

# Impressions of *Talibés* and Islamic Education in Senegal

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*“Madame, cent francs Madame!”*

I am fixed to my car seat and do not know what to say or even how to react. I awkwardly turn my head and pretend not to pay attention to the children crowded around the car, stretching their hands through my open window. My emotions are conflicted but I do what I learned growing up. I ignore the situation.

This first encounter with *talibé* children was on a hot morning in September during my first trip to Senegal in the fall of 2011. I remember clearly how these boys boldly came up to me in the street, asking for money, not only making me uncomfortable but also triggering a curiosity in me that made me want to research these children's lives in more depth and find out the history behind the practices that they were involved in. Why were they ever-present on the streets of Dakar, coming up to me asking for money? Where was this money going and why were they dressed in rags and covered in dirt? Where did they live? I did not know anything about these boys, their stories or the complex traditions that lay behind their presence in the urban landscape.

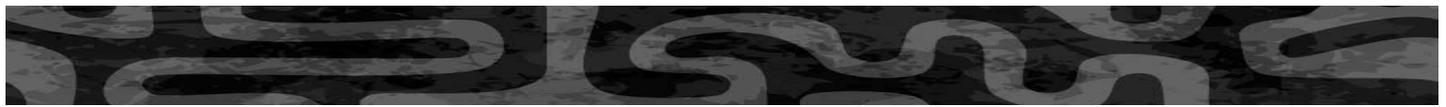
Although I was able to answer some of these questions during my first trip to Senegal through casual conversations, it was not until I started my studies at Brandeis a few months later that I really concentrated on the subject, in one class about Francophone Africa and another about child development. However, doing academic research and writing papers did not provide enough of an explanation for me. I needed to observe and interact with these children in order to better

comprehend their situation. So two years after my first encounter with the *talibés*, I returned to Senegal to intern with *Pour Une Enfance*, an organization that focuses on improving these boys' lives on a daily basis.

## The Debate

I know that international organizations such as UNICEF<sup>1</sup> and Human Rights Watch<sup>2</sup> have published reports that call attention to the *talibés'* lack of access to formal education opportunities and their difficult living conditions, among many other aspects of this religious educational system. These international organizations, along with many smaller non-governmental organizations, have been trying to raise awareness of what they consider inhumane and dangerous aspects of the *talibé* institution and have spearheaded many international initiatives to mitigate these.

However, during my studies I could not help but notice that such reports condemn this religious system, deeply rooted within Senegalese society since the spread of Islam, without necessarily considering the local rationale for it.



Most *talibés* are sent away to these Qur'anic schools by their own parents. This raises the question of why someone would voluntarily send their child to be educated in institutions that have been condemned for their harsh living environment on so many levels. But in fact, the hardship is an aspect of Senegalese education that is valued. In the eyes of many Senegalese, the separation of the child from his parents teaches him to adapt to different situations and to become more independent and stand on his own feet.<sup>3</sup>

Additionally, some parents believe that sending away one of their children to study with a Qur'anic master (in most cases, only one child per family will receive this kind of intensive religious education) helps to ensure the reproduction of religious practices, and, by giving up the benefits of keeping their child at home, they ultimately seek to be rewarded by God. In short, the motivation of most Senegalese to send their children away is deeply rooted in their Islamic religious belief.<sup>4</sup>

I was aware of these two different viewpoints – one from an outsider perspective, condemning the *talibé* system as based on the international understanding of “children’s rights,” and the other from an insider perspective, justifying this practice as part of the religious system rooted in Senegalese society – before I left for my internship. During the eight weeks I would spend interning for *Pour Une Enfance*, I hoped to be able to explore these different viewpoints at a deeper level.

It is a Monday morning at seven o'clock. The song *Gindima* by Aida Samb, one of the up-and-coming Senegalese pop singers, starts playing on my roommate's cell phone in order to wake us up. I appear from under my mosquito net, and choose an outfit that I think will be appropriate for the first day of my internship: a long skirt and a T-shirt. After sharing my breakfast –

a cup of Nescafe and a piece of baguette spread with margarine – with the other volunteers, we leave the house and walk towards the *route nationale*, where we are going to catch a collective taxi.

