

Talibes: Modern-day Slaves

a photo book by

Mario Cruz

In collaboration with FotoEvidence

The *Talibes* and the *Daaras*

Talibe is an Arabic term for disciple. What was once a respectable education system has become, in part, criminal. What tries to pass as religious teaching today, in many cases, has become a business for exploiting children. Everyday, *talibes*, who range in age from five to 15 years old, beg on the streets for eight hours a day and many return back to some overcrowded and

squalid *daara*, rife with skin disease, breathing problems, stomach parasites and Malaria. Little education takes place in some of the *daaras* and *talibes* are routinely subjected to physical abuse. Mario Cruz gained rare access to the dark and violent world of the *daaras* where children's dreams are suffocated by fear.



A young *talibe* bound by chains in an isolation area of a *daara* in the city of Touba, May 27, 2015. In this *daara* the youngest *talibes* are shackled by their ankles to stop them from trying to run away. The chains length only allows them to use an improvised bathroom in a separate area of the *daara*. These children can stay like this for days, weeks, even months until they gain the *marabout's* trust. Their guardian explains, "When I release them, I give them the freedom to beg like the rest of the *talibes*."

The physical abuse of *talibes* is well known but takes place hidden behind the doors of the *daaras*. The *marabouts* are well aware that their actions are criminal and access to many of the *daaras* is heavily restricted by them. Even the police have difficulty getting access to some *daaras*.

Talibes are unlike beggars found in other countries. They are children with marks of physical abuse and often visibly traumatized. They have become a routine part of daily life. The number of children exploited by this system of modern-day slavery is estimated to

number as many as 30,000 in the Dakar region alone and 50,000 across the country.

The long tradition of sending boys to study at Quranic boarding schools in Senegal is rooted in positive values of religious and moral education but in the last decade the system has changed drastically and uncontrollably. Thousands of so-called teachers use religious education as a cover for economic exploitation of the children in their charge. With many of them having more than one *daara* throughout Senegal.



Talibes sleep together inside a *daara* in Saint Louis, in northern Senegal, May 21, 2015. The *daara*, with over 30 children, has no clean water and barely any electricity. Often, the children sleep on the concrete floor without any protection.

Trafficking in Children

Parents often send their children to study the Quran because they simply can't afford their education, others just believe that a *daara* is still a good solution.

Today, child trafficking also plays a crucial part in the numbers. Most of the *talibes* are Senegalese but the number of children from neighboring countries, like Guinea-Bissau, has grown to become an important part of this phenomenon. Every month, the Guinean anti-trafficking unit finds children in remote areas between Senegal and Guinea-Bissau.

The children know that their only escape is to cross the border to Guinea-Bissau because when they ask for help in

Senegal, most of the time they are sent back to the *daaras*.

Earlier in March 2015, Guinea-Bissau authorities found 54 children hidden inside five vehicles that were crossing the border to Senegal but Senegalese authorities have failed to prosecute the traffickers. Several Guinean families are asking for help so that their children can be found and rescued.

Guinean military forces are facing this problem as one of the country's top priorities. At this time there are controls at the exits of cities and is impossible to leave the capital Bissau with a child without an written authorization from the parents. Still, the *marabout* power is well rooted within the peripheral countries to Senegal which makes the traffic difficult to control.



Guinean military police approaches a group of children walking through a forest area near Bissau border, Guinea-Bissau, June 15, 2015. Earlier in March 2015,

Ineffective Enforcement

Though Senegal adopted a law in 2005 prohibiting forced begging and child trafficking, only a handful of cases have been prosecuted.

In July 2015, the government's anti-trafficking unit took its first census of over 1,000 Quranic schools but the unit lacks the resources to check every *daara*, and the police don't know exactly how many of them exist. The *daaras* are unregulated, set up in abandoned buildings and unfinished construction projects. The Senegalese parliament has yet to pass a law regulating these schools, and does not have a scheduled date for discussion. Every year on April 20, the country observes National Talibe Day and the issue of *talibes* comes up for discussion but, year after year, little progress is made.

Since 2010, just one exploitative

Quranic teacher has been convicted and sentenced to one month in prison, under the anti-trafficking law. The lack of reporting abuses to authorities is rooted in the low awareness across Senegalese society about how to handle trafficking and forced begging.

Unfortunately, the current budgetary support does not account for the extra capacity and resources needed to close schools that violate the law's standards and find appropriate shelter for children while mediating their return to their families.

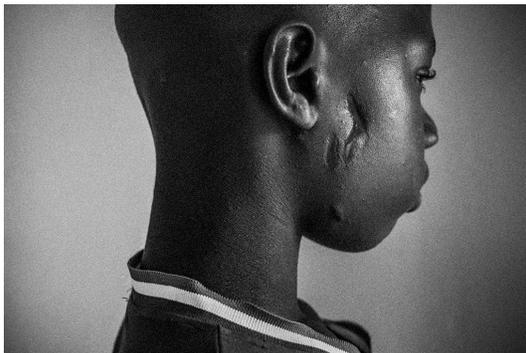
Following heightened media attention on child begging in Senegal in 2010, thirteen Quranic teachers were convicted for forcing children to beg under the 2005 anti-trafficking law. But 12 were given six-month suspended sentences and fines of \$160, well below the minimum penalties.



