social sciences

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# Begging for Knowledge in Senegal: Conflicting Understandings and Interests of the Dominant Anti-Trafficking Approach and Quranic Education

**Hamadou Boiro and Jónína Einarsdóttir ***

Faculty of Sociology, Anthropology and Folkloristics, School of Social Sciences, University of Iceland, IS-102 Reykjavik, Iceland; hab47@hi.is
* Correspondence: je@hi.is

**Abstract:** Diverse actors, including foreign and national states, international agencies, donors, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and private ventures, demand, fund, and implement anti-trafficking activities worldwide. Bissau-Guinean Quran schoolboys begging in Senegalese cities are defined as victims of child trafficking, and their teachers as traffickers. This article aims to explore the Quran teachers' understanding of begging and their response to being accused of child trafficking. It rests on data collected during anthropological fieldwork in Guinea-Bissau and Senegal since 2009, including interviews and participation in religious events. The Quran teachers, some of whom admit colleagues might exploit their students, highlight four aspects of begging: allowing poor populations economically to study the Quran; contributing to humbleness, humility, and empathy with underprivileged groups; redistributing resources across generations; and allowing the acquisition of knowledge, liberation, and power. They maintain that the NGOs are profiting from funds provided to "rescue" the students and act as real traffickers, and together with funders, they aim to eliminate Islam. Embedded in layers of coloniality, the Quran teachers keep their position as community leaders. Banning begging is bound to fail if the anti-trafficking NGOs ignore their understanding of meaningful suffering and begging, including the economic and religious aspects of alms-seeking and its reciprocal nature.

**Keywords:** Guinea-Bissau; non-governmental organisations; religious leaders; Quran schoolboys; Islam; liberation; power



**Citation:** Boiro, Hamadou, and Jónína Einarsdóttir. 2024. Begging for Knowledge in Senegal: Conflicting Understandings and Interests of the Dominant Anti-Trafficking Approach and Quranic Education. *Social Sciences* 13: 288. https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci13060288

Academic Editor: Mara Clemente

Received: 10 April 2024
Revised: 21 May 2024
Accepted: 24 May 2024
Published: 28 May 2024



## 1. Introduction

Scholars most frequently define begging as an individual's request for money or gifts from an unknown person, without providing anything in return (Reinhard 2023, p. 3), and, at times, the request should happen in a public place (Kennedy and Fitzpatrick 2001, p. 2001; Wahlstedt 2013, p. 6). Among the factors found to result in begging are anti-social behaviour, laziness, exploitation, poverty, religious aspirations, and cultural customs (Human Rights Watch 2010; Ogunkan 2011; Agyemang et al. 2020; Johnsen and Fitzpatrick 2010; Rahman 2021). Sabina Yasmin Rahman (2021, p. 207) points out that begging is an ancient, contested practice: "[d]escribed variously as a vagrant, mendicant, panhandler, vagabond, itinerant, and even an ascetic, the beggar of our contemporary world occupies an ambiguous position in relation to the post-modern neoliberal state that seeks to govern them".

Most religions have regarded alms-seeking as honourable when legitimate groups exercised it in a proper context (Erskine and McIntosh 1999; Jordan 1999; Rahman 2021). Such begging denotes a spiritual calling, and giving alms signifies the donor's moral virtue and caring character. While Buddhism, Hinduism, Orthodox Christianity, and Islam all underline the integrity of giving alms to those in need, Orthodox Christianity and Islam finance religious education to various extents with the begging of their students

(Abebe 2008; Binns 2005; Ware III 2014). Indeed, social policy emerged partly through regulating vulnerable groups defined as deserving and thus allowed to beg (Jordan 1999).

While stories suggest that beggars may earn a lot, a recent systematic review concludes that the average income from begging is higher than for recycling or selling blood but less than from activities such as street entertaining, sale of items, theft, prostitution, and selling drugs (Reinhard 2023). According to recent research, a beggar seeking alms daily with a proper strategy can have a reasonably regular income (Lenhard 2021; Thomassen 2015). The relationship between the beggar and the benefactor is complex and may include verbal abuse, physical violence, humiliation, pity, indifference, sympathy, and sociality (Dean 1999a; Rahman 2021; Wahlstedt 2013). Alms-seeking is fraught with ambivalence and suspicion; when meeting street beggars, the pedestrian must morally judge whether the beggar deserves a coin (Dean 1999b). While people's motives for giving alms vary, judging the beggar's worthiness is crucial (Erskine and McIntosh 1999; Fall 1981; Thomassen 2015).