All I know about the organization I will be working with is the little information that I have been able to gather on its website and through the conversations that I have had with my site supervisor, who is also my host father, since my arrival a few days earlier. For now, all I know is that the organization is attempting to ameliorate the living conditions of the *talibé* children through providing them with an infirmary, literacy classes, sewing classes, and games and activities.

My feet move slowly through the warm sand. We finally arrive at the center after a 10-minute walk from where the collective taxi has dropped us off. A fence encloses the property on which stands a rectangular, dirty yellow building. In front of this building, a well is being built. As I cross the door of the fence I see a few children sitting on the front steps, waiting for the volunteers and interns to arrive. I recall my previous encounters with children who looked just like these during my first trip to Senegal. Their torn clothes, their dirty hands and feet, and the mischievousness in their eyes are the same. These are the *talibé* children whom I will be working with for the next eight weeks. Their shy smiles welcome me.

### Islam in Senegal

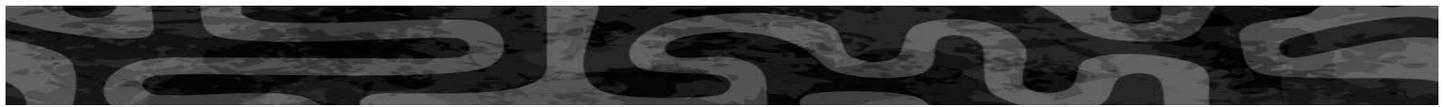
Although I have chosen to work with the *talibés* in the city of Mbour, I know that these children are present in the streets of all major cities of Senegal. This rather small country of about 13.1 million, located at the Western tip of Africa, is considered part of the Muslim world. In fact, the majority of Senegalese, around 94 percent of the population, are Sunni Muslims.<sup>5</sup> The religion is and has been omnipresent

throughout the country since the 11th century and has great influence in both the public and private spheres.

Today, practically all Senegalese Muslims are affiliated with one of the four Sufi brotherhoods that are present within the country. The term Sufism refers to the mystical aspect of Islam, meaning that Sufis focus on a deeper understanding of God than that which can be attained solely through practicing the five pillars of Islam (witnessing God's oneness, praying five times a day, giving alms,

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fasting during the month of Ramadan, and making the pilgrimage to Mecca if able). Although these Sufi orders are characterized by some noticeable differences, they also share some common aspects. For example, the hierarchy within these orders is usually set up in a similar manner. A caliph, a man who can trace his descendants back to the founder of the particular order, heads each one of them. Below the caliph, elders referred to as *sheikhs* are responsible for passing on the religious knowledge and education within the order. These *sheikhs* are also commonly called *marabouts*. The last rank



within the religious hierarchy of the Sufi orders is that of the *talibé*. This position is that of the student, also seen as the seekers of the Sufi way. Each *talibé* has a *sheikh* or *marabout* who as his spiritual leader teaches him everything that he needs to know about religion and gives him guidance throughout many levels of life. In return, the *talibé* submits to and serves his spiritual leader.<sup>6</sup>

The children, who are sitting in front of the center curiously examining a skinny kitten that is trying to get up the steps, are part of this religious hierarchy. Most of them are probably still at the very early stages of their religious education, as most seem to be between the ages of four and 16 years old. They do not particularly pay attention to me. I am not surprised. I am probably just another intern coming for a short period of time in order to help out at *Pour Une Enfance*. I know that these *talibés* are part of this system that has been in place in Senegal for centuries. I know that the Sufi orders are among the most important institutions within Senegalese society, influencing every aspect of the country's workings, including social relations, cultural expression, economics and politics.<sup>7</sup> However, I also know that many of these children, entrusted to their *marabouts* by their parents at an early age, live a childhood that is anything but easy. Most of them wake up early in the morning and spend their days studying the Qur'an. When they are not studying, most of them are roaming the streets to collect money for the *marabouts* and even to find the meals that are not always provided by their spiritual leaders. I have come to Senegal not only to learn more about these children and what their living situations are really like, but also to try to improve their daily routines and to bring an open mind about the *talibé* institution, trying to understand the reasoning of all opinions.

