Space, Secularism, and the Expansion of Forced Child Begging in Senegal, 1850-2008

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Space, Secularism, and the Expansion of Forced Child Begging in Senegal, 1850-2008

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of Bachelors of Arts in History from
The College of William and Mary

by

Hannah Brown Ayers

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INTRODUCTION

On my first day in Dakar in May 2007, a young boy dressed in a ripped t-shirt and shorts walked up to me, extending a tomato paste can to ask for change. I was not shocked to encounter beggars in large city like Dakar, but at that point I could not comprehend the vast scale of this beggar population. Over the course of my seven-week stay, I saw hundreds of boys dressed in a similar fashion, following other potential donors with their cans. These were *talibés* I learned, and at least 100,000 of them roam the streets of the Dakar region. An unknown number of others work elsewhere in Senegal.

Over the past 40 years, Senegalese people have become accustomed to their presence and kept change in their pockets for them, especially on Friday, the holy day. While non-governmental organizations (NGOs) seek to raise awareness and motivate Senegalese people to take steps to end the begging, most locals continue to pay their alms without questioning the system behind it. Foreign journalists, humanitarian workers, and tourists also view the *talibés*’ situation with pity, but do not seek to understand the reasons behind
the begging. Meanwhile, the number of these beggar boys continues to grow. Their parents send them to the cities from rural areas of Senegal or neighboring countries and they spend between five to ten years of their adolescence begging every day.

“Talibé” means student, and these boys are forced to beg in exchange for their education. They live and learn under the supervision of a marabout, a spiritual guide and Quranic teacher who holds a prominent place in Senegalese society. Each marabout guides 10 to 80 talibés, sent to them by impoverished families who want their sons to receive an Islamic education but cannot pay for it themselves. Many parents never see the realities of their sons’ lives in the school, known as a daara.

A marabout whom I visited in 2007 had constructed his daara out of tin sheets. The structure had two rooms: one for the approximately 15 talibés who studied with him, and one room for the marabout himself. He described the everyday routine of the daara: the talibés wake up hours before dawn and recite the Quran past daybreak. They beg for four hours a day, broken up by time for studying the Quran, and go to bed at nine p.m. He did not want to force his students to beg, but his attempts at finding other sources of revenue had failed. “I want begging to end,” he said, but “I don’t have means to support the daara without asking the talibés to beg.”¹ He said that representatives from many NGOs had visited him and talked about ending forced begging. “But the problem,” he said, “is that the government and NGOs do not actually help the daaras. The NGOs pocket the money.” A Belgian woman had once visited and offered to fund the daara and give French lessons. She stayed for a month, but then disappeared and the marabout had to send his talibés into Dakar’s streets once again.

¹ Anonymous marabout, interview by author, Dakar, Senegal, 9 June 2007.
The press and NGO literature that describes the begging problem presents the worst aspects of Quranic education in Senegal. Some marabouts set a quota that talibès must bring back after each day of begging. If they do not meet the minimum, the marabout may use corporal punishment to instill in the talibès the importance of working hard. When they are desperate, some talibès run away. Others steal. Many develop health problems because of the poor living conditions in the daaras, and every year some talibès are killed by vehicles on the roadways. Most marabouts only have training in the Quran, and are unable to prepare their students for an adult life in the urban economy. Talibès leave the daara knowing how to recite the Quran and speak Wolof or another native language and some Arabic, but have no practical skills or knowledge of French.

In contrast to what most news articles would have readers believe, forced begging has not been an ever-present feature of Quranic schools, and most marabouts do not advocate for its use. Quranic education itself has its origins in the earliest days of Senegalese people’s adaptations of Islam. Forced begging is a human rights abuse, but its use derives from a complex context of socio-political, economic, and climatic conditions of the past fifty years, not from any marabout’s desire to exploit children. The
institution of begging was a means in which *marabouts* adapted their roles as spiritual, economic, and educational leaders to an urban context. Those who criticize the system must understand its origins, which extend into early West African history.

**Islam in Senegal**

Historians have described Senegalese people’s adoption of Islam elsewhere, but a few characteristics of its adaptation are important to highlight. The Muslim faith is known for its flexibility to many different contexts, and this feature is manifested in both the history of conversion as well as the movement of Senegalese Muslims from rural to urban areas. In the 11th century, Arabic traders first shared their faith with other traders and community members in what is today known as Senegal. Individuals were able to adapt aspects of the Muslim faith into their existing religious practices and lifestyle. Various inspired individuals developed their own brotherhoods, organizations of Muslims who follow the leadership of a *Khalife*. In the hierarchy of brotherhoods, *grands marabouts* are second in command to the *Khalife*, and form a select group of prominent leaders who have large networks of followers and may oversee several *daaras*. *Marabouts* have smaller numbers of followers based in the same geographic area, and are usually in charge of only one school. Although *marabouts* may look to *grands marabouts* and the *Khalife* as authorities on Muslim practices, there is rarely any personal

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interaction among members of the different groups. There are too many locally-based marabouts for the grands marabouts and Khalife to maintain ties with all of them.

Today, 94 percent of Senegal’s population is Muslim. Most belong to one of the three largest brotherhoods: the Muridiyya, Qadirriyya, or Tijaniyya. Senegalese Islam is heavily influenced by Sufism, which emphasizes the interior spiritual aspects of Muslim practice. Sufis generally seek to escape from the material world in order to seek spiritual closeness to God. Senegalese marabouts incorporated Sufi-inspired mystical practices into their work, including recitations of prayers and Quranic passages. Its interiority does not always translate into personal isolation. Indeed, Sufism also promotes ideas of social cohesion, which helped marabouts to form unified communities.

Marabouts as Teachers and Guides

Although the decisions of the Khalifes and their interactions with top government officials have certainly colored the nature of Islam and its connection to the Senegalese State, local marabouts have played a central role in Senegalese daily life for centuries.

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Marabouts are charged with showing their followers the “way.” They act as spiritual guides and mentors, advising their followers on how to incorporate their faith into their lives. Marabouts are trained in the daaras, and prove to have a certain power or closeness to God at an early age. Others follow their fathers’ footsteps as marabouts.

Talibés seek maraboutic support for a variety of issues and problems, not all of which are based solely on religion. The spiritual guides play a role in both special ceremonies and in everyday life. As scholar Leonardo Villalon describes: “The Senegalese maraboutic model is characterized by its extraordinary presence in public life; in businesses, public transport, private homes, government offices, schools, and industry the icons of affiliation with a Sufi order, and more specifically with a maraboutic guide, are omnipresent. For the vast majority of the Senegalese population, relations with a marabout are an integral component of an individual’s life.”

The marabout-talibé relationship is important for both parties. Talibés value the advice and spiritual prowess of the marabouts, and marabouts need the financial support of talibés to make their livelihood. Followers typically donate money to their marabouts, and the guides earn prestige as they gain more disciples. This connection has developed over centuries of Islamization of Senegalese communities, in which marabouts emerged as prominent

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8 The word talibé comes from tâlib, which literally means “an asker” or “a seeker” (Cyril Glassé, The New Encyclopedia of Islam (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2001), 446). “Talibé” is used both in this general sense of a follower, as well as in describing the young boys who beg in the streets of Dakar today.

leaders. Generally scholars characterize the marabout-talibé relationship as one of patron-client, reflecting its basis on exchange and interiority.10

Marabouts first gained influence in the early centuries of Senegalese conversion to Islam. In the 11th-13th centuries, the first converts had an important resource that attracted others: knowledge of the Prophet Muhammad, the Quran, and the Sharia, or Islamic law. These teachers did not instantly receive respect from the wider community, as they worked within societies with long-established religious beliefs, traditions, and organization. Gradually, individuals and families were attracted to the Muslim faith and its adaptability, and converts organized around the knowledgeable teachers. These religious guides earned the name of mur_bit_ in Arabic; French colonial officials transliterated the Arabic word, forming marabout.11 Besides their knowledge, marabouts also had other skills to offer the community, serving as healers and intermediaries with exterior authority figures.12 The marabouts focused on instruction in the Quran, and they began to establish schools for that purpose as early as the 12th and 13th centuries.13 Because the faith was still relatively unfamiliar to most of the population, and thus suspicious, most marabouts chose to locate their schools in rural, isolated areas. This

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11 Scholars debate the exact meaning and etymology of the word mur_bit_. The word rib_t has several meanings, including ‘frontier post.’ It is also sometimes considered synonymous with z_wiya, or a “small Sufi.” The word also has the “military connotation of ‘soldier’ or ‘frontier-soldier’” (Ian Richard Netton, *A Popular Dictionary of Islam* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International Inc., 1992), 162, 214). Marabout may also be derived from marb_t, or “‘attached,’ in the sense of being bound to God” (Glassé, 293).


