On the Talibé Phenomenon: A Look into the Complex Nature of Forced Child Begging in Senegal

Article in The International Journal of Children's Rights · April 2016
DOI: 10.1163/15718182-02401009

0 CITATIONS
224 READS

1 author:

Antoinette Kona Zoumanigui
University of Pennsylvania
1 PUBLICATION 0 CITATIONS
SEE PROFILE

Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:

On the Talibé Phenomenon: A Look into the Complex Nature of Forced Child Begging in Senegal View project
On the *Talibé* Phenomenon: A Look into the Complex Nature of Forced Child Begging in Senegal

Antoinette K. Zoumanigui
The University of Pennsylvania Undergraduate College of Arts and Sciences, USA
azou@sas.upenn.edu

Abstract

This paper focuses on factors that have contributed to the persistence of forced child begging in Senegal. It interprets from a socio-cultural perspective the evolution and acceptance of an unremitting social phenomenon where *talibés* or Muslim child disciples beg on the streets of a now metropolitan Senegal. In seeking to highlight the fundamental causes of forced child begging, this paper draws on fieldwork and interviews with religious leaders, NGO representatives and Senegalese citizens. The paper then argues that there are four vital factors at the root of the perpetuation of the issue in question: parental motivation; the concept of alms giving; the lack of collaboration among various advocacy groups; and the lack of communication between government officials and religious leaders. These factors in their breadth allow for a macroscopic and exploratory analysis of the phenomenon of forced child begging and the implications of the problems it poses for the current state of Senegalese society. Finally, the paper aims to highlight how proposed solutions of engaging in forthright conversations about the controversial nature of the practice along with consolidating earnest efforts to put an end to it, can help lead to the termination of what has emerged as a modern human rights tragedy.

Keywords
1 Introduction: The Phenomenon and its Origins

The *talibé* phenomenon, grounded in religion, has been a socio-cultural factor of paramount importance throughout Senegal’s history. According to Cruise O’Brien (1969), this phenomenon originated from the Mouride brotherhood founded by Amadou Bamba which began in 1880 and proliferated across Western Africa, becoming widespread. The term *talibé* is a French word derived from the Arab word *talib* meaning a person seeking knowledge (SDGI, 2008). It is used to describe boys, often between the ages of 4 and 18, who live under the tutelage of *marabouts* or religious leaders who concurrently take on the role of Islamic instructors (Perry, 2004). In setting out the background to my assessment of the *talibé* issue, I engage with and build on the works of historians and anthropologists such as Donna Perry and Cruise O’Brien. Their research has been central to the body of literature concerning the state of the *talibé* children and their work has consequently garnered global attention for the children's cause. Engaging with prior perspectives allows for a more constructive and contextualised approach to my own explorations, leading to analyses that go beyond the conditions of the children to a more contributive assessment of why and how their plight should be addressed.

I began the process by engaging in fieldwork involving visits and inspections of four Qur’an schools, and five centres and temporary shelters run by local grassroots organisations. The visits were then supplemented with both formal and informal interviews with religious leaders, NGO representatives and Senegalese citizens as a means to gather and compare both ideas and facts about the various perceptions surrounding this phenomenon as a central practice of the majority of Muslim families throughout Senegal. Muslim parents attribute great importance to religious education, and therefore an important aspect of Islamic tradition is the establishment of Qur’anic schools called *daaras* where young children, usually boys, can advance in their religious and traditional education (Carr, 2012). These children are sent to *marabouts* who take informal custody of them for many years in order to provide religious schooling of the Qur’an.

While such practice was limited to rural areas in Senegal, the onset of urbanisation in the latter half of the 20th century led *marabouts* to relocate their *daaras* in the cities in search of economic opportunities. Prior to the arrival of French colonizers who began setting up secular schools, Qur’anic schools had been the only system of formal education in Senegal (André and Demonsant, 2009). As a symbolic representation central to a nation’s religious identity, they would prevail after the departure of the French. With a strict emphasis on work and study during their religious formation, *talibés* were expected to...
devote a significant amount of their time during harvest season to collecting food as a means to sustain their daaras. At a time of need, they were to go around collecting food donations from their local villages as the principle of alms giving was essential to the precepts of exercising one's role as a good Muslim. It is by this very principle that acceptance for the practice of begging came to be, and one of the reasons, as will be discussed in this paper, why forced child begging in its most exploitative form still takes place today in Senegal. The practice as a static tradition, sustained beyond being an entity from the past, is a result of a society's conviction of the need to retain aspects of its cultural traditions. Because of the static and long-standing nature of traditions such as the talibé phenomenon, it becomes hard to perceive the main ideas, doctrines and dogmas of that tradition as being controversial, which then explains why the practice persists to this day.