I take a few colorful balloons out of the storage room and blow them up. A horde of 15 children comes running my way. I throw one of the balloons in the air and one of the boys quickly jumps over to catch it and immediately thrusts it back into the air. A wild game of passing balloons around the game room begins. The children jump and run around and their cheerful laughter fills the room. They do not get tired of the game. Fifteen minutes later we are still passing the balloons and the children are still as energetic about this simple game as they were at the beginning.

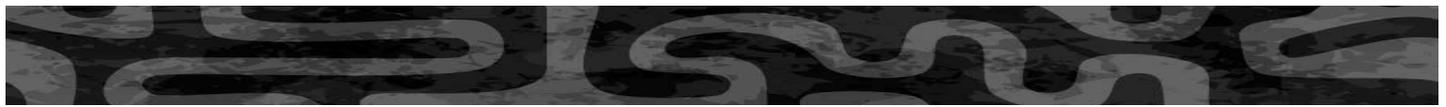
I cannot help but think about what their daily routines would be like if this center did not exist and if they did not have the opportunity to play games like these with the simple materials provided by *Pour Une Enfance*. They would probably be roaming around the streets of Mbour, just like those *talibés* that I first encountered in Dakar, asking passers-by for a few *francs CFA*.<sup>8</sup> Maybe they would be waiting in front of the house of some family for the mother of the household to call out "*Talibé!*" in order to give them the leftovers of the last meal, just like I have observed my host mother doing for the past few days.

According to a Human Rights Watch report on *talibé* children, many *marabouts* are accused of neglecting the nutrition and health needs of the children that they are guiding in their Qur'anic education.<sup>9</sup> Many of the children I see in front of me are wearing dirty clothes that have more holes than cloth, and some of them have crusts of dirt covering their bodies. I also know that they are not all being fed by their *marabouts* on a regular basis, or even at all, because Souleymane, my supervisor, has assigned me and the other volunteers to a project of serving breakfast to the children every morning to ensure they get at least one meal per day.

It is nine o'clock and some of the children whom I have been playing with get impatient and ask me what time it is. When I tell them, they give me back the balloons and run off. I do not understand what is going on. My supervisor fills me in. They have to go back to their respective *daara*, the Qur'anic schools where they recite and learn the Qur'an.

*Daaras* are informal educational structures that are meant to ensure the Qur'anic and basic religious education of children. They are generally led by a *marabout* who is both the main teacher of the school as well as the person in charge of the *talibés* attending it. The children are usually sent to these schools by their parents who live in more rural parts of the country, with the wish that their children will lead lives as pious Muslims, dedicated to God. The *talibé* children who come to the center on a more or less regular basis are from many different *daaras* in the area of Mbour. Although some of these schools are nearby, some of the children have to walk for over an hour to get from their *daara* to the center in the morning. I find out that there are specific hours during which they have to be present at the *daara* to learn so they cannot be at the center. However, some of the children stay longer because their schedules are different.

My next activity is going to be a puzzle. I help the children piece the few dozen cardboard pieces together. I am not sure that they actually understand the concept of a puzzle, as they are trying to force pieces to fit one another that just don't. We finally finish. The picture on the puzzle depicts a scene from *The Lion King*. I would be surprised if any of these children knew about the movie, yet they are proud to have completed the task and are eager for me to take many pictures of them with their completed project.