13 Ibid., 42.
relative isolation also helped the marabout to keep his followers focused on their most important pursuit: spiritual education and training.\textsuperscript{14}

Within these communities, Senegalese people constructed their homes around the daara, and centered their spiritual pursuits around the marabout. The community sustained itself through the very organization of the school. In this daara system, students learned the Quran in addition to cultivating the fields surrounding the community. This agricultural productivity fed the marabout and the students, and communities traded their crops for other goods. As a contemporary marabout described: “At the beginning there was abundant rain, the sun was fertile therefore the harvest was good. The talibé cultivated for the marabout. This was divided in two parts: The first was food to eat. The second part was used to sell for things that were needed, to pay bills…”\textsuperscript{15} In the Mouride communities in particular, the labor feature of the system also had a pedagogical value. Founded by Cheikh Amadu Bamba in 1883, marabouts in this

\textsuperscript{14} Babou, “Amadu Bamba,” 257.

\textsuperscript{15} Anonymous marabout, interview by Amy Farris, Thiès, Senegal, 28 February 2007.
brotherhood emphasized the importance of work in gaining spiritual understanding.\textsuperscript{16} 

*Maraabouts* set a precedent of a “working daara” system that manifests itself in Quranic education today.\textsuperscript{17}

While this system was effective, it should not be depicted as utopia. Life in the daara has been characterized as “austere and Spartan.”\textsuperscript{18} Some families sent their children to daaras in another village far away from home. Cheikh Hamidou Kane recounted one talibé’s scarring experiences in a daara in the oft-cited novel *Ambiguous Adventure*. Kane describes a marabout who required his talibés to work long hours in the fields and who was prone to “outrageously brutal outbreaks of violence.”\textsuperscript{19}

Begging was not unheard of in the early daara, though it differed markedly from begging today. Both marabouts and talibés begged, but only when the marabout saw it as necessary. They traveled into the villages to beg, where Muslims understood the practice as following the Sunni traditions of “ascetism, piety and poverty.”\textsuperscript{20} They retreated back to their daaras in the evening, and only returned to the village when they could not sustain themselves. Although contemporary marabouts explain the use of begging in part because of Quranic references to the practice, they recognize that other factors led to its adoption and expansion.

\textsuperscript{16} Babou, “Amadu Bamba,” 232.

\textsuperscript{17} Ware, 49.


\textsuperscript{20} Ware, 50.
Maraboutic communities gained followers as talibés finished their studies and chose to remain in the village, receiving their own plot of land from the marabout. The spiritual guides thus gained other roles in addition to teaching. They controlled the use of the land and developed agricultural cooperatives. Community members sought their advice when conflicts arose or decisions needed to be made. In these largely autonomous communities, marabouts acted as central leaders. For poorer individuals living in a hierarchical society, these communities were welcome places of refuge. Islamic teachings preach equality among men of faith and thus previously marginalized groups gained knowledge and standing from their access to Quranic education.

Marabouts also served as important figures for the elite. Leaders of various empires in the region sought advice and education from religious teachers and offered gifts in exchange. Some marabouts served as advisors to these political authorities, while others led jihads and other forms of resistance against them. Most marabouts did neither, and instead embraced the Sufi ideals of interiorization and sought autonomy from the larger political sphere. Some scholars characterize this dissociated community as a “contre société.”

Marabouts claimed rural areas as their domain and confirmed the unity of their communities there. The political officials allowed them to do so, as they centralized their

21 Coulon, Le Marabout et le prince, 123.


23 Ware, 48.


25 Coulon, Le Marabout et le prince, 15.
own power in larger communities. Marabouts found a balance between constructing autonomy and remaining engaged in political and economic issues. Teaching Islam to others and finding one’s spiritual connections were the most important pursuits to marabouts. Thus throughout the 16th-19th centuries, the basic “working daara” system continued to flourish and evolve. It became the parents’ duty to send their children to the daara, as educating children in the Quran was a service to the community as a whole.

Senegalese Islam and Politics

Marabouts teach their followers to be first and foremost devoted to Allah and the grand Cheikh who founded their brotherhood. This supersedes devotion to the government and its laws. Scholar Christian Coulon writes that in Senegal, one is often a spiritual follower ahead of being a citizen. Members of early Muslim communities did not need assistance from the State because the marabouts addressed material problems. The elites’ role at the time was limited to providing security in exchange for taxes. Later, marabouts ensured that their followers had access to water, electricity, health care, and job opportunities— typical duties of political and civil officials.

26 Baxter, 29.
27 Ware, 105.
28 Baxter, 87.
30 Robinson, Paths of Accommodation, 14.
For the Mouride brotherhood, the lesson of how to approach the separation between powers was revealed through the life of their founder, Cheikh Amadu Bamba. The son of a marabout who served as an advisor to the king, Bamba concluded that “it was impossible to combine the pursuit of power and the pursuit of piety and opted for the latter.” Thereafter he promoted the separation of pursuit of Muslim faith from the government. According to stories and Bamba’s own writings, his father told him to “flee from the things of this world” in order to help himself and others. Bamba went on to found Touba, a semi-autonomous religious city, and fled from the world by promoting Sufi ideals of “interior Islam” throughout Senegal. When he traveled to cities, he reportedly separated himself from the city center when he studied or prayed, bringing attention to space and autonomy for the religious community.

Figure 4: The mosque in Touba (Photo by Hannah Perry)

Separation of religion from political life is often translated as “secularism” in Western-oriented literature. Secularism is defined as separation between church and

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state, and derives from the European historical context. Muslims refer to separation between politics and religion through the terms *din* (religion) and *dawlah* (state), but view the ties between the two differently.\(^3\) There are distinctions, they believe, but the guiding values within both spheres should be the same.\(^4\) Therefore political officials should still use Muslim values in governing the State. Differing perspectives on the religious-secular relationship led *marabouts* to search for autonomy, as the State failed to embody Muslim values or assist the central figures of the religious communities.

### Islam and Space

In Islamic belief, Muslim space is known as *Dar al-Islam*, or “abode of Islam.” Bad or exterior space is known as *Dar al-Kufr*, which means “abode of unbelief.” Bad space is also sometimes referred to as *Dar al-Harb*, which translates as “abode of war.” A general goal of the Muslim faith is to extend the abode of Islam using a variety of tactics, including “preaching, persuading, example, and ultimately force.”\(^5\)

Senegal’s case is unique because of the emphasis that Sufi-influenced Muslims place on internal spiritual elements. Thus *marabouts* have traditionally sought to share their knowledge of Islam with members of their villages; their goal was not to spread their beliefs outside of these immediate communities. The search for autonomy was first and foremost designed to allow *marabouts* and *talibés* to focus on their spiritual

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development, rather than serving as an attempt to designate a space of unbelief. When 
marabouts chose to stay primarily in the rural areas, this search for autonomy met few 
problems. It was when several factors forced the marabouts to relocate to the cities that 
they had to adapt their practices to a new organization of space. While they retained a 
certain level of autonomy, they also renegotiated their use of space. It is out of these 
changes and adaptations that forced begging became an institution, and the beggar boys 
of Senegal infiltrated the urban sphere.
CHAPTER ONE

DEGREES OF SEPARATION, 1850-1960

The Colonial Era

French authorities took steps to delineate space and power in Senegal during their approximately century-long rule between 1850 and 1960. Colonial authorities established the cities of St. Louis and Dakar as important ports and the centers of secular rule. Colonial authorities paid French urban planners to visit Dakar and draw up plans. The architects had little prior knowledge of Senegal, and stayed for only a short amount of time. Instead of adapting the architecture to the country, they imported ideas from France and simply overlaid a colonial map on the unique landscape of Senegalese cities.

Figure 5 (left): The Governor General’s Palace (Archives Nationales)
Figure 6: The Chamber of Commerce (Archives Nationales)

During colonial occupation, French architects built several monumental buildings, including the Chamber of Commerce and the Governor-General’s Palace, nearly all of
which were designed in a “colonial” style. Their focus was on creating a hygienic, spacious neighborhood distinct from the rest of Dakar and its African population.\textsuperscript{36}

In order to exercise influence in the interior, colonial officials turned towards the people that had the most power: marabouts. Similar to their other experiences with colonization, French officials did not have enough people or resources to exercise direct rule. Although documents from the colonial era reveal that French authorities misunderstood many aspects of Senegalese Islam and society, they did accurately appraise the important role that marabouts played in the rural areas.\textsuperscript{37} In this way, the French revealed their ideal demarcation of space: they would rule in the cities, where they had the resources to do so, while marabouts would serve as their connections to the rest of their land holdings.

Members of the Mouride brotherhood in particular had control over an important physical and intellectual space: the peanut basin. Many Mouride marabouts established their working daaras in the peanut-growing zone, where their work ethic and then-favorable environmental conditions allowed them to prosper. As the brotherhood grew in size and wealth during the colonial era, its members formed self-sufficient communities in order to retain that money, space, and power for themselves.\textsuperscript{38} Because French authorities were interested in economic development, they took a particular interest in

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\textsuperscript{38} Babou, “Amadu Bamba,” 234.
working with the Mouride marabouts. As the intermediaries, these marabouts strategized to gain benefits and autonomy from the colonial authorities.

Threatened by the marabouts’ many roles in Senegalese society, colonial officials attempted to constrain their educational and sociopolitical influence. The French authorities targeted the very institution that had allowed the spiritual leaders to gain power in the first place: the school. In their official documents, they misconstrued the nature of Islam in Senegal, writing about “the fanaticism of marabouts, their poor level of scholarship, the simplicity of their pedagogy, the ritual alms-seeking of their students, the prevalence of corporal punishment, the use of child labor, and poor hygienic conditions.”