Attempts to regulate begging have been ongoing for centuries (Baldwin 1985; Chill 1962; Dean 1999a; Hufton 1972; McCabe 2018; Iliffe 1984). Since the 1990s, begging has been increasingly banned or regulated worldwide to protect the tourist industry, other businesses, and the public from unwanted intrusion (Dean 1999b). While definitions of voluntary versus forced begging may depend on national legislation, forced begging is classified as human trafficking (U.S. Department of State 2021). Emily Delap (2009, p. 3) points out that, in line with international conventions, "children who are forced to beg are subjected to forced labour". She concludes that, according to the Palermo Protocol, such begging "may include trafficking for the purposes of begging". Delap, who researched child begging in four countries, including Senegal, focused on the *talibés,* who "are sent to live in daaras (religious boarding schools) to learn the Koran from *marabouts* (religious teachers)" (p. 6). Her evidence "suggests that these boys are trafficked under international definitions as they are transported from their home villages and then exploited" (p. 7).

In 2010, Human Rights Watch estimated that "at least 50,000 *talibés* in Senegal who are forced to beg with a view toward exploitation by their teachers, out of the hundreds of thousands of boys attending Quranic schools in total" (Human Rights Watch 2010, p. 64). According to the NGO, impoverished parents from Senegal and neighbouring countries continue to have their boys stay with Quran teachers without payment; for instance, traffickers "bring hundreds, likely thousands, of children from Guinea-Bissau into Senegal each year" (Human Rights Watch 2010, p. 64). Most of the *talibés* in Senegal belong to the Fula of Guinea-Bissau, who refer to them as *almudos* and their teachers as *cernos* (Boiro and Einarsdóttir 2023). The Fula of Guinea-Bissau are divided into two groups, the "Fulbe Rimbe" and the "Fulbe Djiahabe" (Fula terms); historically, the former group included the masters of the latter, who are descendants of enslaved people (Boiro and Einarsdóttir 2023; Einarsdóttir and Boiro 2016).

This article explores how Bissau-Guinean Fula *cernos*, who either reside in Senegal or Guinea-Bissau or move between the two countries, understand begging and how they react to accusations of being child traffickers. The following section provides background information about the setting for fieldwork, Senegal and Guinea-Bissau. After that, there is a section on the methodology and another on the results. The article ends with a discussion of findings and conclusions.

## 2. The Setting

The Republics of Senegal and Guinea-Bissau are West African neighbouring counties, ranking 38 and 22, respectively, on a list with the world's lowest GDP-PPP per capita ($) (Ventura 2024). According to the World Bank (2024b), Senegal, with a population of 16.7 million, is one of Africa's politically most stable countries. Guinea-Bissau has a population of 1.9 million, and in contrast, The World Bank (2024a) describes it as "one of the most coup-prone and politically unstable countries in the world". Of 193 countries, Senegal ranks 123 on the Kids Ranks Index, while Guinea-Bissau ranks 177 (KidsRights 2023). Both countries are accused of inadequate action against Quran teachers who are accused of

forcing their students to beg and thereby becoming child traffickers (U.S. Department of State 2023b, 2023a). In Senegal, 97.2% of the population adheres to Islam compared to 46.1% in Guinea-Bissau (CIA 2024b, 2024a).

Islam has a long history in West Africa, with religious masters teaching the Quran dating back at least a thousand years (Ware III 2014). In Senegal, the elite used to have primary access to Quran studies; however, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, those in lower positions, including enslaved groups, increasingly used such studies to enhance their social status (O'Brien 1971; Ware III 2014; Dilley 2000). In contrast, the Fula of Gabú, the ethnic group in focus for this research, began to adopt Islam in the nineteenth century, with emerging *cerno* families who sought to free themselves from the predominance of the Mandinga and Fuuta Fula, their former religious masters (Carpenter 2012; Gaillard 2002; Niane 1989).

In 2005, Senegal adopted Law No. 2005-6, Combat Trafficking in Persons and Related Practices and Protect Victims, which criminalised all forced begging of minors, including begging of the *talibés* (Anti-Slavery International 2011). Earlier legislation, from 1964, had already banned the begging of children younger than 15 years, and the sentence for allowing minors under one's authority to beg was imprisonment for 3-6 months (Lacroix and Mejia 1995). It is worth noting that, according to the 1964-legislation, alms-seeking in a religious context was not classified as illegitimate begging. The 2005 ban on begging was not implemented until August 2010, when the Senegalese Prime Minister announced a decree that banned begging in public spaces (Callimachi 2010). The ban was a response to threats from the USA to cut aid to Senegal without action to curb child trafficking. Following the decree, the police arrested more than 200 child beggars in Dakar; the foreign beggars were handed over to the respective embassies of their countries, while Senegalese ones were released (Nanagayi 2010). The police arrested a few Quran teachers, and they were sentenced and fined, yet quickly released. With lingering presidential elections, President Abdoulaye Wade withdrew the ban in October of the same year (Anti-Slavery International 2011).