One of the volunteers who has already spent a few weeks at the organization makes a sign for me to come into the storage room. He gives me a handful of candy that he has bought and tells me that we can distribute these among the *talibés*. I don't really think twice about it and go outside to hand them to the children. But as soon as they have spotted the candy, they go crazy! I should have thought about this before. Suddenly I am surrounded by what feels like a hundred little hands stretching towards me, pushing each other out of the way. One by one I give out the candies, trying to make them understand with my almost non-existent knowledge of Wolof, one of the local languages spoken in Senegal, to stand in a line so that I can hand it out to them one at a time. I cannot seem to make them understand this concept so I give up and just hand candy to as many hands as I can. I notice that the crowd of children around me is not getting smaller at all. I look up and realize that some of the *talibés* have been standing next to me since the beginning, asking for more and more candy even though they have already been given some.

It is clear that these children rarely get treats like candy so they jump on any opportunity to have as much of it as possible. Even though it is only my first day of work, I already start asking myself a question that will follow me during the entirety of my internship. Is the work of *Pour Une Enfance* making any difference in the lives of the *talibés*? And if so, is this difference of any deeper meaning than filling the children's stomachs in the morning and entertaining them? I know that there are many other organizations throughout the country that do the same type of work as *Pour Une Enfance*, and all of them think that they are improving the lives of the *talibés*. But I am not sure in what ways their lives are truly bettered.

Finally, my first day at the Center is over. I am overwhelmed by a collection of first impressions. Although I already had a pretty thorough background on who the *talibés* were and how this practice was incorporated into the Senegalese society, today was the first time I interacted with them in a situation where they were not asking me for alms on the street. It is as if this was the first human interaction with them that did not immediately highlight the difference in status between the children and myself. They were not asking me for something that I had and they needed. Rather we shared some moments together through games and laughter.

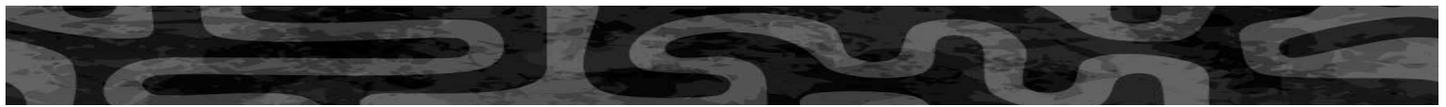
With the group of volunteers, I walk back to the place where we can catch a taxi. It seems like an eternal walk through the sand, under the burning hot sun. We finally get into a collective taxi that will take us close to where we live. While we are waiting for the taxi to leave, a few *talibés* come over and ask us for some money. In a way, this is very ironic. I think that I am able to recognize some of the faces that I saw earlier that day at the Center. Indeed, one of the volunteers who has been at *Pour Une Enfance* for longer knows some of their names and greets them. After he jokes around with the children for a short while, our lack of Wolof language skills making it impossible to have a real interaction, the taxi finally leaves. When we get home, I lie down on my bed in the little room that I share with one of the other volunteers, just to take the morning in and reflect on my first impressions. So many things happened. It was just the first day. The first day of many to come when I would teach and learn and come to know better these children who are part of such a complex religious and social institution.

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### ***Pour Une Enfance***

*Pour Une Enfance* was founded by a French woman who believes that it is important to help and support the *talibé* children through their hard daily lives. By offering them access to medical care and emergency treatment, as well as the opportunity to attend French literacy classes, sewing classes and recreational and educational activities, the organization strives to not only offer the children a more healthy and hygienic lifestyle but also to give them a chance at learning skills that might lead to future professions.

The name the founder chose for this particular organization is particularly interesting to me and clearly illustrates the initial discontent that she must have felt for the system of which the *talibé* are part. *Pour Une Enfance*, meaning "For a Childhood" in French, suggests that these children are deprived of a childhood, something that the organization



strives to give back to them. However, the discussion does not end here. Even though in a French woman's eyes these children do not have much of a childhood – at least in the sense in which she understands it – can we simply assume that the Western idea of childhood is applicable within the Senegalese context?

Just this small snapshot of the organization's founding and its name clearly indicates that *Pour Une Enfance* is aligned with the position held by most international organizations on the Senegalese system of Qur'anic education. Although the goals of the organization seem very pragmatic, over the time of my internship I start to question more and more the position of the outsider within the whole of this structure. Why was it that this organization was founded and run by someone who only knew Senegal as a visitor and tourist? Why were most of the organizations like this one run by foreigners? Was there no initiative on the part of the Senegalese themselves to address the *talibé* system? Did they not have the means to start up their own organizations, or did they simply not see the same level of misery in the lives of these children?

