

Inverting Power Relations: The Case of Fula Forros and Fula Pretos in Guinea-Bissau

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The Fula (Fula: Pulaar) are the most populous Muslim group in Guinea-Bissau, and they live mainly in the eastern regions, principally Gabú and Bafatá. Fula, or related groups, reside in many other countries in the West African region. In Guinea-Bissau, the Fula are mainly divided into two groups, Fula Pretos and Fula Forros. Formerly, Fula Pretos were the slaves of the Fula Forros, thus in the social hierarchy they were an inferior class dependent on their masters who controlled the political power, the knowledge and the economic resources. After independence of Guinea-Bissau, with the victory of PAIGC in 1974, the traditional power of the Fula Forros declined. Their chiefs had collaborated with the Portuguese colonial power, thus some of them were assassinated. Consequently, the traditional power of the religious elite, the marabouts, was also eroded. The aim of the paper is to examine how the Fula Pretos have since independence struggled to invert the former relations of power through refusal to send their children to Koran schools organized by their former chiefs. Instead, they began to send their sons for religious studies in Senegal, where they later opened own Koran schools. The schools are financed through begging of the students, named *alumdus* (Fula) or *talibes* (Woolof). Thus, today there are thousands of Bissau-Guinean Fula boys attending Koran schools in Senegal where they beg for their survival. According to global institutions and non-governmental organizations, this transfer of children and their exploitation through forced begging amounts to child trafficking. Thereby, the efforts of the Fula Pretos to invert their position of power have contributed to their additional discrimination and criminalization. Their religious leaders are classified as traffickers and their sons as victims of child trafficking. The data presented is based on research that was initiated in Guinea-Bissau and Senegal in 2009.