After an impasse in implementing the 2005 ban on begging, President Malky Sall initiated the Removal of Children from the Street project, implemented in 2016-2018. Shona Macleod (2023) identified the use of competing discourses in explaining begging, which justified the dismissal of sanctions against traffickers. Macleod concludes that the project's implementation might have been "an example of the Senegalese state cunningly doing just enough to appease external pressures, without going so far as to anger religious leaders and their followers domestically". Human Rights Watch (2017, p. 36) applauded "political will on the part of the government to address widespread abuses and exploitation of talibé children", while lamenting that the *talibés* were returned to abusive Quran teachers and the failure to have them sentenced. The Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report 2023 for Senegal confirms that the begging of the *talibés* is the most common type of trafficking, with no persecution of their traffickers for three years in a row (U.S. Department of State 2023b).

Until recently, Bissau has been relatively free from child begging and begging in general. However, Quranic schoolboys increasingly beg in the city. Thus, in early August 2017, the Prime Minister ordered the Ministry of Interior to arrest begging children, particularly the *almudos*, and send them to the Bijago Islands (Pereira 2017). National and international human rights and child protection organisations criticised the order and suggested more child-friendly measures. The representative of the Conselho Nacional Islaămico protested and argued that removing the *talibés* from the streets required economic support that allowed them to study the Quran without begging (Agência Lusa 2017). No action was taken to implement the Prime Minister's order. The TIP Report 2023 for Guinea-Bissau informs about a lack of legal action to counteract the forced begging of the boys in Senegal and at home. According to the TIP Report, "[t]he inter-ministerial committee did not conduct anti-trafficking activities. The government continued to lack resources and political will to combat human trafficking comprehensively", and despite anti-trafficking legislation, the Bissau-Guinean authorities have never imprisoned a trafficker (U.S. Department of State 2023a).

## 3. Methodology

This article rests on data collected during a series of fieldwork since the authors initiated their research collaboration in 2009 when working on a study on child trafficking in Guinea-Bissau commissioned by UNICEF (Einarsdóttir et al. 2010). Since then, the authors have continued to research the "talibé issue" (Einarsdóttir and Boiro 2016; Boiro and Einarsdóttir 2020; Boiro et al. 2021; Boiro and Einarsdóttir 2023). Anthropological ethnographic tradition, including informal conversations, semi-structured interviews, focus group interviews, and participant observation, guided the methodology (Bernard 2011; O'Reilly 2012).

This article rests on data collected in Guinea-Bissau and Senegal between 2009 and 2020. While the data collection was conducted whenever an opportunity arose, a series of fieldwork was carried out in July–September 2009, September–October 2010, January 2013, April–July 2014, May–July 2016, March–April 2018, April–May 2019, and July 2020. In Guinea-Bissau, data were collected in the Bafata Region, the Gabú Region, and the autonomous sector of Bissau. In Senegal, data collection was carried out in the Kolda Region and the capital, Dakar. The first author, a native Pulaar speaker, conducted all the interviews with the *cernos*. He conducted 70 semi-structured interviews and organised twenty focus groups in the towns/cities of Bissau, Bafata, Gabú, Kolda, and Dakar. Some of the Bissau-Guinean Fula religious leaders and teachers who provided data for this article reside in Guinea-Bissau, and others move between Guinea-Bissau and Senegal. Before the interviews, the *cernos* were informed about the research and consented to participate. The first author also observed and participated in more than 40 religious celebrations in the two countries, Guinea-Bissau and Senegal. These events bring together thousands of faithful from Guinea-Bissau, Senegal, Gambia, and Guinea.

There are ethical issues to consider. Although they are influential individuals in their communities (Boiro and Einarsdóttir 2023), the *cernos* are represented as child traffickers in an international context, and influential actors call for their arrest and persecution (Seibert 2019; U.S. Department of State 2016). Furthermore, as mentioned, the intragroup relations within the Fula of Guinea-Bissau are sensitive. The first author's recognition as a member of the concerned society and his position as a senior researcher at the National Institute for Studies and Research (INEP—Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisa) in Bissau with a mandate to conduct social research facilitated the data collection.

Considering that the *cernos* are accused of child trafficking, although more so as a group than individually, we take particular care in securing their anonymity (Crang and Cook 2007; Hammersley and Traianou 2012; O'Reilly 2012). Thus, we provide minimal information about the *cernos* and do not mention their exact site of residence or the settings of interviews. In what follows, the Fula term *cerno* is used for the religious leaders and *almudo* for their students. This article focuses on begging and suffering; the Bissau-Guinean Fula *cernos* are the key informants.

## 4. Results

The Bissau-Guinean Fula *cernos* who participated in the research identified various aspects of begging, distinguishing between begging for exploitation and begging that contributed to religious education economically but was also begging as an integral part of the Quran studies that cultivated valuable personal characteristics.