French officials misunderstood the pedagogical goals of Quranic schools, believing that marabouts taught children to view the French as the enemy. Colonial authorities also questioned the marabouts’ motivations and worried that they trained children in violent tactics in preparation for a jihad.

Because Quranic schools did not correspond with French ideals of education, colonial authorities attempted to make French schools the dominant form of education. Although colonial administrators issued several decrees calling for changes, little action resulted. Marabouts and their followers were dedicated to protecting the Quranic schools, and helped to ensure that the decrees were not implemented. When French authorities did establish schools, they built them in their urban domain first. Most

39 Ware, 14.


Muslims were uninterested in sending their children to these French schools and likely saw their establishment as another reason that cities were colonial officials’ domain. Colonial attempts to make marabouts their intermediaries and to establish French schools largely failed. As a reflection of the strength of the Muslim community by this point, maraboutic communities stayed intact and even grew in influence. Marabouts themselves continued to serve as sources of trust and leadership within the larger society and contributed to the adaptation of Islam within the colonial occupation. Marabouts established the rural areas as their physical and intellectual domain, and served as guides and protectors for members of their communities. As colonial authorities used policies and physical constructions in an attempt to install themselves in colonial cities, marabouts symbolized a force working against this sphere of hegemonic power.\(^4^2\)

Independence and the Adoption of “Secularism”

Like administrators in many former colonies, emerging Senegalese politicians used policies, institutions, and physical infrastructure that the French authorities established—in part because the French left them with nothing else. First, they made Dakar their center of influence, taking over the same neighborhood that colonial officials used to construct their civic sector. Second, they accepted the French value of “laïcité,” or secularism, that French authorities had attempted to apply in Senegal. Early presidents and ministers maintained this concept as well as the French perspective of marabouts as

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\(^4^2\) Ware, 54.
intermediaries. Because *marabouts* could serve as connections to the rural domain, politicians began courting them in the 1940s.

Some early political figures, such as Lamine Guèye and Mamadou Dia, alienated the *marabouts* by attempting to interfere in their space. Guèye intervened in peanut production, while Dia wanted to align with a reformist group in order to establish a Supreme Islamic Council. *Marabouts* refused to be grouped together in such a council, as they differed in their teachings, their brotherhood loyalties, and their views on the political-spiritual relationship. Dia also supported the implementation of modern Islamic education, which threatened the very basis of *marabouts*’ influence.

Islamic reformists who called the coastal cities home in the 1940s and ‘50s also criticized the *marabouts* and the educational system they helped build. Members of these reformist groups, also known as political Islamist groups, promoted changes in the overall organization of the State and how it related to the Muslim faith. One of their primary critiques was the *daara* system. Because many of the Islamists had received education in cities abroad, they were often influenced by anti-Sufi thought, as well as reformist beliefs from the Wahhabi movement. They believed that the “traditional,” Sufi-influenced Quranic education needed to be reformed and even replaced by “modern” Islamic schools. They generally viewed *marabouts* with contempt and predicted that they would soon lose their influence. Quranic schools did not properly teach Islamic

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43 Loimeier, “*Je veux étudier sans mendier,*” 183.

beliefs to children, in their view, and even taught them concepts that were outright wrong.\textsuperscript{45}

All criticism of \textit{marabouts} as being archaic teachers or colonial minions during the 1950s came from urban-based organizations.\textsuperscript{46} Urban residents could issue their criticisms from afar, as the spiritual leaders disassociated themselves in the physical space. Politicians encouraged this separation from their own secular sphere.

\section*{Senghor’s Diplomatic Rapport with the \textit{Marabouts}}

In the 1940s and ‘50s, future president Leopold Sédar Senghor, then one of many organizers fighting for independence, took careful steps to foster connections with rural-based Muslim leaders. Before independence, he helped to publish a pamphlet titled \textit{La Condition Humaine}, which voiced dissent with the colonial government and demonstrated his party’s understanding and support of issues affecting rural communities. Under Senghor’s leadership, the Bloc Démocratique Sénégalais (BDS) party also granted land to \textit{marabouts}, ensuring that as Mouridism grew, political support of the BDS grew with it.\textsuperscript{47}

Senghor became president when Senegal gained its independence in 1960. As a Roman Catholic reigning in a predominantly Muslim country, he still managed to strategically gain support from the \textit{marabouts}. Unlike Dia, who made the unification and modernization of Islam one of his priorities as Prime Minister, Senghor emphasized the

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 184.
\textsuperscript{46} Coulon, \textit{Le Marabout et le prince}, 125.
\textsuperscript{47} Ware, 49-52.
\end{flushright}
French-influenced secular character of the state. Religious discourse was not entirely absent from his speeches and writings, but he used it to highlight the importance of religious freedom and the secular nature of the State. In his message to the Senegalese people in December 1966, he celebrated Senegal’s people “of faith” and thanked God for allowing the Senegalese people to traverse differences in race, social class, and religion.  

Under Senghor, secularism translated into noninterference with marabouts outside of polite diplomatic relations. Although marabouts’ ideal State would have been Islamic rather than secular, the practical consequence of Senghor’s approach aided marabouts because they still served as semi-autonomous leaders. Senghor did not implement proposals for organizing their diverse voices into a unified association. Marabouts did not want interference, although they did seek certain benefits for their communities and protection of rural interests. They understood Senghor to be a neutral outsider who knew how to appeal to these complex needs. His party dispensed land to marabouts, thereby encouraging their influence over rural zones and crop cultivation. As they did under the colonial government, marabouts served an important role as intermediaries for the government, creating connections to what Senghor called the “le pays réel” (the “real country”).

Although Senghor viewed education in general as a priority, he did not break his noninterference approach to maraboutic communities by addressing Quranic schools.

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His government spent almost a third of the national budget on education, but this money was primarily designated for higher education and the establishment of new public schools, most of which were located in the cities. Government officials were concerned with education as a means of buttressing the nation’s economic growth and development. Besides wanting to avoid interference, Senghor and his supporters also did not see a place for Quranic schools in this schema of urban growth and industry. Although most Senegalese Muslims viewed daaras as important in developing young people’s knowledge and their ability to become responsible Muslims, the talibés did not typically learn practical skills. Secondly, political officials were primarily concerned with developing cities, another continuation of a Eurocentric model. Rural daaras had little to offer in this vein.

When government officials did recognize Quranic education, they presented it as an ancient, bygone system. In 1971, the Ministry of Information issued a special edition of the Sénégal d’aujourd’hui publication. In the chapter on primary education, the authors presented Quranic education as an important system—but one that lay firmly in the past. The writers cited the daara system as proof that Senegalese people developed their own form of education before French colonists arrived. In describing the post-independence era, however, the authors of the pamphlet applauded the trends in public education only, and made no mention of the daara educational system. While the number of children who attended public schools grew during this period, the authors


failed to recognize that the number enrolled in daaras continued to mount as well. This omission was consistent in government documents, speeches, and actions in the 1960s and ‘70s.

Marabouts generally appreciated this lack of interference in the institution that represented the origin of their influence. In exchange, they encouraged their talibés to vote for Senghor and his party.\(^5\) When manifestations of urban discontent plagued Senghor’s later presidency, rural-based marabouts continued to exhibit their support. Although university students and urban workers sometimes protested Senghor’s politics in the mid- and late-1960s, marabouts and rural citizens expressed their support for his agricultural policies. They made this backing publicly known through declarations from their rural communities.\(^4\)

Relations between marabouts and Senegalese political officials mirrored those with French colonial authorities, especially with regard to the Quranic education system. This was a result of Senegalese politicians’ adoption of French policies and institutions, as well as colonial officials’ failures in assisting Senegalese people with the government transition. Maraboutic communities functioned as largely autonomous villages that sustained themselves through agriculture and trade. When droughts and poor economic conditions forced the marabouts and their followers out of these communities, spiritual and political figures had to renegotiate their notions of space and secularism. Rural-urban physical separation had allowed both spheres of power to influence their own


constituencies until the mid-1960s. At this point, both parties had to adapt to a new rapport as *marabouts*’ and *talibés*’ migrations blurred spatial lines.
Migration Trends

Senegalese people have been mobile for centuries, especially rural dwellers who based their migrations on the onset of the dry season (December-April) and the wet season (May-November). These seasonal migrants, known as navétanes, were young to middle-aged men who moved to find temporary work.\textsuperscript{55} Prior to the mid-1960s, the navétanes moved primarily towards the Sine-Saloum peanut zone, the domain of the Mouride marabouts and at that point a major source of Senegal’s revenue. Marabouts continued to claim more and more land for their communities, expanding into the interior

regions. When climatic conditions changed, they turned their attention to coastal cities, the colonial and neo-colonial domain.