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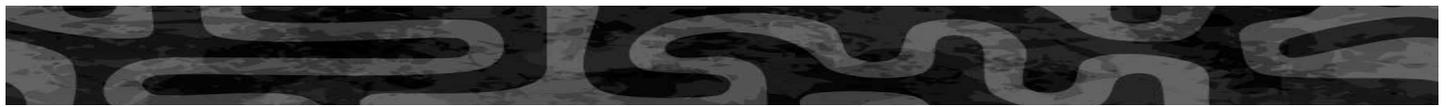
A few days later, Souleymane tells us that we are going on our first visit of a *daara*. This particular one is not far from the *Pour Une Enfance* center. In the morning he advises all of us girl volunteers to dress appropriately, meaning something that completely covers our legs. We diligently follow his instructions; we do not want to look unprofessional for this visit. I am personally very curious about what I will see. I have heard extreme stories of the very poor living conditions of the *talibés*. In fact, according to a Humans Rights Watch report, most of the *daaras* in urban areas of the country go hand in hand with issues such as overcrowding and lack of sanitation, hygiene and running water.<sup>10</sup>

A little group of volunteers, led by Souleymane, walks through the sandy roads that run between the very basic looking cement houses of the neighborhood. After 10 minutes we arrive in front of a metal gate, crookedly hung in between two cement walls. Souleymane pushes it aside, and we make our way into the front yard. Some chickens are running across our way and I can discern the chanting of the *talibé* boys in one of the adjacent rooms, probably reciting the Qur'an in unison. A fully-bearded man dressed in a long white *boubou*, the traditional Senegalese attire, and a cap that many religious figures in Senegal wear, walks out of the house. He shakes Souleymane's hand to greet him. Being in front of all the volunteers I stretch out my hand to shake the man's hand, following the Senegalese etiquette of always shaking someone's hand when greeting. Souleymane awkwardly motions at me to take my hand back. He later informs me that *marabouts* do not usually greet women unless they are married to them. I feel a little bit ashamed of my mistake, but nobody seems to make a big deal out of it and the *marabout* invites us to sit down on a mat that he has laid out on the floor

for us. The *marabout* and Souleymane engage in conversation, in Wolof. The *marabout* does not speak French. He was only taught Arabic in addition to the local languages that he grew up with. Once in a while, Souleymane translates the conversation to us, but only very briefly and I have no idea about all the detail that might be left out. Apparently, they are talking about the center, its goals, projects and the necessary collaboration with the *marabouts* that the Center wants to develop.

For about 20 minutes, as we listen to a conversation that we cannot follow, we try to peek around to get a better image of what this *daara* is like, and what the rooms are like in which the children live and study. After the conversation finally comes to an end, the *marabout* shows us around. We look into the room where the *talibés* are reciting the Qur'an. There are about 40 boys crowded into a small area, kneeling on the floor, holding their wooden tablets on which they have written a verse of the Qur'an, reciting it in unison while rocking their bodies back and forth. The *marabout* informs us that he only educates children from the neighborhood, so there are none who live with him in the *daara*. I am disappointed, as I had wanted to see how some of the children who regularly come to the center live. But before I can even express this disappointment, Souleymane informs us that we are going on from there to visit another *daara*.

It is getting hotter and hotter and the sun is burning down on my head. We have been walking for about 20 minutes and we are still looking for our next destination. Souleymane is asking random people on the street to point us towards the *daara* that we are looking for, but everyone sends us in a different direction.



Finally we arrive outside of what is a rather nice looking compound compared to the other houses in the neighborhood. An older man welcomes us; his wife is preparing a meal in the background. I do not make the same mistake as the first time, I only nod and greet him with a confident “*Salaam maalekum!*” – the Senegalese greeting borrowed from the Arabic language.