### *4.1. Begging as Exploitation*

The *cernos* were aware that they were accused of trafficking children, which is an international crime. They also understood that the reason for the accusations was the maltreatment of the *almudos* and, most of all, for forcing them to beg. When the first author visited Dakar in mid-September 2010, the effects of the recently enforced ban on begging were evident. Only occasionally were boys observed begging in the city's central areas, yet they were still seeking alms and looking for food in other city locations. The suburban areas and the neighbourhood of the mosques were crowded with beggars. On closer inspection,

the begging boys were alert and cautious, looking for police officers who might arrest them and push them to identify their teacher. After the arrests of the Quran teachers, the Quran students looked threatened and avoided contact with outsiders. Simultaneously, *cernos* running Quranic schools in Dakar pointed out that there were some rascals organising child begging in the city who were not *cernos*. The *cernos* who were interviewed argued it was impossible to distinguish between these children and true *almudos*. They underlined that all begging children in Dakar were not *almudos*.

While no *cerno* agreed that he was a child trafficker, some did not exclude the possibility that other *cernos* forced their students to beg only for exploitation. Some cernos might exaggerate the number of their students and, without concern for their education, have them beg for long days. They also informed that a few *cernos* rented barracks in the outskirts of Dakar for their *almudos* while living with their family in the suburbs. These *cernos* had older *almudos* responsible for the alms collection and teaching but came twice or thrice a week to fetch the alms. "It is this kind of *cernos,* which we consider to be exploiters of *almudos*", one of them explained. Finally, some cernos argued it was illegitimate to demand a particular sum of money each day from begging; that would be exploitation.

*Cernos* who lived in rural areas in Guinea-Bissau distinguished between the rural and urban *cernos*. A *cerno* resident in Guinea-Bissau emphasised that the *cernos* residing in the rural villages were unable to build houses with corrugated iron; in contrast, some of their colleagues living in cities in Senegal already had such houses in their native villages in Guinea-Bissau, where they also had financed the construction of mosques.

The *cernos* were upset about being accused of trafficking their *almudos*. In line with tradition, the parents had handed over the responsibility for their children to the *cernos*, not the NGOs. Nonetheless, "NGO-people" picked up *almudos* from the streets and sent them back to Guinea-Bissau. Many *cernos* argued that the NGOs exploited children for their gain and were themselves involved in trafficking. They accused the NGOs of acting in their financial interest when searching for donor money; the NGOs sensationalised the situation to get funds, which they used for themselves without scruple. The *cernos* meant that the NGOs were unable to implement programs that would stop the "so-called child trafficking" because of the contempt they had in their regard. In addition to their economic gain, many argued that the NGOs wanted to eradicate Quranic schools and, thereby, Islam.

For some *cernos*, the NGOs unconsciously or consciously exaggerated identity conflicts in Guinea-Bissau. It was, for instance, illustrated by the fact that some NGOs recruited Quran teachers who belonged to ethnic and religious groups foreign to the area. Furthermore, the "NGO-people" should know that Quranic teachers who used to live in big cities could never stay in rural villages; indeed, the same applied to the teachers in the "Portuguese school". It was evident that the "NGO-people" did not know the realities of Muslims, much less the profound reasons that motivated the parents to send their children to study the Quran. The NGOs should have collaborated with the village *cernos* and community members instead of disorganising and stigmatising the traditional system for religious education without supporting an adequate replacement.

Finally, some *cernos* hinted that the parents constituted the primary responsibility for exploitative begging; parents should stop sending their children to exploitative *cernos*. At the same time, the *cernos* recognised that, at least in the context of Guinea-Bissau, it was economically challenging for most parents to support their children's religious education.

### *4.2. Begging for Religious Studies*

Most of the *cernos* underlined that begging allowed the teaching of the Quran in poor African countries like Guinea-Bissau. The socio-economic conditions of the parents in the villages did not allow them to support their children's religious studies. In the traditional system, the parents and the children had worked in the fields of the *cernos*, and the crops provided food for him and the children who lived in his house. In that system, the children only begged during the "hungry periods", ahead of the harvest time.

The *cernos* argued that begging was increasingly the primary source of support for teaching the Quran due to two facts. First, there is an increased demand for the *almudos'* living standards. Nowadays, the *almudos* have a more comfortable life than in the past. Elderly *cernos* recalled former times; beyond the pains of hunger and lack of clothing and medicine in the villages, they had suffered the most when travelling by foot. Today, the *almudos* travel to Senegal by car; even recently, this has not been the case. Secondly, drought exacerbated rural impoverishment, and traditional agriculture could not ensure food self-sufficiency. An elderly *cerno* explained as follows:

> What has increased the number of begging *almudos* is the drought. I remember being an *almudo* in a village [in Senegal]. We did not beg. We worked in the fields of the *cerno* in the morning between 9 to 14 and in the evening from 15 to 17. We devoted the rest of the day to studying the Quran. But there were two successive years when there was no rain. We experienced famine and a lack of clothes. During this period, we hardly ate.