When traditional daaras relocated in the cities in the advent of industrialisation, the move resulted in the loss of support from the close-knit village communities they once relied heavily upon for sustenance. To make up for the shortfalls, children in daaras located in the city are obliged to go out begging most often for money. Whilst many remained uncorrupted by such transitions, some marabouts begin recognising the profitability of relocating into urban areas. This shift therefore gave way to an enterprise once derived from a system founded on religious and moral principles to one now characterised by exploitation and abuse, namely forced child begging (Carr, 2012). As a secular state with separation between religion and government by means of its constitution, Senegal does not formally include Qur'anic teaching in the national curriculum (SDGI, 2008). Because the national education system of the nation does not concern itself with religious education, there are currently no formal regulatory means for establishing daaras and Qur'anic educational facilities (SDGI, 2008). It is therefore the case that many children are sent to marabouts by their parents based on oral and informal arrangements made between both parties resulting in a rather arbitrary system of education. The lack of formality and regulation within this educational system has allowed some marabouts allegedly to open daaras as a source of income for themselves, further perpetuating the phenomenon of forced child begging. It is therefore not unusual to see children who, after spending several years in a daara, with the majority of the time spent roaming the streets, are not only lacking in a comprehensive religious education but are also inadequately prepared for a chance at a formal education (SDGI, 2008).

The practice of child fostering is common within West Africa and thus, given the informality with which Qur'anic schools are set up, it is difficult to obtain a precise estimate of the number of children fostered by Qur'anic
educators. UNICEF, whose 1992 estimations have been reiterated in a myriad of reports, states that there are close to 90,000 talibés in Dakar of whom 86 per cent are under the age of 15 (DAS-UNICEF, 1992). Many migrate from surrounding countries such as Gambia where the ban on the practice of begging is being strictly enforced. The daunting nature of such statistics has since garnered the attention of many local and international agencies whose efforts to mitigate the problem in Senegal has been all but fruitful. Whilst many marabouts justify the practice by citing a lack of both government involvement and of parental contribution to the upkeep of the children and their daaras, the problem as this paper will argue stems from a combination of four factors often overlooked by those who are attempting to propose solutions to a perpetual problem.

Religion as the first factor encompasses family values and the moral foundation under which the talibé system developed. The second factor stems from the religious concept of giving alms for repentance, a purpose that is possible to fulfill as long as talibés are on the receiving end of the charity. The third concept largely deals with transnational human rights organisations’ lack of sociocultural understanding of the phenomenon making it challenging for them to tackle the problem. Lastly, the fourth factor is the lack of communication between marabouts and government leaders, highlighting the struggles faced by a nation fighting to maintain its tradition in the face of modernity. Interviews and fieldwork with religious leaders, local citizens and international and grassroots organisations, reveal a rich and often conflicting set of claims about the meaning and morality of talibés which has led to a broader yet more meaningful understanding of the struggle to end the practice of forced begging. My objectives are then to draw from my analysis of these various groups and institutions in order to give an in-depth assessment of the ways in which the above factors hinder the progress toward the elimination of forced begging.

2 On Religious Family Values and Parental Motivation

To individuals or outsiders with little insight on the cultural significance of begging, parents who send their children to marabouts for a life wrought by harsh conditions are perceived as perpetuating abuse. To parents who grew up understanding the moral implications of such a decision for their families and communities, a child attending Qur'anic school and begging are perceived as being part of a socialisation process (Ballet et al., 2012). In interviews with
Qu’ranic instructors or marabouts, reasons ranging from socio-economic difficulties to a strict desire for religious and moral education were cited as to why parents choose to foster their children, though the latter seems to hold more significance as part of shaping a child’s identity. In expanding on this concept, it is important to note that the marabout–talibé relationship is a uniquely Senegalese tradition modeled after Muslim ideas of submission and servitude as presented in the Qur’an (Vidal-Crouset, 1981). So, it is important for a child to live with a marabout who will not only serve as his master but also as his spiritual guide due to the belief that if a talibé did not wholeheartedly submit himself to his teacher, neither he nor his family could hope to reach paradise (Ballet et al., 2012). Begging, which is often carried out as a repayment to the marabout for his fosterage, then also becomes an important aspect of the educational trajectory of the disciple, serving as a way of acquiring virtues of humility, of toughening up the child so that he becomes a responsible adult (SDGI, 2008). Children in this regard spend more years living with their marabout-master without significant contact with the parents, who believed that seeing their children would interfere with the marabout's strict discipline.