Rural Senegalese people had always been attracted to the cities of Dakar, St. Louis, Thiès, and others, but until the late 1960s, they usually chose to enter the urban sphere only temporarily. Geographer Jacques Lombard wrote in 1963 that “definitive migrations are fairly rare” in the country.56 According to his survey of cities, 47 percent of migrants planned to stay there for less than six months, and almost 77 percent planned to stay for less than a year. “It seems,” wrote Lombard, “that all of Senegal is oriented towards Dakar and the Cap Vert peninsula, where the activities that yield the country the greatest part of its revenues are concentrated.”57 In 1962, 78 percent of industrial enterprises were located in Cap Vert.58 Temporary migrants sought jobs and money in the burgeoning cities, but viewed the rural villages as their home. At that point, too, rural residents could still hope for a good crop of groundnuts or cotton.

These major migration patterns—permanent movement towards the peanut basin and temporary movement towards the cities—shifted when severe droughts and subsequent erosion drastically hurt the cultivation of peanuts and other major crops. Between the early 1960s and the early 1980s, Senegal experienced a 50 percent drop in total commercial production of groundnuts.59 All parties were partially to blame:

56 Jacques Lombard, Géographie Humaine (Saint Louis: C.R.D.S.-Senegal, 1963), 32.
57 Lombard, 174.
marabouts and farmers used practices that depleted the soil and chose to limit their crop cultivation to groundnuts. Meanwhile, the government’s changes in agricultural policies penalized some farmers. More and more Senegalese families experienced poverty and sought a new way of life.

![Principal migratory movements](https://example.com/figure8)

Figure 8: Principal migratory movements (Atlas du Sénégal)

The resulting migration reached such large proportions as to be characterized as a “rural exodus.” According to a survey conducted in 1970, 46 percent of Dakar residents had arrived there after 1960, reflecting a 30 percent urban growth. The most dramatic evolution was between 1965 and 1976, in which almost every Senegalese city saw its population double or even triple. Many African countries experienced the same phenomenon of rural exodus during this era, with similar consequences. Young men

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60 Robinson, *Muslim Societies*, 98.


were the first to migrate, draining rural zones’ most important source of manpower. This
trend compromised agricultural production and caused cities to be flooded with young
people, augmenting levels of unemployment and underemployment. Despite these severe
consequences, journalists maintained a sense of optimism during much of the droughts,
emphasizing the tonnage of groundnuts or cotton that was produced each year. In 1971,
*Le Soleil* published articles entitled, “Rice yields may double or even triple” and a report
from the Casamance region entitled, “Abundant and well-distributed rain explains the
good results obtained.” Reflecting urban dwellers’ perspectives of the rural zones, as
well as the importance that the government placed on the agricultural economy, the only
coverage of the Sénégal Oriental region was reports of production yields.

As the droughts continued, journalists and government officials began to
recognize their implications for both rural and urban societies. Articles in *Le Soleil*
reflected an increase in awareness of the severity of the climatic conditions. Among the
headlines: “A conference of three heads of state adopt a plan to fight against the
drought” and “520 million for rural development: financial aid from ACF [Assistance
and Cooperation Fund].” Government-sponsored studies reflected a concern over the
implications of the mass urbanization. In a 1970 report on urban management policies,
the authors proposed a strategy of localization of industry in an effort to “fixer des
populations” and discourage too much migration into Cap Vert. Their idea was to create

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64 “La Conférence des 3 chefs d’état adopte un programme lutte contre la sécheresse,” *Le Soleil*, 14 April,

65 Malal N’Diaye, “520 millions pour le développement rural: une aide financière du FAC,” *Le Soleil*, 30
poles at a certain distance from Dakar, build industry there, and attract people away from the Cap Vert. The situation in this region had reached such alarming proportions that the government was forced to rethink the entire urban network. Senghor wrote, “The planning of the Senegalese geographic space must be undertaken urgently, if we consider the costs that inevitably follow the absence of organization of this space.”\textsuperscript{66} As climatic conditions and subsequent movements of people shifted, State officials had to re-examine their notions of space. They were unable, however, to aid the rural populations or newly migrated urban populations effectively.

Senegalese people became aware of the disparities between the conditions of the rural zones and those in urban areas. Many rural citizens decided to abandon their villages and move to the cities—this time permanently. Among these migrants were many marabouts and their followers. Droughts placed the center of agricultural communities’ revenue at risk, and compromised the central organization of the daaras. With enormous drops in agricultural production, talibés were unable to produce enough food to sustain the members of the school or the surrounding the community.

Furthermore, struggling rural citizens no longer had money to contribute to the marabout.

Cities, and especially Dakar, became attractive not only as an escape from these poor rural conditions, but also because they offered new possibilities. Authors of an atlas published in 1977 described the city in this way: “Sole center of decision, Dakar monopolizes the major part of infrastructure related to administration, hospitals, sports, and education etc.”\textsuperscript{67} In the cities, marabouts could gain access to more means of  

\textsuperscript{66} Ibid., 80 bis.  
communication and thus gain more followers. They could find alternative sources of revenue and seek financial contributions from wealthier residents. Talibés could finish their studies, find jobs, and send money back to their families—at least, these were the hopes.

*Marabouts* and their disciples were able to translate many institutions and aspects of rural Muslim communities to the urban environment. The Sufi-inspired elements of social cohesion allowed Muslims to find new forms of communities, and the emphasis on interior spirituality meant that, despite their presence in a new environment, migrants faithfully pursued Quranic studies and sought out *marabouts* to guide them. *Marabouts* took an active role in re-establishing close spiritual communities by forming religious associations called *dahiras*. These associations were centered around particular neighborhoods or among people of the same occupation, drawing members from a variety of social classes and ethnic groups. Each member was expected to give a donation. In return, disciples received spiritual guidance, as well as a guaranteed community of assistance—important for those newly arrived to the city. *Marabouts* reorganized the urban space in a similar manner as they had organized their rural villages. They established themselves as points of contact and leadership, and created a constituency of people who sought their advice and guidance. It was strategic for the *marabouts*’ followers, too, who became part of a coherent network within the chaos of the city. Some areas in particular, such as Grand Yoff and Ngor, developed into distinct

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communities, allowing marabouts to maintain their leadership status in a particular physical space.

Figure 9: Region of Dakar (Camara, Amadou et al. L’Association Senegalaise des Professeurs d’Histoire Geographie. C.A.R.T. 1983. Library of Congress)

Marabouts who ran daaras faced more difficult challenges, as the shift in location meant that agricultural production could no longer serve as their source of subsistence.

Some marabouts had previously invested money in urban businesses or had the resources to open a shop or pursue other commercial ventures. However, begging offered the most practical method of adapting to the new environment. Begging had always been one aspect of the daara, but never its primary source of revenue. As more and more marabouts moved to the cities with no economic assets, the practice of begging exploded.

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Urban Geography and Distinction of Secular and Spiritual Spaces

Figure 10: Types of residences in 1980 (Abdoulaye Tall, Croissance urbaine, 15)

French colonial authorities’ economic focus on the coast contributed to the creation of distinct neighborhoods that delineated political and social spaces. The adoption of the “colonial city” by the Senegalese government confirmed its place as the “secular” political realm. Next to this administrative quarter was the predominant business area, surrounded by higher income housing and Point E, where many diplomats live today. North of this zone were mixed neighborhoods and lower-class neighborhoods, including Medina, known as the “African city” during colonial occupation. Further away were the “traditional villages” such as Ngor and Yoff and the neighborhoods characterized as “unsanitary sectors”\(^7\) or “quartiers spontanés,” which were home to newcomers who squatted or constructed temporary residences.\(^3\)

\(^7\) Atlas du Sénégal.

\(^3\) Ministère de l’Économie et des Finances, *Méthodologie Et Principaux Résultats*, 130.
organization of the Dakar agglomeration,” an atlas summarized, “is the result of a policy that was always founded on the separation of functions in space.”

The construction of this space—mostly a result of colonial authorities’ choices—formed areas in which new migrants could and could not live. Many of these migrants could not find suitable housing, as the State owned most of the land and had not planned the urban space to allow for an influx of people. One problem was that the high cost of construction discouraged the State from installing low-income residences. Therefore, families shared residences and a growing number of people were forced to squat. Migrants adapted to the lack of space by remaining mobile, which challenged urban planners’ and government officials’ goals of stabilizing urban growth. In 1980, the government-run urban planning agency estimated that transitional neighborhoods with temporary housing made up almost 80 percent of the Dakar region’s acreage.

As newcomers with little income, most marabouts and their talibés were forced to settle in these outlying neighborhoods and had to constantly search for housing. Marabouts helped to fill a niche left by a lack of infrastructure in these outlying areas.

Most public schools were located in the higher-income and administrative neighborhoods, where families could afford the fees. For example, a researcher for

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74 Atlas du Sénégal.

75 Abdoulaye Tall, Croissance urbaine et stratégies résidentielles des ménages : L’Exemple des quartiers spontanés à Dakar (Dakar-Ponty: Union pour l’étude de la population africaine, 1999), 50.