For some *cernos*, child begging resulted from a combination of facts. A *cerno* argued the following: "The state does not support the Quran education for children; thus, the parents give their child to the *cerno* without wanting to know how the child was to survive". Then, he explained how the *cernos* accepted all the children the parents gave him because his prestige increased with the number of *almudos* in his school. The children had to beg to have something to eat. Many *cernos* meant that the Bissau-Guinean state had the primary responsibility for the begging of Bissau-Guinean *almudos* in Senegal. One *cerno* did not expect the country's government to improve the *almudos*' situation because it even failed to pay the teachers at the Portuguese schools. He argued, "The politicians are only interested in the *cernos* during elections or when they need government positions". Many *cernos* argued that begging would not stop without improving the socio-economic conditions of the parents; the parents, eager to have their sons know the Quran to fight ignorance and "become somebody", would continue to accept their children's begging for that aim. Begging was an economic requisite for continued Quran studies of the poor. Some *cernos* meant that begging was also a kind of intergenerational solidarity that allowed each generation to study the Quran.

A *cerno* resident in Senegal argued that nobody could stop the begging of the *almudos*: "We have begged in Mali, Mauritania, and Senegal. Before us, our *cernos* begged. Our children will [beg]", he said and added the following:

> You saw the number of children I have here; a bowl of rice is not enough. I don't have the conditions to feed them every day. They must go out and beg to eat. It does not diminish them; on the contrary, they become humble and resistant.

For this *cerno,* begging was not merely a matter of survival during Quran studies. Like many other *cernos*, begging had to do with humbleness for him.

### *4.3. Begging for Humility, Blessings, and Endurance*

The *cernos* agreed that begging was a tradition that allowed for the religious education and liberation of underprivileged communities. However, begging was not only safeguarding poor children but all *almudos* searching for knowledge. For instance, a *cerno* resident in Senegal underlined that "even the sons of the great *cernos* begged". Begging was an integral part of the curriculum. Beyond begging for survival, the *cernos* argued, begging cultivated humility and piety.

The *cernos* agreed that the living conditions of an *almudo* should not be luxurious. An *almudo* should not only know God's love but also accept all conditions of life. One *cerno* argued, "We should not expect an *almudo* to have good living conditions. When he lives in comfort, he is no longer an *almudo*. To be an *almudo*, one must meet certain conditions, including humility, selflessness, sharing and serving the people". From an early age, an *almudo* should learn to live an ascetic life without excessive material conditions. They only

needed the minimum to survive: food, a mat, and the Quran. For the Bissau-Guinean *cernos*, Senegal offered this minimum provided.

Apart from humble living conditions, some *cernos* argued the *almudos* needed to isolate themselves from their parents. A *cerno* recalled Prophet Mohammed's advice to "look for knowledge as far as China". Leaving the parents' home to study the Quran abroad provided optimal conditions. "It is a principle in teaching the Quran to send an *almudo* elsewhere for further knowledge. It is also a way of isolating the child to avoid becoming distracted when studying the Quran", a *cerno* argued: "There is a time when the *almudo* must learn to be alone with himself, which will allow him to be closer to God".

The *almudo* should also learn to live at the same level as the local population and stay close to the neediest people for whom he would function as a *cerno*. Through begging, the *almudo* would cultivate humbleness and compassion. For a *cerno* in the Gabú Region, this was the main reason for seeking alms and wearing dirty and tattered clothes. The *almudos* should share scarcity among themselves and with the population. The only sense of superiority acknowledged among the *almudos* had to do with how rapidly they mastered the verses of the Quran; an intelligent and dedicated *almudo* was respected and admired by his peers and his *cerno*.

A few *cernos* referred to begging as training in endurance and suffering. A *cerno* resident in Senegal begged for more than 20 years during his studies; he never got sick or consulted a doctor. He argued that "*almudos* are more resistant than other children. We are immune to many diseases through our food. In this respect, God protects us". Some *cernos* pointed out that the alms do not only allow the *almudo* to survive and create desired qualities such as humbleness and compassion; it is also crucial to receive the *cerno's* blessings, which bring divine enrichment, spiritual empowerment, and success. An *almudo* can receive the blessings of his *cerno* through diligent study of the Quran, gifts, and hard work for the *cerno*. A *cerno* resident in Guinea-Bissau explained as follows:

> You talk about suffering. Currently, the world is pleasant, but formerly, we could not achieve anything without suffering. We see *almudos* with beautiful things. I remember I had only one piece of clothing all the time, and I worked hard in the fields of the *cerno* and my father. But that did not stop me from establishing a home and becoming a *cerno*. An *almudo* must work for his *cerno* to have his blessings.

Without his *cerno's* blessings, an *almudo* will not become a *cerno*, and nobody becomes a *cerno* without suffering. The *cernos* frequently recalled their time of suffering during their Quran studies. When it came to suffering, they had stories to tell, but also about how suffering and success were intertwined.