Thus the act of entrusting one's child becomes a public practice grounded in paternalistic rationale. The marabout in essence becomes a father and a figure of authority to the child, which in turn allows him to define the sorts of autonomy and personal liberties the child is allowed to exercise. One of the marabouts with whom I spoke claimed that he was only generous with children who were the most studious and so as a reward, he would let them go back to their villages to see their parents on a holiday. In such circumstances, a child would only be allowed to see his parents once a year. This sense of detachment was said to make the child much more resilient and independent. Perry (2004) further demonstrated through her interviews with Wolof farmers the spiritual motivation of parents fostering their children out to daaras through the sacrificing of the labour their sons could have provided them in the fields. These parents do so to ‘demonstrate their membership in an emerging Islam’ under expectations that the marabout's methods of discipline would mould their children's moral character, bringing them closer to God (Perry, 2004:59).

When children come out as survivors of circumstances they have endured during their time spent in fosterage, they are then perceived as being able to withstand and surpass any hardship that life will present them (Badjan, 2001, Diop, 1981). The concept of master and servant between marabouts and talibés, which essentially alludes to metaphors of slavery, is central to the Islamic concepts of the relationship between individuals and the god they serve (Perry, 2004). Therefore in this hierarchical system, it is no one’s place to tell a marabout how to treat his talibés. In its allusions to slavery, this very concept is also
believed to shape and justify the harsh discipline faced by these children in a culture where success is not perceived as a possibility without struggling in the literal sense. The acquisition of values of submission, tolerance, obedience and respect are perceived as an inherent part of what it takes to become a good Muslim. Studying the Qur’an in this manner ensures the perpetuation of a religion and stands as a symbol of a promising afterlife for both a child and his parents (Markovitz, 1970). Given that educating one’s child in the Qur’an is perceived as a moral obligation, many individuals then think they should have no jurisdiction over a marabout’s tutelage. Therefore, if the marabout sends a child out begging, the act is understood as contributing to the development of the child’s moral character.

Whilst tradition stands to explain and justify a tolerance for such acts, some marabouts looking to exploit that very tradition send children out for the majority of their waking hours begging for food and money. In many instances, the children live under punitive circumstances, deprived of water and food, and often left to fend for themselves. Given the conditions under which the talibés live, it comes as no surprise that many run away from their school masters but then do not have the courage to return home to their parents who are not expecting their arrival any time soon. To many parents, receiving a child home who has not completed his formative years as a talibé is considered shameful to the family’s reputation and honour. Steeped in a collective sense of identity, families take pride in the accomplishments of individual members and so feel shame if a member does or is subjected to something considered dishonorable. Having a child repatriated or banished from their Qur’anic school is in that regard considered shameful.

However, with organisations noticing the abuse unfold, many, especially repatriation agencies, take it upon themselves to return the children back to their homes (Einarsdottir et al., 2010). This is a task that proves more difficult given that many children are brought in from neighbouring countries without any identification which then leads to the emergence and strong prevalence of displaced children in Senegal (sdgi, 2008). Although finding the parents of these children who are brought from other countries in ways that should certainly be investigated proves to be daunting, it does not deter agencies or lawmakers from attempting to do so. Gambia, where the ban on begging is being enforced, has repatriated 48 children from the region of kaolack Senegal, of which only 34 were then reclaimed by their parents (Seneweb News, 2015). The Gambian government, in continuing its efforts to keep child exploitation in check, and in encouraging its neighbors to do so, signed a Memorandum of Understanding on trafficking in persons with the Government of Senegal in 2014. In addition, the Government increased funding for temporary shelters
that provide medical attention, food, and counselling to street children and continued to operate a conditional cash transfer programme that provides services to children rescued from forced begging (US Department of Labor).

Even with an imposed ban on begging in Gambia, parents still manage to send out their children which is revealing of the profound nature of a practice imbedded into the religious and social fabric of not only one nation but also of that of its surrounding regions. Scholars such as Cruise O’Brien (1971) further reveal some insight into the socio-political nature of the act of fostering through the belief that parents are seeking to establish a connection between the family and the powerful brotherhood to whom both they and the marabout belong. Mahir Saul (1984) further argues that some parents send their children to marabouts for training in a career in maraboutage as the prospects of teaching the Qur’an and earning respect as a community leader seem more attractive. Politics aside, the parents’ poverty was also mentioned as part of the socio-economic reason why children are fostered. In one interview, a marabout claimed that parents who could not afford to care for an additional child perceived fostering as a more appropriate child rearing practice.