Children that used to be talibes cool off at SOS Talibe Center in Bafata, Guinea-Bissau, June 8, 2015. The Center received 45 cases of talibes returning from Senegal in 2014. Some of them ran away from *daaras* but others were handed over to the authorities by Marabouts when brought to the courts

The Life of a *Talibe*

“Every day I try not to cry. Every day I try not to scream. I don't sleep. I just close my eyes and imagine myself in a different place. I don't know who my family is, I just know that I'm not from here...I'm tired of being beaten, even when I have the money I get beaten. I know stories about dead *talibes* but I'm not afraid of death anymore.” Amadou is 15 years old.



Demba Fati, 14, outside the medical support room of Mason de La Gare center in St. Louis, Senegal, May 20, 2015. His Marabout beat him with an iron rod after he tried to escape.

Inside a *daara* each *talibe* has a different posture, some are crying, some are fighting the tiredness, some are silent, but they all tremble with fear. Most of them don't know where they came from or who their families are. The only thing they know is violence. The youngest boys often are shackled to stop them from trying to run away.

It's getting harder every day for all *talibes* to keep up with their guardians' demands. More *talibes* on the streets means less money for each one. They know that it will be impossible to collect the amount of money imposed by the *marabout* and that means only one thing: punishment.

The demands of *marabouts* are growing as more money is demanded even as the number of *talibes* grow and in the

face of the limited resources of people in Senegal.

Not only the amount of money required is increasing but also the *marabout* demands are changing, with some of them using *talibes* as cheap labor for different kinds of services or forcing them to dig for valuable goods in large garbage dumps around cities.



Abdoulaye, 15, imprisoned in one room of a daara in the Diamaguene area, city of Thies, Senegal, May 18, 2015. The rooms have windows with security bars to keep the talibes from running away.

Sadly, many of these children can stay enslaved for many years in a long a dramatic path towards despair but some of them flee and take a chance living on the street. Some of them become what they hated most when they reach adolescence in a horrible cycle that infects Senegalese society.



A talibe begs in a bridge in the city of Thies, Senegal,. Many of them spend their days almost without eating and end up sleeping on the street out of fatigue.

The Power of the Lens

My purpose in this project has been to alert the world to this systematic exploitation and abuse of children and bring back documentary evidence that would demand a response from the international community.

In July 2009, I was in Guinea-Bissau when I first heard stories about Guinean children who were taken to Senegal to work and beg for Quranic teachers. Many of them had disappeared while playing in remote areas; others were

given by their parents after promises made by *marabouts*. These stories stayed with me.

In early 2015, I started planning an in-depth project about what was happening in Senegal. I made contact with Human Rights Watch, Senegal's Ministry of Justice and local NGO's focused on the *talibes*, like Voices of *Talibes*. I thought I was ready to document the disturbing reality of child slaves but, in truth, I could never be fully prepared to see children whipped and chained in front of me.



Ibrahima Ndao, *marabout* of a *daara* in Rufisque, whips a *talibe* child after he makes a mistake reading an excerpt of the Quran, May 17, 2015. The *talibes* are subjected to physical violence when they fail to get the daily quota imposed by the *marabout* or if they make a mistake while reading the Quran.

After six months of research and investigation, I traveled to Senegal and gained access to several *daaras* across the country: in Dakar, Rufisque, Keuer Massar, Diamaguene, Saint Louis and Touba, where I also followed the lives of many *talibes* that had run away. After

Senegal, I went to Guinea Bissau, to visit shelters, families and border points to track the child trafficking that fed some of the *daaras*.

Despite the magnitude of the *talibe* system, I strongly believe that by

reporting and sharing the suffering of so many children we can bring needed attention to this problem and change to the criminal and exploitative *talibes* system in Senegal. After publishing the first series of “*Talibes*, Modern-day

Slaves” he won World Press Photo - 1st Prize for Contemporary Issues (Stories) raising international awareness and pressuring the Senegalese government to address the issue.



Runaway *talibes* stand on the bank of Senegal river, in Saint Louis city, north of Senegal, May 20, 2015. Saint Louis is known as Talibe City. A city with small proportions compared to Dakar but with a large number of *talibes*, because many of them choose the streets instead of *daaras*.

About Mario Cruz

Born in 1987, in Lisbon, Portugal.

Mario Cruz studied Photojournalism at Cenjor - Professional School of Journalism. In 2006 he began working with LUSA – Portuguese News Agency / EPA – European Pressphoto Agency.

Since 2012, he has been focused on his personal projects dedicated to social justice and human rights.

Awards

Winner of Estacao Imagem Mora Award, 2014 for “Recent Blindness” -

Winner of Magnum 30 Under 30 Award for “Roof”

Winner of World Press Photo 2016: Contemporary Issues: Stories for “Talibes, Modern-day slaves” -

Winner POYi 2016 - Issue Reporting Picture Story

Publication

Mario Cruz's work has been published in Newsweek, The New York Times LENS Blog, The International New York Times, TIME Magazine Lightbox, CNN, CTXT and Neue Zürcher Zeitung.

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Talibes, Modern-day Slaves in the Press

NEWSWEEK: [The Truth About Child Trafficking in Senegal](#)

CNN: [It's Supposed To Be a School](#)

About FotoEvidence

FotoEvidence was founded in 2010 by Svetlana Bachevanova with the intention of publishing the work of documentary photographers working on long-term projects that focus on social justice and human rights. In addition, each year the FotoEvidence Book Award publishes a book for one photographer whose project demonstrates courage and commitment in the pursuit of human rights.

FotoEvidence's website: <http://www.fotoevidence.com>