### *4.4. Begging and Meaningful Suffering*

The *cernos* underlined that there were two types of suffering, positive and negative. They argued that suffering was positive if it resulted in a successful life for the individual and the society. The better a person could overcome and subdue difficulties, the more likely that person was to have success in life and to serve the community. From this perspective, the *cernos* agreed that it was not easy to acquire knowledge. "You can find money, but you cannot pick up knowledge. To acquire knowledge, you must suffer", a *cerno* argued: "Those who have a conscience and agree to endure suffering return to their villages with knowledge and will give pride to their parents and community. Those who refuse to endure suffering will fail in their lives".

The positive suffering had a purpose and clear goals. A *cerno* argued that the *almudos'* pain was positive because it helped "the fight against ignorance" and prepared them for a better future. The *cernos* contributed to children's education, although most parents were not paying for it. The parents wanted the *cerno* to return a well-educated child, which they saw as contributing to the mission of awakening their community. The negative suffering resulted in destruction; it was suffering without a purpose. Children who failed to reach their Quran studies, who did not study at the public school, and who did not learn

to work in the fields were victims of negative suffering. A *cerno* from a rural village in Guinea-Bissau explained as follows:

> We all know our children live in deplorable conditions in Dakar or elsewhere. But we have no choice. Indeed, in our villages, we have no public schools, we are poor. Our only alternative is to send our children to study. You cannot be poor and ignorant in your village and not try to give your son a chance to get out. The question is, what is suffering? Is it to stay in the village and continue to be poor and ignorant or to go elsewhere in the world searching for knowledge about your religion and the world? If you want parents to stop sending away children [to Senegal], allow us to educate them here.

The *cernos* agreed that the difficulties and suffering of the *almudos* were more severe in their villages than in the cities, particularly the cities of Senegal. They also meant that life was harsher for the *almudos* in the old times; today, living conditions have improved, and there is less hunger.

The *cernos* maintained that, today, in Senegal, the *almudos* were not hungry, especially those who begged. People provided alms, and, often, they received donations of good clothes. A *cerno* recalled that, a long time ago, when he was studying in Senegal on the eve of *Tabaski*, a man gave him a beautiful *boubou*. His *cerno* told him to return the *boubou* to where he had stolen it: "He couldn't imagine that anyone would offer a beautiful *boubou* to an *almudo*". Another *cerno* explained how he was always hungry when he was an *almudo* in a rural village in Guinea-Bissau. Over ten *almudos* shared a calabash of couscous, with the last ones in line only getting couscous or white rice. A *cerno* who had become *imam* explained how he and the other *almudos* suffered: "We had nothing to eat. We went into the forest looking for locust fruits and other food". They prepared harvested hay with water, salt, and leaves. For these *cernos*, the hunger was the worst. Given the difficulties encountered in their home country, many opted to settle in Senegal with their *almudos*, where they suffered less. Staying in Guinea-Bissau would mean a continuation of ignorance and hunger.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

Here, we presented data from anthropological fieldwork on begging in Senegal and Guinea-Bissau, aiming to understand how the religious leaders and Quran teachers, the *cernos*, understand begging and react to accusations of being child traffickers. The *cernos*, who are accused of child trafficking for sending their Quran school boys, *almudos*, to seek alms, see begging as a prerequisite for Quran education among poor populations. From their perspective, begging allows the *almudos* to cultivate humbleness and compassion with the population they aim to serve as *cernos*. They argue that begging enables the materialisation of a noble cause and contributes to the liberation of their communities. They respond to an accusation of child trafficking with a counterattack, arguing that the NGOs are traffickers of children, while simultaneously acknowledging that some of their colleagues might exploit the begging of their students.

Begging is a complex issue, as recognised by Claire Healy (2018, p. 159), who points out that "the absence of an international definition of exploitation, let alone of the exploitation of begging, the latter often categorized as 'forced begging'—a sub-category of forced labour". Citing Delap's (2009) understanding of child begging as forced labour, Healy (2018, p. 159) argues that "[e]xploitation of begging may then be considered a form of trafficking in human beings if the other elements of adult or child trafficking are in evidence". However, the begging of the *almudos* can hardly be understood as labour, in line with Johannes Lenhard (2021), who researched begging during two years of fieldwork in Paris. Lenhard followed beggars who referred to alms-seeking as their occupation. In line with Arendt, Lenhard sees begging as labour rather than work, and he argues: "Unlike work, . . . labour leaves nothing behind, is in this sense unproductive. . . . Labourers are, according to Arendt, bound up by the necessity of daily survival" (795). Nor did the *cernos* rationalise begging as work, like individuals with mobility difficulties in Accra. In Ghana, begging has been an

illegal activity since 1969 and is socially devalued; however, when discussing begging as their regular work, the beggars presented begging as a valuable social activity, allowing them to take care of their family members (Kassah 2008).