76 Migrations, Development, and Urbanization, 134.

77 Tall, 13-14.

78 Ibid., 33.
UNESCO found that Guediawaye, a suburb of Dakar, had no educational infrastructure. In such “quartiers spontanés,” marabouts offered an alternative, as the daaras represented a confirmation of migrants’ culture and history as opposed to the Westernized public schools. In effect, the marabouts retained their autonomy because they lived in outlying areas that functioned outside of government officials’ notions of industry and development, and continued to provide practical and spiritual assistance to unified communities.

Some families, unwilling or unable to make the difficult transition from village to city, entrusted their children to the marabouts who moved to the cities. This decision was both practical and economical. If parents considered public school as an option, few were located in the rural areas: in the mid-1970s, there was only one class for 1,140 people in the rural region of Diourbel, in contrast to one class for every 414 people in Cap Vert. A child sent to an urban daara would receive a Quranic education and theoretically have a better chance of finding a job after his studies. In addition, his parents would receive a break in expenses—an important consideration when agricultural conditions were so bad.

Mahama Traoré provided a dramatic example of this trend in his film Njangaan, released in 1975. Njangaan, the central character, is sent to a daara by his parents when he is six years old. He first attends a daara that is located a couple of miles outside of a large village. When the marabout’s son, who is also the school master, wishes to find more profitable work in the city, the marabout sends Njangaan and two other talibés with

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him. In the film, the talibés stop learning the Quran when they enter the city, and instead constantly beg for money to give to the teacher, who is unsuccessful in finding work. One day, while running from the police, Njangaan is hit by a car and is killed. Traoré’s alarming and somewhat extreme portrayal of talibés’ experience in cities reveals much about Senegalese society at the time. The film was produced in the mid-1970s, and thus the sight of talibés in urban spaces must have entered the general public parlance by this point. It also presents a charged, controversial look at Quranic education and the dangers that talibés faced in their new environment.

The influx of marabouts into the urban space formed strong religious communities in the outlying areas of Dakar. These neighborhoods contrasted in their physical organization and religious character to the center of Dakar, domain of the secular governmental and big business ventures. Marabouts adapted the daara system to the urban space by instituting begging, a practice initially limited to the religious communities but slowly permeated the urban physical space and the intellectual space of public discourse.

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CHAPTER THREE

*MARABOUTS’ AND TALIBÉS’ FOOTHOLD IN THE URBAN ENVIRONMENT, 1970s-1980s*

Integration of the Daara System into Urban Life

As *marabouts* sent their *talibés* into the streets of the surrounding neighborhoods, Senegalese people became accustomed to the sight and donated money to them. *Marabouts* opened *daaras* in the cities’ outlying areas, where, according to Elkane Mooh, who works for the NGO Save the Children, there was “a strong concentration of the population which accept their manner of doing things.”

In the outlying areas of Dakar, newly migrated Muslims saw the benefits of begging for the *talibés* themselves. It also allowed them to practice one of the five pillars of their faith, almsgiving. *Talibés* were out in full force on Fridays in particular, the Muslim holy day. Mooh explained, “For a long time people said that the suffering that *talibés* endure allow them to learn humility and tolerance…” A *talibé* was sure to grow up to become a hard-working, responsible Muslim. *Marabouts* justified their practice by arguing that *talibés* “adapt to all the suffering.” Another said, “Begging is necessary. If a *talibé* begs he will always be correct, with a lot of wisdom. One does not acquire wisdom if one does not leave his

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82 “…il y a une forte concentration de la population qui accepte leur façon de faire” (Elkane Mooh, personal correspondence, 25 March, 2008).


84 “Pendant longtemps les populations disaient que les souffrances que subissent les talibés leurs permettaient d’apprendre l’humilité et la tolérance…” (Elkane Mooh, personal correspondence, 26 March, 2008).

85 Anonymous *marabout*, interview by Amy Farris, Thiès, Senegal, 28 February, 2007.
home/family. He will not have many life experiences.”

It was the general acceptance of this perspective that allowed begging to become part of the landscape of Senegalese cities.

Muslim migrants produced a resurgence of Islamic activity in the 1970s and 1980s as they entered the urban environment and sought to create their own cultural and religious space. The trend of religious renewal in urban spaces has been documented worldwide, disproving the previously held assumption that city life resulted in mass adoption of secular values. In Senegal, the revival was demonstrated by a blossoming of visual culture in both private and public places that celebrated Muslims’ past and popular figures.

More and more Senegalese people chose to go on pilgrimages to Touba, capital of the Mouride brotherhood, as a method of returning to a religious space and seeking spiritual renewal. Other manifestations of this formation of space included parades and celebrations in the city streets.

Figure 11: Depiction of Cheikh Amadu Bamba on a coffee cart (Photo by Hannah Perry)

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Marabouts served as symbolic figures and champions of this religious revival. Urban residents continued to visit marabouts to seek their advice and demonstrated their support of the brotherhood by donating money and displaying pictures of grands marabouts. Many viewed Quranic education as a priority, and sent their children to learn from marabouts before enrolling them in French schools. Through urban residents’ support, marabouts integrated begging within other city-adapted Muslim practices and encountered little skepticism or criticism.

Marabouts and talibés guarded their ties with the rural villages by sending money and gifts. NGOs and journalists criticized marabouts for the disparities between their estimated income earned from their talibés’ work and the conditions they provided in the daara.89 Much of the money went back to the marabouts’ relatives in the villages, or to leaders within their brotherhoods.90 These consistent ties symbolized the importance of cities to rural residents, who knew that city living could translate into wealth. It also revealed the continued importance that marabouts played in both rural and urban settings.

Quranic schools offered Senegalese people an important alternative to public schools, which remained the source of much criticism. Amar Samb, author of the autobiography *Matraqué par le Destin*, which highlights his negative experiences within various forms of Senegalese education systems, explains: “School, they say, is nothing but a distracting means for whites to dominate blacks, it’s nothing but a disguised way of the first to bring about the ruin of the second, it’s nothing but their camouflaged way of

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destroying the religious faith that enlivens the other.”\textsuperscript{91} Many Senegalese people viewed public schools as a legacy of French colonial rule, and worried that they only provided a Western, Christian education to children. Many public schools suffered from inexperienced teachers, a legacy of colonial inattention to and underfunding of training institutions. Others charged fees that were too expensive for some Senegalese families.\textsuperscript{92} Quranic education, by contrast, represented a celebration of Senegalese history and culture, and a valued alternative to a public education system marred by colonial policies. Marabouts maintained a crucial institution for a society in which displacements and political and economic turmoil encouraged a return to Islam.

A Return to Faith

Senegalese people turned more towards religion in part because of the political and economic disappointments of the era. Students, taking a cue from their French peers, staged protests in May of 1968 to demonstrate their discontent with the political regime. The events escalated as teachers and urban workers took the opportunity to strike, expressing their own frustrations surrounding the economy and governmental policies. Some of the protests took place in front of the President’s Palace, in the traditionally political domain. An appeal from the Minister of Education addressed to the strikers revealed the importance the government placed on the ties between education and productivity: “I can’t believe that you would accept to lose and to make our country lose

\textsuperscript{91} Amar Samb, Matraqué par le destin: Ou, la vie d’un talibé (Dakar: Les Nouvelles Editions Africaines, 1973), 89.

the profits of a year of work.” While the events resulted in few concrete changes, they did bring to light the disconnects between the State and the public, especially from the perspective of youth.

Senegalese Muslims showed discontent when the State passed policies that threatened their way of life and their religious practices. These policies served as attempts by the government to institute more secular policies—but they directly affected Muslims’ religious practices. The Family Code of 1972, for example, instituted regulations for marriage, divorce, succession, and custody—practices which had previously been controlled through religious codes or customary laws. The change, deemed an important step of “modernization” by the State, made it more difficult for Senegalese men to practice polygamy, and was viewed as an attack on Islam. In Touba, the semi-autonomous religious city, the Khalife declared that they would not implement the Family Code. Leaders there also expelled secular officials and closed public schools in a staunch attempt to retain a purely religious-driven space.

Meanwhile, people within all socio-economic classes felt the consequences of an economic depression. In an era of unemployment, lack of housing, and unpopular policy decisions, marabouts represented “popular heroes, indispensable protectors,” and

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“guardians of the ‘stronghold of good’” to many Muslims. Both religious and secular leaders attempted to find responses and solutions to Senegalese people’s frustrations, but marabouts were more accessible and provided spiritual aid in a difficult time. Some scholars pointed to supposed signs of marabouts’ waning influence, including changes in grand marabout leadership. Although some brotherhoods experienced succession changes, that did not diminish the locally-based marabouts’ ability to teach and guide their followers.

Abdou Diouf’s Presidency

Leopold Senghor remained president for twenty years before relinquishing his title in 1980. Although some Senegalese people were attracted to the Parti Démocratique Sénégalais’ call for “sopi,” meaning change, Senghor’s hand-picked successor, Abdou Diouf, was elected president in 1981. Diouf seemed to have a more comfortable relationship with the grands marabouts and, as a Muslim in the Tidjani brotherhood, he could address the role of Islam more freely than Senghor, a Catholic. He recast secular needs as religious priorities, and promoted diplomacy between Senegal and other Islamic countries. He was more interested in Islam as a tool for diplomacy than in the everyday experiences and needs of Senegalese Muslims.