Caroline Bledsoe (1990:72), for instance, explained, ‘parents living in a poor society with high rates of infant mortality wish to avoid developing a strong emotional bond with their children and therefore foster them out.’ Qur’anic schools, where begging is prone to serve as a source of income, are usually the ones that welcome children from rural villages whose parents cannot afford to contribute to their children’s education. With minimal income and often numerous children to care for, these parents send their children away for years and choose not to question the potential risks and conditions of urban daaras. Possible motivation to stick to the status quo comes not only from social and societal pressures to have a child educated in Islamic principles, but also from the belief that the system does indeed fulfill divine purposes. Since a marabout often cannot turn a child away, and since he runs an independent school, he is obligated to sustain the children out of his own pockets and sends them begging in order to make up for any shortfalls. Corrupt marabouts often take advantage of the distance between a child and his parents to then exploit the child. But because the practice of sending a child begging symbolises something much more significant for all the parties involved, abuse towards the child is then tolerated.

Although the talibé issue is a widespread inter-ethnic and inter-regional phenomenon, it is important to point out that is not practised by all Senegalese. In the advent of modernisation, fewer parents are choosing to send their children out to distant places for a Qur’anic education. Many in fact take it upon themselves to educate the child in this respect. Therefore, whilst reverence and
respect for the *talibé-marabout* institution may be a dominant force, it is not presently nor was it ever totalised and unchallenged. In this regard, my analysis of how religion, coupled with parental motivation, perpetuates the act of forced begging reveals the extent to which a tradition profoundly linked to religious belief can be hard to challenge. Next we look at the very concept of alms giving within contexts of a Muslim-Senegalese culture and how this factor plays part in the continuation of forced child begging.

3 On Alms Giving

Although almsgiving is a philanthropic activity with no particular religious affiliation, it is an obligation that constitutes one of the five pillars of Islam. In discussing the implications of the act of giving within the *talibé* phenomenon, it is important to consider the various motives of those who give alms and what the act symbolises for them. The two ways in which the concept of giving is interpreted in Islam are the *Zakat* (Arabic word for charity) and the *Sarax*. The two types of charity can be distinguished as follows: the *Sarax* is considered voluntary alms given to the poor on a daily basis while the *Zakat* is obligatory, given yearly by all Muslims and representing 2.5 per cent of the profit earned in the Muslim year (Weiss, 2007, and D’hondt and Vandewiele, 1984). Religion aside, charity is also given for moral and social reasons but in a highly Islamised society such as that of Senegal, religious and social motives are often intimately entwined. In interviews with local citizens, it became apparent that people often gave for not only traditional, but also personal reasons. The majority of interviewees qualified the act as a “tradition here” which enables believers not only to practise charity but to fulfill a religious duty as required by the Qur’an. While some lay stress on the need to be more compassionate towards those who are deprived, many others stated to have given as an act of repentance in the hope that Allah forgives their wrong-doings. An exploratory analysis of the various reasons involved was of interest to me for it gave insight into the self-centric aspect of the act itself.

For moral and religious reasons, many individuals state that giving ensures they will remain good Muslims. In being charitable, they are fulfilling duties and recommendations of the religion. Giving charity to the poor and less fortunate members of the Islamic community is deemed a token of solidarity, which can in return ensure God’s blessing. With strong conceptions and ideals of an afterlife, many believe in this sense that giving ensures access to eternal salvation. There also exist the notion that god did not create men equally and that beggars within the Islamic community fulfill their purpose by praying to god
on behalf of their benefactors who in turn will receive Allah’s blessing. Beggars in essence exist to fulfill that purpose. It goes to show that more that testifying to ones act of kindness, giving charity affirms one’s own sense of self-esteem. It further upholds ones’ sense of fairness towards the less fortunate and brings relief to the individual who does not desire to be perceived as a selfish and unconcerned human being. To many parents in privileged circumstances, teaching their children about concepts of charity acts as a means of socialisation and integration within Islamic society (D’hondt and Vandewiele, 1984). It ensures that their children learn to accept the values of not only compassion but also mutual responsibility toward fellow members of their community.

The sense of public esteem that being charitable supposedly gives an individual leads to the understanding that more than religion itself, giving is performed to fulfill intra-personal motives. For a wealthy individual, giving appeases one’s conscience and makes one feel at ease with occupying positions of power and status. In a society where individuals also give great importance to their dreams based on the significance they hold, giving alms becomes a way of reacting in accordance with the message of that dream. Alms then are also given with instructions inspired by dreams to fend off evil spirits and bad luck (D’hondt and Vandewiele, 1984). Furthermore, the characteristic of the alm itself is determinant of the goals or wishes the giver is looking to accomplish or realise. In figuring out the appropriate charity to give, a person often consults a marabout or individuals with religious authority. Wishes can vary from a desire to neutralise a perceived evil, to influencing future outcomes in one’s favour when it comes to circumstances where one is, for example, seeking employment. An analysis of motives proves that although religion is central to the decision to give alms, other, less perceived reasons play a critical role in that decision.