The NGO-ification of anti-trafficking activities with questionable benefits for those allegedly "rescued" is well documented (Clemente 2021; Dottridge 2007; Musto 2008; Plambech 2014). While Senegalese literature, music, and films repeatedly highlighted the situation of the *talibés* in the second half of the 20th century, the NGOs have taken the issue mostly over since the 1990s (Perry 2004, pp. 66–71). Sara E. Lahti (2019, p. 117) points out that the begging Quran schoolboys in Senegal "have incited transnational and local NGOs to create a plethora of taalibe assistance programs"; these programs aim to combat what they outline as "a multi-million dollar child trafficking industry operating under the guise of religious education". Lahti highlights that the NGOs have secured generous grants to cover operating costs, hired personnel, organised public forums and professional training seminars, and launched nationwide campaigns advocating against begging. However, Lahti points out that the boys who are "the designated beneficiaries" continue to beg.

While some *cernos* admit there might be exploiters of begging among themselves, they agree that the real exploiters of children are the NGOs. They accuse the NGOs of searching for donor funding for their survival while simultaneously aiming to eradicate Islam globally. Community members in Bissau-Guinean villages with many boys who had been repatriated from Senegal argue likewise that the NGOs are the "real" traffickers through the creation of a "vicious circle" of repatriations (Boiro and Einarsdóttir 2020). A few NGOs have been working directly on the begging Quran schoolboys in Guinea-Bissau, while in Senegal, the number was already 47 in 2011 (Anti-Slavery International 2011, p. 19). Like the *cernos* and village community members, the parents of the begging boys in Guinea-Bissau hold these in low esteem and argue that they are benefitting from their children; they have to fill their centres with the so-called "trafficked children" to justify the funds received (Einarsdóttir and Boiro 2016). Thereby, as outlined by Ayushman Bhagat (2023, p. 83), the anti-trafficking actors can "become part of the problem that they attempt to solve".

The mastery of the Quran has been the foundation of the theocracy of the Futa Djallon area in Guinea (I. Diallo 2012; T. Diallo 1981). Conversion to the Islamic religion was a guarantee of freedom and protection. Access to Quran studies has been an issue of power and liberation among their neighbours, the Fula of the Gabú Empire. Most of them were descendants of enslaved animist populations seeking to embrace Islam in response to the injustices of which they were victims (Les Traditions Orales Du Gabu 1981). A wide range of research has revealed how descendants of enslaved forefathers in West Africa apply varied strategies to get rid of the attached stigma, including Quran studies (Botte 1994; De Bruijn and Pelckmans 2005; Klein 2005; Pelckmans 2013; Rodet 2015; Rossi 2015; Schmitz 2009).

Pursuing liberation through the mastery of the Quran is still challenging for the Fula of Guinea-Bissau. The crucial social life events are directed by the *cernos* and those who master the Quran (Boiro and Einarsdóttir 2023). The presence of the *cernos* is essential for reading the Quran during ceremonies, including burials and the religious events of *Ziara* and *Gamou*. Those who do not know how to read the Quran, whatever their rank and position, even at the state level, comply with the decisions of the *cernos.* Symbolically, ministers may sit in a lower position on mats while the *cerno* sits on an armchair. Thanks to their knowledge of the Quran, the *cernos* occupy a position of power, and their knowledge acquisition was possible thanks to begging.

Like Muslims in West Africa, the *cernos* and the parents "have attached a profoundly positive value to suffering and hardship in pursuit of knowledge" (Ware III 2014, p. 42). The parents of the *almudos* accept their sons' begging, given that they study the Quran, to escape life in ignorance in the rural villages (Einarsdóttir and Boiro 2016). They accept begging as the "weapon of the weak" to finance their sons' religious studies. Through begging in Senegal, Bissau-Guinean Fula *cernos* emerged in the rural villages in the Bafatá and Gabú Regions. Earlier, no Fula of Guinea-Bissau *cernos* led the prayers at major Muslim

events (Boiro and Einarsdóttir 2023). Formerly, the Fula of Gabú were obliged to look for a Mandinga *cerno* or a Fuuta Fula one. Begging has financed and still finances the studies of the Bissau-Guinean Fula *almudos* in Senegal, thereby creating an elite group of Muslim leaders who earlier had meagre chances to access Quranic knowledge and a position of power. The *cernos* and the parents recognise the suffering of the *almudos*, but they interpret that suffering as positive, paving the road for their sons to "become somebody" (Einarsdóttir and Boiro 2016).