We do not stay long and the *marabout* designates another man to accompany our group to the place where his *talibés* are housed. My expectations about the living conditions of this place drop immediately. The children definitely do not live in the nice compound that their spiritual leader lives in. We walk a few blocks away and arrive in front of a rusted door that is the entrance into a dark cement compound. Inside, there are three near-empty rooms. Inside one there are a few pieces of clothing and two thin mattresses filled with holes, thrown on the ground into one of the corners. The room has one minuscule window that barely lets in any light, let alone fresh air. This place looks abandoned, but the man tells us that this is the room where the children live. As we walk back outside, I see a box filled with wooden tablets and pages with Arabic scriptures on them. Some of the reports that I have read back at Brandeis during my research about the *talibés* come to mind. Although some of them described even worse places, this is not so far from what most of them reported. There is no running water and the man explains to us that the nearest well is about a 10-minute walk away. I shudder at the thought of about 50 young boys between the ages of four and 16 living alone in this dreary place.

On our way back to the *Pour Une Enfance* center, and even throughout the afternoon, I keep thinking about our visit to the two *daaras*. Although I have been

interacting with the *talibés* for days now, it was the first time that I had come into contact with their living environment. I could finally put their lives into context, by seeing what their lives were like outside of the confines of the center. As I was thinking and reevaluating this experience, I became conscious of the fact that it was necessary to also put the images that I had seen earlier this day into the context of the larger Senegal society and an average Senegalese person’s way of life. Walking through different neighborhoods of Mbour, and even recalling some of the living environments that I had seen during my first trip to Senegal in various neighborhoods of Dakar, I realized that many of the reports about *talibés* that I had read in the past were based on a Western perception of what we value as good and bad living conditions. In fact, on many occasions I had seen Senegalese families that lived in worse conditions than the places we had visited that day.

During my first trip to Senegal, I encountered a life and society that could not have been more different from what I had known back home. Even though I had many international experiences – being born in Germany, growing up in Switzerland, going to high school in the United States and traveling to many countries throughout Europe and some Latin American nations – I entered an unknown world, with many challenges and situations that I had to adapt to. Now that I had come back to Senegal for the second time, I was reminded of the fact that not only was the society I was living in structured in a completely different way from what I grew up with, but also that the norms and values were drastically different from what I had known. Although the *daara* that we had visited that morning seemed like a morbid, dirty and unhygienic place to live, poor families all throughout Senegal were living in similar conditions. Running water was not a given, I realized, but rather

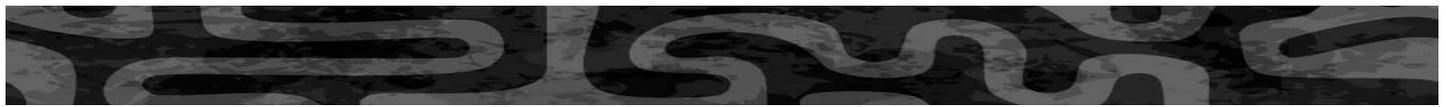
a privilege that only a small percentage of the country had access to.

Being conscious of this reality that I had not always considered, I continued to question the work of organizations such as *Pour Une Enfance*, trying to improve local children’s lives. What was the ultimate goal that the people founding these organizations were trying to achieve? I knew that *Pour Une Enfance*, specifically, was not trying to eradicate the *talibé* practice in Senegal, as some others wanted to. But they did still approach the entirety of the practice as something that needed to be battled.

### The volunteers

Except for the doctor who runs the infirmary, the team of *Pour Une Enfance* is entirely made up of volunteers, including both locals and international visitors. The local team consists of Souleymane, the administrator and head of all local operations; Ababacar, who is in charge of the literacy program; and the two “*talibé* mothers” Maguette and Nogaye. Although I was not able to completely figure out Maguette’s reason for working with *Pour Une Enfance*, I would like to write a little bit more about her and the relationship I was able to build with her during my internship, despite the fact that we did not share a language.

