the Qur’ān and as inclusive because girls can also pursue Qur’ānic education.\cite{13, 34} What keeps some parents from sending their children to improved schools are the costs, but there is nevertheless scope for developing Islamic schools further to offer an alternative to state schools for Muslim children.\cite{13}

Questions that Need Further Investigation

- Why does uneven representation of ethnic groups occur in Daaras? How do gender (notions of masculinity), age, poverty and processes of marginalisation impact on uneven patterns?
- Examine the political economies of education to understand why the state has not issued – or does not enforce – legislation to regulate religious education?
- How do parents choose a Daara? How do Marabouts recruit students?
- How do parents respond to situations in which their children are exploited? How do such responses impact on common educational strategies?
- Is the physical development of a Talibé different from that of his siblings back home or living with other relatives?
- What are children’s motivations for studying in Qur’ānic schools?
- Does Talibés’ migration reflect general migration flows from their areas of origin?
- What do former Talibés do for a living?
- Do former Talibés integrate in the migrant community?
References


14. CRDH-Tostan (2010) La mendicité des "talibés" en milieu rural sénégalais: résultats d’une étude exploratoire (Régions de Tambacounda et de Kolda, 2010). Centre de Recherche pour le Développement Humain (CRDH) et Tostan, Dakar. [provided by UNICEF]


57. Author’s observations in Burkina Faso and/or Côte d’Ivoire.

February 2012
Dr. Dorte Thorsen,
Anthropology, University of Sussex
Terms of Reference

Five briefing papers covering

1. Children in artisanal quarries and mines (gold in Burkina Faso, Mali and Guinea, diamonds in Democratic Republic of Congo and Sierra Leone, etc.);
2. Talibé, al-majiri, almudos, etc. (Qur’ānic school pupils who are begging) in Sahelian countries;
3. Children in commercial agriculture: e.g. children working in cocoa farms (Ghana, Côte d’Ivoire, Cameroon), rice and cotton farms (Mali, Burkina Faso), including children who are forced to work on the agricultural fields of their teacher, and children herding animals;
4. Children in the informal urban sector, such as children in carpentry, building sites, mechanics, metal construction, “boy-chauffeur” children (Gabon, Cameroon, Congo), children “porters” also called “portefaix” (Togo), and children working in the market as small scale vendors (e.g. Benin);

Each briefing papers presents evidence on the following aspects:

- Description of the phenomenon, situation, trends, scale, impact on children, etc.;
- Effective approaches to preventing child labour and exploitation, such as education, social protection, communication and mobilisation (social norms), etc. The focus will be on approaches that can show evidence of demonstrated impact, that have been taken to scale and that are cost-effective. Criteria for accessing ‘effectiveness’ have to be clarified;
- Effective approaches to responding to child labour: “second chance schools” such as those developed in Senegal, aiming at bringing back children to school), “targeted action”, etc. The focus will be on approaches that can show evidence of demonstrated impact, that have been taken to scale and that are cost-effective;
- Comment on the effectiveness and scale of vocational training, income-generation, microfinance, micro enterprise support services, and law enforcement, etc. Comment on the types of investments and contextual factors that were needed to make economic interventions work;
- Identify approaches that have not been effective (in certain contexts) and explain why they have not had much impact or why it has not been possible to take them to scale.