On religious grounds, forced begging in the case of the talibé is perpetuated by this very concept of fulfilling a moral obligation as a Muslim. While some of the individuals being interviewed were in favour of child begging and others were not, there seemed to be a general consensus that because of the constant need to fulfill a religious duty in giving, there consequently could be no end to this phenomenon of begging. It begs the question of how does one fulfill one’s duty of charity with the absence of beggars. It was evident that those who opposed the talibé system did not give alms. The reasons for that decision varied. For one, many of them seemed to be clearly aware of the corrupt nature of the situation some of these children are in. They cite the transition of a socio-religious tradition into an exploitative and economic one. Another situation at play was the fact that street children were now mimicking talibés, making it hard for an individual to distinguish one over the other. Furthermore, able-bodied adults who could work for a living are increasingly roaming the streets...
chanting religious verses and simulating poverty and infirmity whilst asking for money. The majority of those who refused to give alms cited the adults beggars as making no effort to get out of their current circumstances, highlighting the stigmatised relation between begging and idleness. Especially in the case of the talibé, giving alms reinforces the dependence of those soliciting on the benefactor, thus perpetuating a situation of continuous exploitation both of the children and the donors themselves and encouraging the rural exodus of daaras to the cities.

Many amongst those who refused to give expressed feeling an occasional sense of guilt when it came to talibés, given that the children arrive in towns where they compete with adults for donations. When asked about a potential solution, many were in favour of continuous refusal as a form of boycott yet had little hopes that it would actually bring an end to the problem given the religious nature of the society itself. Nevertheless, it was becoming evident to even those in favour of the talibé system that some marabouts were shamefully exploiting their talibés by not only sending these children begging for long periods of time, but also beating them if they failed to meet the daily quotas imposed on them. There was consensus that some marabouts were going beyond their role as religious instructors by becoming demanding in their material desires. Because the marabout is a powerful figure, it is often hard to question his motives, raising scepticism of whether there will ever be an end to such cycles of abuse. Nevertheless, there are clear signs of a growing dissatisfaction with the issue of alms-giving as the categories of beggars continue to rise and the religious principles of solidarity are being abused within society. Given that it is becoming socially shameful, particularly because of its negative impact on tourism, local grassroots organisations along with transnational advocacy groups have become involved in the quest for a practical solution to not only the talibé phenomenon, but to address the issue of begging as a whole. However, the progress made by these various organisations to address the issue have been slim for reasons that will be discussed as part of the third factor in the perpetuation of begging, namely the lack of cultural context and understanding these organisations, especially transnational ones, seem to have of the talibé phenomenon as a whole.

4 On the Lack of Social Context Displayed by Various Advocacy Groups

The complex and multi-dimensional nature of poverty in West Africa and other parts of the developing world has played a major role in the way local
and international aid systems have evolved over time. The fundamental desire that people have to live in a world free of poverty and distress is what I believe came to legitimise their existence. However, there is a danger in blaming such a large structural force for the exploitation and abuse of individuals or groups throughout the world. As the question of basic children’s rights became central to the talibé problem, numerous national and transnational advocacy organisations became involved with Senegal. Many came with good intentions but in the discussion of the perpetuation of forced begging, one cannot ignore the contribution of the problems posed by the way in which some have used the media to discuss controversial practices within non-Western cultures. In elaborating on how this is particularly problematic, I build on the works of Donna Perry in her development of the concept of strategic structuralism (Perry, 2004). This concept more effectively describes how some women and children’s rights movements often have a tendency in presenting dysfunctional and tainted views of non-Western cultures on the global stage through a willful ignorance of those cultures’ ideas, values and beliefs. Because of a lack in cultural context, these organisations, especially transnational ones, rely on more recognisable large-scale structural forces such as poverty and population growth to shape their narratives of controversial practices such as the talibé issue. What is then lost is a recognition and acknowledgement of the actual source of the talibé problem, that being the corrupt marabouts.