Diouf ignored the influx of marabouts into the urban sphere and the consequential explosion of begging, and instead defined marabouts by their earlier domination of the

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97 Coulon, “Construction étatique et action Islamique,” 266.

rural sphere. Diouf met with spiritual leaders in agrarian villages to bring gifts and public messages of support. During election years, other political candidates did the same, thereby demarcating the rural zones as separate, traditional, and different from the urban political sphere.

One journalist reported that a meeting between government officials and marabouts “proved, once again, the excellent relationship between the spiritual and secular powers, between which collaboration is necessary and indeed indispensable.”

In 1983, the Khalife of the Mouride brotherhood helped Diouf to garner 83 percent of the vote by issuing an ndiggal, a call for all Mourides to vote for a particular candidate. Both parties continued to pursue benefits from the other. Marabouts sought land, favorable agricultural policies, and money for mosques. In exchange, political officials hoped that grands marabouts would publicly declare their support and thereby secure votes for them. To achieve these goals, top leaders on both sides approached relations through what could have appeared as press stunts and photo ops, recognizing their opportunity to promote a certain image of themselves through subsequent media coverage.

For the general population, these diplomatic relations had little bearing on everyday life. It was clear that one of their main concerns—their children’s education—was not being addressed by the government. Despite his affiliation with the Tidjani brotherhood, Diouf retained the French secular approach to governing. In order


100 Ware, 68.
not to risk his rapport with the *grands marabouts* or to compromise the government’s secular standing, Diouf continued to ignore *daaras* and begging.

Avoidance of Quranic Education and the Begging Question

Because *marabouts* managed to adapt their role and institutions into the urban sphere, most Senegalese people did not criticize Quranic education directly. Instead, public officials and academics commonly debated problems surrounding the concepts “traditional” and “modern.” Although *marabouts* had adapted their *daaras* to the cities, Quranic education—when it was discussed—was generally presented as a “traditional” institution that could not function in the “modern” urban setting. One alternative was reformist Arabo-Islamic schools, which Islamist groups also called “modern” Islamic education. Instead of rote memorization, the reformists argued, teachers in these schools would teach Arabic and Islamic sciences as well as French.\(^{101}\) Most of the modern schools were located in the cities but did not offer full-time care as *marabouts* did. Well-off Senegalese families could enroll their children in these schools, but most families could not afford to do so.

For a minister in the government, support for the Arabo-Islamic schools could serve as a safe way to demonstrate one’s good faith as a Muslim. But the reformists rarely attacked the system of begging itself, as they understood its importance within Islamic education’s pedagogy and *marabouts*’ financial needs.\(^ {102}\) At the same time, government officials continued to ignore Quranic schools, for fear of unsettling their

\(^{101}\) Loimeier, “The Secular State and Islam,” 192.

\(^{102}\) Ware, 68-9, 112.
diplomatic rapport with *grands marabouts*. From their perspective, *daaras* did not deserve any attention—positive or negative—because their instruction did not appear to contribute to the economy. For Diouf and other members of the government, economic development continued to be a top priority, especially when droughts threatened the major sources of crop production. As Pape Mbaye, a Senegalese NGO worker explained, the government “abandoned the *talibés* because they say that Islamic education adds nothing to the country; at least that is what the lenders like the World Bank and others have them believe.”

Instead of according financial or logistical aid to Quranic schools, the government focused its education budget on public schools, higher education, and literacy programs.

Senegalese men and women engaged in the civil sector occasionally addressed the possible complications of Quranic education in conferences or meetings. For example, members of *La Fédération des Associations Féminines du Senegal (FAFS)* held a discussion on the theme of “Children in moral danger: an alarming and ongoing theme.” They suggested that someone—whom they did not specify—needed to improve hygiene in *daaras* and implement sanctions for *marabouts* who “live off of their young *talibés’* work.”

Meanwhile, the begging continued to spread from the outskirts closer into the city center. Many Senegalese Muslims continued to go to their *marabouts* faithfully and, sometimes on the *marabouts’* advice, carried change destined for *talibés’* tomato paste.

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103 “… le gouvernement a abandonné[sic] les talibés car ils disent que l’éducation islamique n’apporte rien au pays du moins c’est que les bailleurs tel que la Banque Mondiale et autres leurs fait comprendre…” (Pape Magatte Mbaye, personal correspondence, 26 March, 2008).

cans on Fridays. Begging developed into a common and accepted sight, and outside of occasional conferences, remained largely unquestioned until the 1990s. Government officials only referred to *talibés* as “human clutter,”105 evoking an image of litter within the State’s idealized image of Senegal’s cities. Their disdain did not result in action, and the *talibé* problem thereby developed into the country’s “white elephant,” that conspicuous presence in a shared space that no one dares to mention.

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105 Ware, 111.
CHAPTER FOUR
BEGGING INVADES THE PUBLIC DISCOURSE: 1990s-TODAY

Newfound Awareness

After 1990, when the practice of begging began encroaching on more areas of the urban landscape, Senegalese people became increasingly critical of the practice. They were also irritated by attention accorded to it by the press, reformist groups, and NGOs. This attention compromised Diouf’s attempts to promote Senegal’s image in the wider Muslim world. Foreign journalists drew direct lines between the begging situation and Islam, though they largely misunderstood or ignored the origins of the phenomenon.

In 1995, UNESCO researchers found that 65 percent of Dakar residents polled viewed talibés as “unenviable,” considering that “neither the education nor the development of the young talibé constitutes the central preoccupation” of the marabout. Fourteen percent of people said that they are a “public danger,” reflecting fears of talibés who stole money or became involved in criminal activity. Quranic schools, the authors reported, “had numerous insufficiencies, often vehemently highlighted by today’s Senegalese society.”

106 “On comprend également que devant cette situation où, ni l’éducation, ni le devenir du jeune talibé ne constituent la préoccupation majeure, 65 percent de l’ensemble des couches sociales de la région de Dakar aient affirmé lors d’un sondage d’opinion, que ‘le talibé était gênant,’ que 14 percent de cette même population aient estime que le talibé était ‘un danger public’” (Djibril Nguirane and P.F. Badsine, “Education de base et éducation coranique au Sénégal” (Dakar: UNESCO, Dakar Regional Office (BREDA), 1995), 9, 12).
This newfound awareness occurred within a complex political and religious context. The major Islamic brotherhoods experienced succession problems during this time, and seemed to display a less unified leadership. Some marabouts distinguished themselves by explicitly entering the political sphere—a new space for spiritual leaders. Aided by increased accessibility to radio and television, some marabouts formed their own political parties such as the Moustarchidine movement. Unhindered by this political involvement, Abdou Diouf easily won re-election in 1993 and the State’s relationship with the grands marabouts continued to be one of polite diplomacy.

On the ground, local marabouts encountered obstacles as Quranic education grew within the limited space of the urban environment. Multiple trends exacerbated tensions developed in previous decades. Marabouts continued to migrate from rural areas to the cities. Economic distress pushed more rural families from Senegal, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, and other countries to send their young boys across regional or national lines to urban daaras. Because the cities and the Dakar region in particular continued to experience large influxes of migrants, the amount of physical space became more and more limited.

In their constant search to acclimate to the urban conditions, marabouts adapted untraditional spaces to their needs. They held classes in abandoned buildings, in garages, on verandas, and in the streets. By 1995, approximately 63 percent of daaras in the Cap

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107 Villalon, “Generational Changes,” 129.

108 Mbacke, 537.

109 In 1995, over 80 percent of marabouts in cities had migrated from another region in Senegal or a neighboring country (“Education de base,” 12).

Vert region had no permanent location. A marabout described the housing problem in this way: “We often live in construction sites, and frequently have to move in order to look for a new place to live. Sometimes we live in a house that doesn’t even have toilets, electricity, or doors, or windows, the roofs are made of straw and during the rainy season, we have many problems.”

Some daaras were only open during certain seasons or during public school breaks. This formed a transient community of marabouts and talibés who entered and left the cities in different times of the year, and constantly moved the location of the daaras. Talibés begged in more and more areas of the city. All of this movement threatened the government’s goal of “fixing” the population and exerting its power over the entire urban zone. These changes also brought more attention to the begging phenomenon among Senegalese people, as talibés walked the city streets in an ever-widening radius. An NGO report explained the overwhelming presence of talibés in this way:

The talibés are found begging in the downtown areas and on the fringes of the cities. Dirty and dressed in rags, they now belong to the landscape of Senegal. They are everywhere, wherever there are passersby and motorists. They can be found in the streets, on the sidewalks, along major traffic roads, on main crossroads, at red lights, in front of restaurants or shops, in markets, at public transportation hubs, in front of the places of worship, pharmacies, movie theaters, banks, gas stations, etc.

By 1997, an estimated 50,000 to 100,000 talibés were begging in the streets of Dakar.

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111 “Education de base,” 11.