Maguette is a 27 year old woman who volunteers daily at the *talibé* center. Her radiant smile lights up in the morning when she sees me coming in through the metal gate that separates the Center’s land from the rest of the neighborhood. “Nelly!!! *Ça va?*” Her French is very limited, as she never had the opportunity to attend school when she was younger. Now the interns are teaching her the basics when there is not much to do around the Center. She has four children, her oldest daughter being 13 years old. This means that Maguette



had her first child at the age of 14. I can't help but think about the kinds of things that I was doing when I was 14 years old. While Maguette was settling down with her husband, preparing to be a housewife and mother for the rest of her life, I was doing the contrary: spreading my wings and getting ready to leave home to broaden my study experiences. I was applying to boarding school in the United States.

When I look at Maguette's story and then look at mine, comparing our two narratives, it becomes real to me: as much as the difference in our economic status is always present, what makes us even more different is the past and future opportunities that are unequally distributed between us. While Maguette had to assume real life responsibilities at a young age, I was getting ready to live far from my family for the first time, being given the opportunity to learn another language and learn about another country and culture. I wonder if such opportunities could have ever appeared in Maguette's life – given that she has only had a religious education and cannot read or write in French – and if they had, how would it have changed the course of her life?

These are thoughts that go through my head daily when I spend yet another morning sharing work and laughter with Maguette. Even though we do not speak a common language, we have become very close friends. Even though so many things separate us, we share and enjoy the same moments together. And even though we have had such different pasts, we are now volunteering for the same organization. I wonder how she would explain her reason for her being here, her motivations for working with *Pour Une Enfance*.

In order to complete and support the Senegalese team, the organization also recruits volunteers from overseas throughout the year. Most of these

volunteers come from Europe, more specifically Francophone European countries – France, Switzerland and Belgium. These volunteers come for many different reasons, which becomes noticeable through the work that they choose to do at the organization. During my internship, I saw volunteers ranging from a father trying to show his spoiled 15 year old son the hardship of some children's lives in this world, to young university students like me who became interested in the *talibés* and decided to deepen their knowledge about them by working with *Pour Une Enfance* firsthand. All of us got placed into the same host family, not only working together but also living together. The different ideas and points of view that each volunteer brought to the organization diversified the work that *Pour Une Enfance* tried to achieve, with each intern valuing different aspects of it more than others.

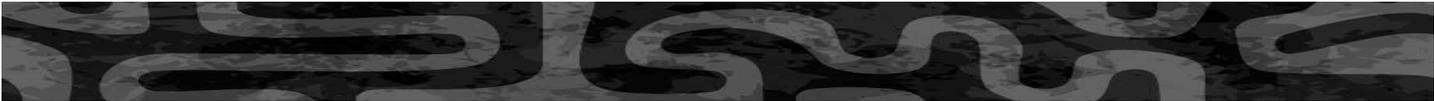
I am sitting on the steps in front of the door of our host family's house with some of the younger volunteers who have also become my close friends over the past few weeks. It is late afternoon and finally cooling down a bit. We are looking out onto the wide street in front of the house. Across the way, Doudou, one of our neighbors, waves in our direction. I start discussing the leadership within the organization with two other volunteers. For all of us, it does not make sense that the president lives in France, only spending a few weeks per year actually in Senegal. During the rest of the year, Souleymane acts as the local head of the organization. However, he also works for a hotel in the neighboring town of Saly, the main tourist destination in Senegal, abundant with fancy resorts bordering the beach. So he, too, does not have the time to completely invest himself in the work of the organization.

Over the course of the eight weeks that I spend in Mbour, I become more aware of some of the loopholes that exist within

this type of organization. One of the major issues that seems to arise over and over again is that of the disconnect between what the organization's president from France wants to achieve, and what is actually happening locally. This is not only because the Senegalese members of the organization do not necessarily have the time to implement all the president's plans, but also because of the differences in the way that the *Pour Une Enfance* leadership in France and its Senegalese team members conceptualize priorities. For example, the leadership is trying to emphasize the importance of the French literacy classes more, because to them it seems like a crucial skill for the *talibés'* future, whereas the Senegalese team focuses more on the daily distribution of breakfast to the *talibés* – an initiative that was developed during my internship time – because it answers an urgent ongoing need.