In interviewing grassroots talibé rights organisations, it was apparent that because they had a first-hand cultural and moral understanding of the issue, their approach to combatting forced begging was significantly different from that of international organisations working to address the same problem. Furthermore, I was able to confirm some of what was true and some of what was false of some transnational human rights advocates’ media and internet portrayal of the talibé problem. It quickly became clear that blaming a structural force like poverty as being the central reason for the abuse of these children was a means of many of these transnational advocacy programmes to circumvent opposition from Islamic community leaders, many of whom happen to be marabouts who strive to preserve an image of cultural integrity. These organisations’ attempt to remain culturally sensitive, however, fails because of their fear of stirring controversy whilst learning about the origins and cultural significance of the practice of begging. They are not able to or purposely avoid asking questions that would point to the marabout as the source of the problem, and so instead they carefully frame the issue in a more suitable way for public consumption. However, as Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink (1999:96) state in their analysis of large-scale advocacy groups, ‘an effective frame must show that a given state of affairs is neither natural nor
accidental, identify the responsible party or parties and propose credible solutions.’ It is easier to point to poverty as the reason these children go out begging than to blame the exploitative nature of local rights abusers who send them out for longer than is necessary. It is also easier to transform this children’s rights issue into a social health problem in order to depoliticise it. Furthermore, for advocacy groups who are bold enough to call out the real perpetrators, they often make the mistake of omitting the fact that forced begging is not practised by all marabouts. This lack of cultural context and understanding begs the question of how do these organisations expect to make real progress in combating forced begging without raising discussions around the involvement of marabouts. Neglecting this aspect of the situation has had many consequences for multinational organisations who have failed to grasp how difficult it is to tackle a problem ingrained in religion and the respect for religious leaders.

As a consequence of the lack of contextual understanding, many NGOs have put out onto the global stage tainted perceptions of non-western cultures. The talibé issue in this case has been illustrated through a kind of image strategy with close ups of seemingly unhappy children dresses in oversized, dirty rags holding giant red or yellow tomato cans. They put up these images with lurid descriptions of these children’s exhaustion and bodily suffering, all the while neglecting to mention that their circumstances are part of a bigger issue imbedded at the core of a perceived cultural and socio-religious norm. Furthermore, as opposed to directing their services immediately to the talibés, there have been reports of improperly regulated NGO programmes set up monetarily to assist daaras in the hopes of raising the quality of life of the talibés. What ends up happening is that these NGOs are essentially giving up autonomy and control over their resources to a marabout who may or may not honour their vision. In the same manner that giving out money does not help, donating provisions is also futile as there is no guarantee that the marabout will not sell them to increase his profit. Moreover, these organisations end up distorting economic incentives for migration by rural daaras with their tendencies to offer aid exclusively to those in the city. This further perpetuates the desire for migration into the city by scheming marabouts looking for a quick way to gain wealth.

Unlike many transnational advocacy groups, local grassroots organisations often headed up and organised by Senegalese citizens have proven to be more knowledgeable of the socio-cultural significance of the talibé issue and therefore much more successful in advocating for the children. Pour une Enfance, an organisation based in Mbour Senegal, holds monthly meetings with local marabouts at their centre in order to strengthen ties with them so that they
allow their children to visit the centre for food, medical treatment or simply for recreational reasons. In this way, they are able to build trust with the religious leaders whilst providing services directly to the children which cuts into their time spent on the streets begging. The way in which their centre is built also ties into notions of openness and trust building. The walls are low, and the gate to the centre is constantly open which allows anyone suspicious or curious about what is going on inside to come in and visit. As an incentive for the community to get involved, they have placed a well at the centre of their compound from which people can come and fetch free water. *Pour une Enfance* is essentially capitalising on the fact that any durable strategy on the issue of *talibé* children must include a viable plan for working with the surrounding communities, *marabouts* and their respective *daaras*. Whilst local organisations like *Pour une Enfance* strive to partner with other grassroots organisations to advocate for these children, it is the case that they have felt overwhelmed while trying to provide necessary services for the *talibés*.

This often happens because these local organisations’ efforts rarely resonate beyond the community level. They simply do not partner with large-scale organisations which essentially hinders progress. The main reason has to do with the differences in agendas, which could serve to create barriers between them. Smaller organisations tend to be detail-oriented in their approach to providing aid. Given that they operate on a reduced scale they focus more on immediate relief and target children who are within their reach. Larger organisations, which often are international, focus more on issues from a wider perspective. Whilst local organisations have an understanding of the socio-cultural nature of the *talibé* problem given the proximity with which they operate, transnational ones often possess the tools and resources to expose and advocate for the issue on an international scale. They each have qualities that could help them overcome their limitations. Yet, the lack of partnership and communication between these two institutions minimises the possibility of finding a viable and sustainable solution to the issue of begging despite the progress made this far.