113 “Project to Eliminate Begging,” 9.
Because of the higher demand for Quranic education and the promise of economic success in the cities, not all new marabouts fit into the traditional mold of a well-trained and experienced teacher. Talibés became teachers at a younger age and were ill-prepared to teach and control a group of boys. Because the government did not regulate daaras, anyone could open a school. Within the context of a struggling economy, some marabouts had economic gain as their primary goal and thus talibés spent most of the day begging and little time learning the Quran. One report estimated that on average only 30 percent of talibés’ time was spent learning. Some of the profit-oriented marabouts purposefully neglected the appearance of their students, hoping that the talibés would receive more charity if they looked poor and unkempt. Marabouts who used these practices drew unprecedented attention from humanitarian organizations, manifested in media attention and calls for change.

Quranic Education in Conferences and the Press

Local NGO workers offended by the public spectacle of begging children joined forces with foreigners to bring international pressure on the government. Following a conference on children’s rights held in Dakar, a journalist for Le Soleil wrote, “We have the impression that everyone suddenly became conscious of the magnitude of the drama that touches children, especially in the Third World.” The Senegalese State ratified the

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114 “Education de base,” 12.
115 “Project to Eliminate Begging,” 11.
Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989, which was designed to hold the
government accountable for protecting children’s rights. Members of the Organization
of African Unity (OAU) made children’s rights one of the top points of discussion in
their 1993 meeting. Out of the meeting came one of the first articles on forced begging
written by a Western journalist, entitled “Orphans of the Koran.” Its title reflects
journalists’ frequent misunderstanding and generalization of the begging situation.

During the 1990s and early 2000s, journalists from Senegal and elsewhere wrote
hundreds of articles about *talibé* begging. In the international press, journalists from the
Associated Press, TF1 (a major French television station), and the *New York Times* all
published articles. The articles typically painted the same portrait: the inexplicable
exploitation of young children in Dakar’s streets. Very few explored the background of
the problem or the relationship between *marabouts* and government officials. Some
articles were more presumptuous than others. A journalist from *The Independent* of
London wrote “there is plenty of hoodwinking and trickery afoot… tens of thousands of
unsuspecting children are lured, pied-piper style, from the villages… into a modern form
of slavery.” Senegalese journalists presented the problem in similar ways: they

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117 “Project to Eliminate Begging,” 16.
119 See Nafi Diouf, “On Senegal Streets, Islamic Education for Many is the School of Hard Knocks,”
Times Online, 16 January 1996,
120 Leonard Doyle, “Independent Appeal: Child slaves of Senegal beg to fill their master’s bowl,” *The Independent*, 19 December, 2006,
deplored the conditions of the daaras, the perils that talibés faced on the busy city streets, and the terror that some marabouts inflicted when they used corporal punishment. 

Journalists helped to bring national and international attention to talibé begging, though their methods of representing the problem often portrayed the marabouts as evil masters. Marabouts themselves had few ways to defend themselves to the wider community. The grands marabouts rarely addressed the subject, as they were in charge of large, prosperous daaras that did not necessitate begging. These top spiritual leaders also did not have control over the local marabouts. As NGO workers searched for solutions, it became clear that changes would have to come from the local marabouts themselves.

Early Campaigns for Change

In the early 1990s, it appeared that government officials were beginning to address the problem. In 1992, the State partnered with the United Nations to carry out a campaign addressing the negative aspects of Quranic education, including the begging phenomenon. Islamist groups, the original frontrunners of the movement to reform Quranic education, also attempted to work with the government. While these actions brought more attention to the problem, they resulted in few tangible changes. President Diouf was most concerned with Senegal’s image in the rest of the Islamic world, and chose his associations with reformist groups or marabouts on each occasion depending on the audience and diplomatic benefits.¹²¹

The government’s inaction spurred NGOs to implement temporary fixes for the larger problem. NGOs filled a niche, taking over necessary services and locating themselves in the areas where begging was most prominent. The majority of the first agencies to become involved were domestic organizations, formed by Senegalese people concerned about the health and well-being of *talibés*. Leaders of international organizations were more hesitant to get involved because the begging situation was tied up in religious and cultural questions. For NGOs like World Vision, which functions as a Christian-based sponsorship program, involvement in Quranic schools meant stepping into a controversial issue as a clear outsider. International NGOs tended to remove themselves from the outlying areas where begging was most rampant. World Vision, for example, set up their offices in the prosperous Point E neighborhood near downtown Dakar.

Early NGO workers offered *marabouts* temporary assistance in order to improve the living conditions in the *daara* and the health of the *talibés*. Some NGOs established health clinics where *talibés* could seek help for various illnesses and injuries. Others, like Tostan, donated cleaning supplies, mats, and food to *daaras*. Tostan, formed in 1991 by an American woman, focuses on community empowerment and partners with *marabouts* to find solutions. It established a sponsorship program in which families in the neighborhood serve as surrogate parents, washing, feeding, and clothing their adopted *talibé*. Some NGO workers tackled the *daaras’* educational curriculum itself, offering supplemental classes in French, English, and practical training. Many of the NGO offices were located in the areas in which begging was most prominent, including Yoff and

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122 Interview with Yvette Kinkpe, Program Director, World Vision, interview by author. Dakar, Senegal, 26 June, 2007.
Pikine, establishing a presence in the physical spaces where the government’s attention was lacking. Their short-term solutions provided an important service, but had limitations in creating sustainable changes.

Limitations to the Call for Change

Journalists, scholars, and NGO workers largely neglected to recognize the complexity behind the begging phenomenon and Senegalese people’s reactions to it. The call for reform was disunited and outsiders approached the issue with their own assumptions and beliefs. Some Senegalese leaders wanted to dislodge the *marabouts* from their powerful roles, but ignored the trends among the general population.

At the same time, many Muslims sought a return to an “idealized past of Senegalese Sufism,” which confirmed *marabouts*’ place in society. Begging brought to light certain *marabouts*’ liberal interpretations of their duties as teachers according to Islamic beliefs. Critics of begging did not always condemn the role of *marabouts* in general however. Indeed some *marabouts* have publicly condoned the practice, and others express their dislike for it, explaining that they have no other options. Mooh distinguished between true *marabouts* and “pseudo *marabouts*” who only want to make money.

Politicians, meanwhile, struggled with problems in the public education system, diverting attention away from begging. Mamadou Lo, an independent candidate in the 1993 presidential election, critiqued the alleged inaction of Diouf’s government: “The

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123 Villalon, “Generational Changes,” 144.
current regime never had any concern for the education, for training for the masses.”

Teachers were unprepared, the physical infrastructure was poor, and scholarship selection was determined by nepotism. Outside sources confirmed the public schools’ challenges. Because of their perspective on the role of schools in economic development, government officials continued to spend nearly a third of the national budget on education. In adhering to secular ideals, however, they refused to spend any of it on daaras or protecting the talibés.

Reformists’ initiatives to improve the Quranic education system developed a separate system of Arabo-Islamic education for Senegalese elites. Reformists did not succeed in reforming the daara system itself; instead, they caused further problems by encouraging wealthy parents to send their children to the reformist schools. Parents who would have normally paid the marabout took their money elsewhere, and thus reformist schools took away yet another possible source of income for marabouts and marginalized the system further.

Senegalese people have debated the source of the begging problem in many mediums, including web-based discussion boards. Some blame the government and the President in particular. Others say that Senegalese people as a whole are at fault because they all help perpetuate the system. Some citizens attack the marabouts and grands marabouts, viewing their role and the daaras themselves as archaic. Former


126 “Éducation de base,” 6.

127 Ibid., 19.

talibés have also voiced their opinions, and while they praise their marabouts, they also note that Quranic education has changed since they were students. According to a Tostan employee, “begging bothers all Senegalese people whether they are Muslim or not because it’s something that is certainly harmful because children’s rights are overridden through this practice.” While they may dislike the system, Senegalese people continue to give alms and sustain the begging practice.

NGOs’ Recent Solutions

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, NGO employees addressed the organization and negotiation of space as it relates to the begging phenomenon. First, they took steps to influence public intellectual space by waging an awareness campaign. Far from teaching talibés humility, the NGO literature argued, begging exploited children and endangered their health and safety. Contrary to some marabouts’ arguments, the Quran does not condone begging. Tostan has been a leader in this public awareness campaign.

Second, NGOs attempted to reverse the trend that brought marabouts to the cities in the first place. They encouraged a sort of reverse migration, in which marabouts would return to their village of origin to re-establish their daaras there. This approach advocated a return to the agricultural production-based daara, or for marabouts to find alternative sources of revenue in their villages. Hypothetically, this could end the need for begging and encourage parents to keep their children at home instead of sending them to urban daaras.

129 “…la mendicité gêne tout le peuple Sénégalais que ça soit Musulman ou autre car c’est quelque chose qui naturellement fait mal à cause des droits de l’enfants bafoués à travers cette pratique” (Pape Magatte Mbaye, personal correspondenc, 26 March, 2008).
Third, organizations tried to take control of space in order to draw attention to the need for governmental action. On April 20, 2007, Tostan organized the National Day for Talibés, during which thousands of concerned citizens, including marabouts, talibés, and NGO workers, marched from Thiès to Dakar in a reclamation of space and a symbol of the migrations that brought marabouts to the cities in the first place.