When I begin to notice these disconnections, I realize that they mirror the disparity that exists between the international community's view and the local perception of the *talibé* institution itself. In fact these disparities continue to demonstrate the contrast between what we could refer to as the "outsider" and "insider" perspectives. While both sides carry valid opinions, they are rooted in different values and experiences, which often seem to be misaligned.

During one of the daily breakfast distributions at the center, I think about the importance of this meal for these children. Every boy receives a little plastic mug filled with warm, sugared milk and a fifth of baguette bread with margarine spread on it. Once they have realized that we are starting the distribution, the room becomes rowdy, and within seconds about 20 little hands surround me asking to be served first. For a few minutes they push each other around, and loudly throw words at each other until the last one has gotten



served. Then they finally all sit quietly on the mats and the only noise that can be heard is the slurping of the boys sipping their milk and the chewing of their bread. In their faces I read satisfaction.

I recognize that, even though the organization that I am interning with might not always be as efficient as it could be in terms of working towards its stated goals, these simple gestures that my coworkers are taking, such as providing one meal daily to the *talibés* along with other services such as medical care, might actually make an immediate difference in the lives of these children. On the other hand, for the projects that need more regular time investment on the part of the children, such as literacy and sewing instruction, the success is less guaranteed and it takes more effort and time on the part of the organization to establish a suitable program.

However, I am an outsider as well. In large part, all I can do is observe. I observe what the lifestyle of the *talibés* is like and what their living environment is like through the lens of my own experiences and my personal set of values. Even though I might think that my thought process is the right one, the person next to me, who grew up within the context of Senegalese society, might have a completely different opinion about the *talibés* and whether their lives are harsh. During my internship at *Pour Une Enfance*, I was not only able to assist the organization in implementing some of the projects that it was working towards, but I also learned to value differing opinions on the very work we were doing.

One of the local volunteers calls us into a room where all the *talibés* have gathered. It is the last day of my internship. Soon I will return to the world I have grown up in, taking back many memories, some of them happier than others. One of the boys starts to say something in Wolof, and Ben translates it for us. He thanks

us for coming to the Center everyday. I am touched. After all, maybe it *did* make a difference to these boys that I came all the way to Senegal. Later that day when Souleymane and I talk about my now completed internship, I discuss with him the recurring doubts I have had during my internship about my place within the organization, and my personal purpose for being here. He looks me in the eyes and says: “Nelly, you came all the way over here for these children and they know that. That is enough.” Although I don’t know if this answer is enough for me, I accept it as the only one I will receive for now

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### Notes

1. Dr. Thorsen, Dorte, “Children Begging for Qur’anic School Masters” Evidence from West and Central Africa (UNICEF: 2012).
2. “Off the Backs of the Children” Forced Begging and Other Abuses against Talibés in Senegal (Human Rights Watch: 2010).
3. Hecker, Amanda, Dakar Is Not the Village: Transformations in the Senegalese Talibé Experience (Senior Honors Thesis, Brandeis University: 2010), 24.
4. Perry, D.L. Muslim child disciples, global civil society, and children’s rights in Senegal: The discourses of strategic structuralism (Anthropological Quarterly, 77: 2004), 47-86.
5. Ross, Eric, Culture and Customs of Senegal (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2008), 31.
6. *Ibid.*, 34.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Franc CFA is the currency of Senegal. 1 US dollar currently equals 486 CFA.
9. “Off the Backs of the Children” (Human Rights Watch: 2010), 47.
10. *Ibid.*, 43.

When I begin to notice these disconnections, I realize that they mirror the disparity that exists between the international community’s view and the local perception of the *talibé* institution itself. In fact these disparities continue to demonstrate the contrast between what we could refer to as the “outsider” and “insider” perspectives. While both sides carry valid opinions, they are rooted in different values and experiences, which often seem to be misaligned.