It is the case that many of these organisations, although working towards a common goal, abide by individual rules and protocols that make cooperation impossible. Many have come to distinguish themselves on the basis of how specific their role is as X organization, focusing only on Y agenda, whilst forgetting that there is a greater chance of harboring change through more progressive means of collaborating. An example of such successful collaboration has been between a grassroots organization, *Maison de la Gare*, based in St. Louis, Senegal and its partnership with foreign aid programmes such as Global Giving UK and USAID. Global Giving puts effort into campaigning and raising ongoing
revenue to sustain the various parts of Maison de la Gare’s work. In turn, Maison de la Gare works to provide shelter, food, medical attention, and a proper education for those looking for a way out of the talibé system. This form of productive collaboration is what is needed to bring about change and optimism. Acting autonomously compromised the quality of the services provided in favor of the children for even with the amount of progress made thus far, the situation is still far from satisfactory. With the national government’s involvement being little to none, a reality that will be discussed as the fourth factors contributing to this perpetual cycle of forced begging, a national viable strategy is yet to be developed. But if NGOs both national and international continue to strengthen and combine efforts, ending this cycle of abuse in Senegal as it has been done in Gambia will surely remain a possibility.

5 On the Lack of Communication between Government Officials and Religious Leaders

In the fight to end forced begging, the Senegalese government has often been cited by advocacy agencies as being passive in their efforts. Many Senegalese citizens as well as members of the international community resort to blaming politicians for both being too corrupt and apathetic to push a reform agenda for the cause. But as will be discussed in this section, the problem runs deeper than just a mere disregard from the side of the government. Despite its principle of democracy and secularism, the behaviour of the country and its people is often determined by the interactions between political and religious factors. So then Marabouts, as Islamic leaders and intermediaries between faithful followers and Allah, also possess the capacity to influence political decisions. So much so that politicians who often covet their support, prefer not to tamper with the complex and socio-religious phenomenon that is the talibé issue. It can then be argued that it is rather fear than apathy that is driving the Senegalese government to be passive in their efforts to fight forced begging. That fear of a backlash ultimately characterises the lack of communication that exists and persists between the government and the marabout about a subject largely being swept under the rug because of its controversial nature. Given their ready welcome into high government circles, marabouts as religious leaders play an important part in present-day Senegalese politics. Whilst the marabouts themselves do not contribute to policy making, their support nevertheless is essential to both the stability and viability of a government (Lazuta, 2014). Whenever a crisis emerges they come into public view with announcements and demonstrations with the support of their followers. Many
have a large enough following that their support of a political candidate could affect the outcome of an election.

With that kind of influence, it is often difficult for lawmakers to pass laws and make decisions that are antagonistic to their interests. It is the case that government officials do not get elected into office if a marabout finds them unfavourable. The nature of the relationship between these two groups of national elites has characterised the danger faced by those who wish to initiate large-scale structural and institutional changes that would entail a disruption of the status quo. In maintaining their own interests, these national elites have sought out more acceptable and efficient ways to manage serious social troubles like the talibé issue rather than resolving situations in the totality all of their complexities. This is often the case when deep-rooted changes needing to come into effect are regarded as politically unacceptable or too costly to pursue. It makes sense for marabouts to be in favour of systems that are central to role preservation given that they have a vested interest in the status quo. Consequently, structures that support the norms and behaviours of dominant social groups will tend to be preserved. Changes that are regarded as a threat to the immediate interests of those who determine economic and social priorities are then unlikely to be enacted. In this regard, political, social and traditional structures become exceedingly difficult to alter.

While dealing with the fear they have of marabouts, the Senegalese government and lawmakers nevertheless had to find a way to satisfy international humanitarian groups who were beginning to magnify the problem on the world stage. According to Human Rights Watch, in 2005 the Senegalese government took what seemed like a crucial step towards addressing the problem of forced begging. The national assembly passed legislation that seemingly outlawed forced begging, threatening to jail or fine marabouts caught forcing their students to beg. As time passed, it became more evident that this move towards change was purely an act and was not going to be enforced, given that the premises under which the law came into being were as confusing and vague as the law itself (Ayers, 2008). Prior to this, in an attempt to fill in the gaps left by the government, UNICEF had implemented its own talibé programme where it pressured the state to modify its laws to state that ‘begging is forbidden’, that ‘anyone guilty of begging is liable to a prison sentence’ and that ‘a similar penalty shall be imposed upon those who allow minor under the age of 21 subject to their authority to beg’ (OMCT/SOS torture, 1995:17). Marabouts who were politically powerful and influential were in complete opposition and so the government moved to create loopholes that would allow marabouts to avoid legal culpability. In doing so, they adhered to UNICEF’s demand but amended the laws to state that giving or accepting alms to fulfill religious obligations is
not considered begging. In the advent of a 2013 fire incident that claimed the lives of eight talibés in the neighbourhood of Medina Dakar, local outrage and tension were beginning to build. A deadly fire broke out at a daara where a marabout had locked up 40 boys. This pressured the government to consider enforcing the 2005 legislation it had implemented and to even create an action plan to end child begging by 2015.