Abdoulaye Wade’s Connections with Marabouts and the Implications for Reform

In 2005, the government took what seemed like a crucial step towards bringing begging to an end. The National Assembly passed a law that forbade forced begging and threatened to fine and jail marabouts found forcing their talibés to beg. Despite its promising appearance, the law seems to have been purely for show. NGO workers report that the government passed the law in order to satisfy international humanitarian groups, but they never planned to implement the law. According to NGO employee Elkane Mooh, NGOs are hoping that the government will pass a new law because the one passed in 2005 was confusing and vague.\textsuperscript{130} The Senegalese government also signed the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989, which places responsibility for

\textsuperscript{130} Ekane Mooh, personal correspondence, 26 March, 2008.
children’s well-being and education in the hands of the State.\textsuperscript{131} Allowing the begging system to grow unchecked, NGO workers say, is a direct violation of the Convention.

These disappointments served as a sign that Senegalese citizens could not rely on Diouf’s successor to alter the status quo. Abdoulaye Wade first won office in 2001, and was re-elected in 2007. Although begging has infiltrated the public discourse for over a decade, and various reformist and non-governmental organizations have waged campaigns, the top-level politics are remarkably consistent with those in the past. Wade continues to pursue secular politics while courting grands marabouts, giving them sports-utility vehicles and monetary donations in exchange for their public support. As in the past, he visits grands marabouts in isolated rural zones and pledges to assist them in rebuilding mosques and improving their living conditions. The primary change is that Wade has directly addressed Quranic education. In preserving a diplomatic approach, however, he does so in an idealistic way, promising to install or modernize the grands marabouts’ daaras without recognizing the problems in the system.\textsuperscript{132} For their part, top religious leaders have issued ndiggals—public declarations of support for a candidate—consistent with marabouts of the past who were concerned how their relations with the government were perceived. One journalist’s interviews revealed that the ndiggal did make a difference in voting decisions. Several Senegalese people said that they had not planned to vote for Wade, but the ndiggal convinced them to do


otherwise. After the election, Wade gave land, including formerly preserved forests, to the *grands marabouts* who had proclaimed their support. This was a symbolic move, as his gift encouraged the *marabouts* to remain in their traditional domain and work in the economic sphere that they defined as their own many decades ago. Governmental officials and *grands marabouts* thus appear to be maintaining the tradition of ensuring a diplomatic, mutually beneficial relationship that builds on separate spheres.

Unfortunately, this diplomatic rapport does not leave room for action addressing the begging problem. Although more Senegalese people, including NGO workers, parents, urban dwellers, and rural residents have recognized the need for changing the system, the movement appears to have reached a standstill. Government action is the crucial missing piece to stopping this dangerous phenomenon.

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CONCLUSION

The beggar child I saw on my first day in Dakar is part of an enormous network of *talibés* found in Senegal’s cities. These young boys serve as a symbol of desperation and poverty, of *marabouts* exercising an adverse practice out of necessity. Foreign and domestic NGO workers agree that the begging phenomenon is growing, especially as the youth population in Senegal and other African nations continues to increase. The *talibés* themselves express the desperation of their situation. One said, “we will do anything to stop [begging].” As it stands now, another *talibé* explained, “if I don’t beg, I don’t eat.” Another said that he “only want[s] to learn” but cannot stop begging because the “*marabout* will beat us if we do not beg.”

NGOs are attempting to fill the void left by politicians’ inactions. These initiatives, while well-intentioned, often fail to resolve the underlying problems of begging. Some NGO employees, for example, assist city-dwelling *marabouts* in relocating back to their rural villages. Through this approach, NGO workers hope to prevent families from sending their boys to the cities by providing Quranic education in the rural environment. But *marabouts* sense little to be gained from moving back to poverty and drought-stricken rural villages where crop cultivation is unlikely to provide a reliable source of revenue. NGO employees cannot force *marabouts* to reverse the rational choices they made to move in the first place. Although *marabouts* face plenty of

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problems related to urban living, they have adapted to this space and established their own religious communities.

Senegalese Muslims continue to value Quranic education and its benefits for their children. Researchers recently found that most daara students pass reading and writing tests, giving testimony to the caliber of some marabouts’ instructional skills. More Senegalese people are becoming concerned, however, that begging is superseding the importance of the education itself. NGO leaders have waged public awareness campaigns which, while important, will not easily dissuade urban residents from giving alms to talibés. Residents know that most talibés must meet a monetary quota or else face punishments by the marabout. Thus the immediate needs of the children win out against longer-term goals of breaking the begging-almsgiving cycle.

In order to find long-term solutions, government and NGO officials need to listen to marabouts, talibés, and their parents. Members of these groups know what needs to change and have already identified possible solutions. As one marabout commented, there is a “gap between politics and reality. The population should be involved.”

Most marabouts want to stay in the cities, but they want to find alternative sources of revenue outside of begging. They need assistance in finding micro-finance projects that will generate income while permitting them to focus on teaching. In this way, the government and NGO workers will help marabouts further integrate themselves into the urban

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economy. Politicians who threaten to jail marabouts do not address the underlying issues and fail to provide the spiritual leaders with alternatives.

Some marabouts advocate government regulation of daaras. This would ensure that all daaras met certain health and infrastructural conditions, preventing profit-oriented religious teachers from forming a daara. Again, the marabouts will need assistance from NGOs and the government in order to meet those requirements, as most do not have the necessary money or physical space. Marabouts’ suggestions often include elements of the American charter school model. They would like to receive funding from the State but have more flexibility in their structure and curriculum than public schools. In exchange for this liberty, marabouts would remain accountable to the State by regularly demonstrating that their students are gaining specific skills.

The government can also not afford to neglect the rural zones. As the droughts continue to aggravate rural poverty, sending children to the cities remains a rational choice for parents. Political officials need to make rural villages attractive places to live and work, which means offering economic assistance and ensuring that agricultural policies aid farmers. When marabouts get their start in the local village, they must have the means to feed and care for the talibés; otherwise, they will continue to migrate to the more economically promising cities.

Foreign and domestic journalists, NGO workers, and political figures need to seek increased understanding of the begging problem and appreciate the important role that marabouts have long played in Senegalese society. Members of the press should recognize the urban migration that brought thousands of marabouts and talibès to the cities and led to the explosion of the begging practice. NGO leaders must be cautious of attacking marabouts and instead recognize their remarkable ability to adapt to various landscapes and to help shape an ever-changing society.

Scholars of Africa and Islam have largely neglected the historical context of begging. Nearly all scholars of Senegal have focused on the Mouride brotherhood, although marabouts from other brotherhoods practice begging as well.\footnote{Cheikh Anta Babou, Peter Baxter, David Robinson, John Glover} Histories of begging typically look at the agricultural-based daara, and have not studied the urban daara in depth.\footnote{Rudolph Treanor Ware, "Knowledge, Faith, and Power: A History of Qur'anic Schooling in 20th Century Senegal."} Few scholars have examined the role that NGOs play in the struggle to change the system. When writing about the relationship between secular and religious
officials, scholars tend to limit their studies to interactions between top government officials and the Khalifes or grands marabouts instead of addressing the experiences of locally-based marabouts and their talibés. Sociologists who study Senegalese education often fail to address Quranic education and instead focus on nonformal education. The history of begging deserves more attention, especially considering that writers have offered no explanations of why the problem is particularly immense in Senegal.

Although the begging phenomenon is unique to the country, it reflects wider trends in other West African and Muslim nations. Other Muslim leaders have experienced difficulties in adapting the Western view of secularism to their socio-political contexts. Two systems of education develop—one secular and “modern,” and the other religious and “traditional.” Adherents of the two disconnected systems misunderstand one another and foster discourse pitting “modern” and “traditional” as dichotomous concepts. Muslims in other countries have also participated in quiet Islamic revivals, obligating government officials to be more “Islamically sensitive.”

The underlying tensions between religious and political figures are not restricted to Senegal, and the begging situation generates wider questions about Islam and the State today.

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143 Christian Coulon, Roman Loimeier, Leonardo Villalon, Lucy Creevey

144 Michelle Kuenzi, Babacar Sine


146 Ibid., 346.
In order to address the white elephant of begging, political officials must look past their diplomatic goals and recognize the locally-based marabouts who may not have the personal and economic ties of the grands marabouts. Beyond being intermediaries or political tools, these marabouts contribute their vast knowledge of Islam, spiritual guidance, and often practical assistance to millions of Senegalese Muslims. Although they have retained their autonomy from direct political interference, they have never been disengaged from Senegalese culture, economy, or politics.

Today, these marabouts and their talibés need help in finding alternatives to the begging system that has evolved from the complex trends of the past fifty years. Government officials must now abandon fears of trampling on French-instituted concepts of secularism and address both the immediate humanitarian concerns and long-term consequences of the begging problem. Muslim families value the Quranic education system as an alternative to a public school system that reflects Western values and neocolonial hegemony. Talibés have entered the politicians’ physical domain, and government officials can no longer ignore their needs. All parties involved must renegotiate their concepts of political-secular relations and organization of space to find solutions for the rampant begging that compromises Senegal’s image as a model West African nation.
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