

West African Koran Schools: Institutions for Education or Exploitation?

Jónína Einarsdóttir¹ and Hamadou Boiro²

¹University of Iceland, Department of Anthropology, Reykjavík, Iceland

²Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisa (INEP), CEHA, Bissau, Guinea-Bissau

je@hi.is

Religiously motivated schools have been and are common in West African countries. The neoliberal politics of recent decades has contributed the continuation of former privately run schools, as well as establishment of new private schools, religious and secular ones. The data presented in this paper is based on research that was initiated in Guinea-Bissau in 2009. In the paper we aim to explore how various groups of people, including parents and NGOs representatives, explain the fact that thousands of Bissau-Guinean boys attend Koran schools in Senegal. The boys, named *almudus* in Fula and *talibes* in Wolof, beg on behalf of their teachers, called *moros* (Kriol) or *marabouts* (French). Global institutions and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have classified the custom as child trafficking and a huge amount of money is allocated from individuals, private institutions and NGOs as well as Western governments to rescue them from their traffickers in Senegal and repatriate them in their community of origin. This has contributed to a conflict between locally active NGOs and the local communities, which feel stigmatized by the ongoing trafficking discourses and anti-trafficking activities. Some argue the NGOs are using the *almudus* as a pretext to earn money from the international donors, and that they want to convert their children to Christianity. Likewise, they believe that the Western countries aim to eliminate Islam through their support to the anti-trafficking activities, which for some reason is only directed against the religious education of their children. The local population argues that it would be better to give the money to them to build and run schools in the area. People prefer mixed schools; a combination of a public school for everybody and an elective Koran school. As of today, many villages are without schools and the existing ones are not functioning for long periods because the teachers are on strike due to unpaid salaries. The political instability in Guinea-Bissau has resulted in its classification as a fragile state with consequent reluctance of donors to give aid to the country. At the same time, global institutions and NGOs struggle for the power to define what kind of education should be classified as acceptable one. What they classify as exploitation of children is for the parents a respectable religious education.