But as of 2014, despite evidence of continued exploitation, Human Rights Watch reported that the government had shut down only one Qur’anic school for safety reasons and has prosecuted only a handful of marabouts (HRW, 2014). In response, some institutions have argued for incentivising marabouts to move towards modernising their daaras whilst others have talked about how the government simply needs to muster the courage to confront marabouts. I argue that first and foremost, the situation need not be confrontational and that secondly, the government cannot solve this problem without the help of the marabouts they often solicit for political support. A confrontational approach to solving the talibé crisis will only serve to put a barrier between both institutions and if change were to take place it should and would have to be initiated by the marabouts themselves. The government’s role in this step toward change would involve having the courage not to confront but instead to initiate an honest and respectful conversation with marabouts about the criminal nature of the act of forcing a child to beg. Both parties need to engage in conversations where they discuss the changing attitudes towards alms and begging both locally and internationally. If the government is able to influence some of its more powerful marabouts so that they start to acknowledge the distressing side of this complex tradition, then these marabouts could engage their followers who tend to be small-scale marabouts to advocate for a reform within this talibé-marabout system.

6 Discussion

The all-encompassing explanation of the four factors in their contribution to forced begging may perhaps be that in Senegal, as is the case in many African societies, children are the most significant bearers of the society’s cultural identity. Society is significantly structured in many ways around their lives because they are viewed not only as crucial to a family’s survival in their contribution to the upkeep of the household economy, but also as the vehicle through which society’s cultural identity can live on (Ennew, 2003). But when the very nature of the cultural tradition they ought to preserve turns into something exploitative, then it is time to revive conversations about the
intended nature and significance of that cultural tradition in the hope of redefining the more appropriate ways of conserving it. This conversation has yet to take place regarding the talibé phenomenon. As bearers of a socio-religious and cultural tradition, the talibés have fulfilled their roles in many ways. For their parents, they represent a means through which they can ensure a connection to and salvation from Allah through their religious education. Through their cheap labour and panhandling, they are supposedly contributing to the upkeep of their Qur’anic school and their marabout. And for a society whose moral foundations are thoroughly grounded within religious principles, talibés have served as a means to fulfill religious obligations such as alms giving. But the circumstances under which these children have and continue to live begs the perplexing question of how can individuals, as bearers of a culture, protect and carry on that culture which compromises their own wellbeing.

As blatant as the abuse of the talibé continues to be, no significant efforts have been furnished to protect them for reasons previously discussed. But what is even more ominous is that whilst no one is oblivious of the abuse taking place and generally agrees that something needs to be done, there also seems to be a general consensus that this practice of forced begging may possibly never come to an end. The sobering nature of this conclusion perhaps stems from the fact that the very people who are supposed to protect these children, that is their parents, the marabout, and the state, have turned their backs on them by willfully ignoring their circumstances. However, this is a problem that ultimately can be solved given that there have been interventions in place to manage and cope with it over long periods of time. However, the process of putting a definitive end to the problem of forced child begging will have to be characterised by a constant and evolving evaluation of the impact and efficacy of previous intervention methods, the most important of which is communication.

Whilst political leaders like President Macky Sall have publicly made it part of their campaign platform to put an end to the practice, they have neglected to include marabouts as part of that conversation which then consequently has led to no progress. A solution to this problem cannot be attained without giving favour and recognition at institutional levels. The avoidance and perhaps fear of initiating a conversation with the marabouts who are central players in this issue denotes a lack of political commitment necessary to the integration of the talibé problem into national issues to be dealt with. Furthermore it is important to communicate and understand the beliefs and social expectations of both marabouts and the parents involved, especially given the societal pressures they sometimes face when sending their children to Qur’anic schools. A communication of expectations can serve in possibly
identifying core groups of religious leaders who oppose the practices and are ready to act as pioneers in both informing their counterparts about the negative aspects of the practice as well as redefining how the moral obligation of giving can be channelled in a positive manner. Furthermore, in addition to solidifying networks of inter-institutional cooperation, the state, along with local and international advocacy groups, should enter in conversation with one another about ways in which they can consolidate or complement their efforts towards this single objective as opposed to operating on an ad hoc basis. Whilst communication may seem a simple and obvious way to address the issue of forced begging, engaging in it in a truthful manner can be a confusing process demanding a considerable amount of time and effort. That is especially true when dealing with sensitive topics such as the one explored in this paper. Nevertheless, fully committing to the process of a conversation that needs to take place no matter the complexity of its nature is and will always remain as one of the most efficient ways to get to the root of a problem. For the talibé at the centre of this controversy, it will mean having their rights acknowledged and protected as children of this world and being offered once again a chance at a normal childhood.

References