Historically, accounts tell about destitute *almudos* begging for themselves and their *cernos* who entered a profession that allowed them to enter royal courts and sell protective amulets to the population (Les Traditions Orales Du Gabu 1981). However, the fruits of begging benefit not only the individual *cernos*, as argued by anti-trafficking NGOs (Human Rights Watch 2010). The *cernos* see begging as a tool for redistributing resources across generations, ultimately benefiting whole communities. Begging has, as such, provided villages in Eastern Guinea-Bissau with *cernos*, mosques and *almudos*. Often, these *cernos* are descendants of enslaved families who know meaningful suffering. In this context, begging works as a "total" social phenomenon, within which, according to Marcel Mauss (2002, pp. 3–4),

> all kinds of institutions are given expression at the same time—religious, juridical, and moral, which relate to both politics and the family; likewise, economic ones, which suppose special forms of production and consumption, or rather, of performing total services and of distribution.

For Mauss, there is no gift without the obligation to reciprocate; thus, a definition of begging as seeking alms without a return is not valid in the case of the begging of the *almudos* or *talibés*, whose alms-seeking was exempted in Senegalese legislation in 1964 on the ban on begging (Anti-Slavery International 2011). In her iconic book *The Beggars' Strike*, Aminata Sow Fall (1981) uncovers the Senegalese beggars' ambiguous position of power, inherited in the reciprocal nature of the Maussian gift. It tells about a high-ranking public officer eager to become vice president, who sees the branch of the tree on which he sits while working on the ban on begging and undermining his efforts to realise his future dream. Not without irony, Fall outlines how giving alms to the resistant beggars is not an act without a counter-gift.

The concept of coloniality, outlined by (Quijano 2007), sheds light on failed bans on begging in West Africa. The logic of positive suffering and that begging provides knowledge and power and understanding of its nature as reciprocal is at odds with the values of the former colonisers of West Africa and their prolonged actors, at times including NGOs and child rights activists. The fight against the *almudos'* begging without understanding its local value is bound to fail. For the NGOs and international agencies, the *cernos*, the religious leaders, are simply traffickers who live "off the backs of the children" (Human Rights Watch 2010), and the NGOs represent the parents interchangeably as naïve, ignorant, impoverished, or evil and their children in need of rescue (Einarsdóttir and Boiro 2016). The funders of the NGOs "may be surprised to learn that not all taalibes want to be 'rescued' or to prosecute their instructors" (Lahti 2019, p. 130), and some consciously opt for Quran education rather than a formal one (Newman 2017). Furthermore, the anti-trafficking actors in Senegal are diverse in terms of intentions, influence, and understanding of the context (Lahti 2018, 2019; Reed 2018; Macleod 2023). Many of these rest on sensationalised narratives and demand dominant anti-trafficking interventions, such as criminal justice; others lean towards more alternative approaches, arguing for collaborative, context-based measures, adequate support, and focus on root causes (Bhagat 2022; Musto et al. 2020).

Warnings against giving alms to beggars are common, for instance, in Europe and North America. Instead, diverted giving schemes for those who want to support people in need have been established; however, these have been unsuccessful in collecting resources and tend to lack transparency and accountability (Pérez-Muñoz 2018). Ironically, NGOs warning against giving alms to the Quran schoolboys in Senegal beg, at the same time, for donations on the internet to rescue them (Duschek 2023). Bissau-Guinean *almudos* who

have been repatriated from Senegal to their home villages refer to such rescue as "capture", and most return to Senegal (Boiro and Einarsdóttir 2020). In short, bans on begging have not been a successful strategy to counteract alleged human trafficking, and such bans have been tainted by racism and discrimination (Borevi 2023; Memetovic 2021; Rahman 2021; Solaki 2020).

The Bissau-Guinean Fula *cernos* reject the idea that begging devalues the child. In contrast, they argue that begging contributes to humbleness, humility, and empathy with underprivileged groups. Furthermore, they argue that begging allows the *almudos* to seek knowledge that contributes to new relations of power and, ultimately, liberation. Most of the many who give alms to the *almudos* do not understand their giving as being without return. If the most dominant child rights activists and anti-trafficking actors continue to ignore the *cernos*' position of power, their understanding of begging, the reciprocal nature of giving alms to the *almudos*, and positive suffering, bans on begging will fail and continue to be a zero-sum game.

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualization, H.B. and J.E.; methodology, H.B. and J.E.; formal analysis, H.B.; investigation, H.B.; resources, H.B. and J.E.; writing—original draft preparation, H.B. and J.E.; writing—review and editing, H.B. and J.E.; supervision, H.B. and J.E.; project administration, H.B. and J.E.; funding acquisition, H.B. and J.E. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This research was funded by The Eimskip University Fund/The Doctoral Grants of The University of Iceland Research Fund [2016], The Icelandic Research Fund (195957-051; 2020) and The University of Iceland Research Fund [2011, 2012, 2013, 2015, 2018, 2019].

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and was positively evaluated by the Ethics Committee of the University of Iceland (nr. 18-014), 15 May 2018.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed verbal consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

**Data Availability Statement:** The data presented in this work belong to the set of ethnographic data, which is not accessible to the public due to privacy and ethical restrictions.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

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