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Basic Education in the Face of the Islamization of the Fulani Community of Borgou in Benin

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Abstract

The Fulani represent the second most populous ethnic group in the Borgou department, behind the Bariba, and practice Islam as their primary religion. This study aims to analyze the influence of Islam on students' educational paths, using a qualitative approach to explore the cultural and religious dynamics within the Fulani community. Empirical data reveal that the Fulani's connection to Islam dates back to ancient times, which explains their deep cultural roots in this religion. The study also shows that learning the Quran, an essential pillar of Islamic education, contributes to a child's overall development. However, the practice of begging associated with this learning hinders the social integration of talibé children. Furthermore, the survey reveals that the Islamic educational model differs significantly from the European educational system. This difference generates recurring conflicts that complicate collaboration between the two models. By prioritizing the practice of Islam and the teaching of its precepts, the Fulani community has distanced itself from the formal education system, which explains the high number of school dropouts, despite the richness and diversity of its activities. This situation exacerbates the community's isolation, hence the urgent need to implement strategies to reconcile these two educational models.

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Introduction and Justification of the Subject

Education has long been considered one of the pillars of scientific and technological progress, as well as a key factor in the emergence of a society. Its contribution to the construction of individual and collective identity is well established. According to Kwame Nkrumah (1964, p. 78), "Education is the key to the development of consciousness as well as to the social and economic transformation of society. It is through education that people become aware of its unity, its interests, and its responsibilities." Thus, in Tanzania, schooling was recognized in the 1950s as a key factor in national emergence (Wenzek, 2023, p. 6). Education therefore

plays a crucial role in individual and collective development, particularly through training in civic and moral values. It aims to enable each individual to fully realize their potential in various fields. Thus, education is not limited to the transmission of academic knowledge, but also takes into account the development of social, emotional, and ethical skills.

Education is based on the idea that each individual must have the necessary tools to face the constant transformations of a changing world. However, ideologies differ regarding the best way to prepare human beings for successful integration into society. On the one hand, formal education, based on a European-

style system, aims to equip individuals with the skills necessary for professional integration. On the other hand, Quranic education and Islamic teaching, based on traditional methods, aim to impart knowledge of the Quran and Islamic sciences. According to some preceptors, this model of education is the very origin of scientific knowledge. As Rahal (2018, p. 7) states: "Religion must be the basis of education. The teaching of science depends on the teaching of religion and the Quran."

This remains a real challenge, particularly in countries where religious education is separate from official national education." This divergence of opinion creates an "educational conflict" that forces African societies to choose an educational model based on their own logic and perceived interests. UNICEF (2018) explains this conflict by the inability of formal education systems to integrate their graduates into the labor market, leading to increased unemployment and investment with no return.

This ideological conflict stems from the fact that, in most sub-Saharan African countries, Quranic education, present before the colonial period, was not integrated into formal educational programs until the 2000s. After independence, public education policies were developed without taking Quranic education into account (UNICEF, 2018). This form of education, centered on the memorization of the Holy Book (the Quran), has nevertheless persisted in some countries, taking advantage of the weaknesses of formal education systems to establish itself in certain African societies. However, Islamic education provided in modern Islamic schools, such as madrasas or Franco/Anglo-Arab schools, has sometimes received special attention from certain states, often for financial and political rather than educational reasons (UNICEF, 2018, p. 7). Conversely, the formal education system faces numerous problems, including the obsolescence of its curricula, which struggle to meet the expectations of the population, and it is often poorly perceived by predominantly Islamic communities.

In a study conducted by UNICEF (2014) in certain communes of Borgou and Alibori, the institution highlights the difficulties of formal education, showing the dominance of faith and its influence on the formal system and other sociocultural realities. It therefore states that "Schools are struggling in Islamized environments. The formal education of children in Islamized environments like Karimama is based primarily on the teaching of faith" (UNICEF, 2014: 45).

The various policies and strategies implemented to improve children's education encounter strong resistance in these regions, particularly within the Fulani community, which favors an educational model consistent with its ideals, which hinders the schooling of its children in a context of promoting inclusive basic education.

Islamic precepts specify that, in the face of schooling and the collective interest, the individual needs of the child are not always a priority. According to the Quran, the child must receive an education based on social values, in a logic of submission to his parents and, above all, to Allah. Educational principles are therefore imposed on him. In this context of ideological conflict surrounding the education of Fulani children in Borgou, where learning the Quran and the development of madrasas are the norm, it becomes urgent to analyze the influence of Islam, as a deeply rooted religious practice, on the schooling of children. This analysis will be conducted through a comparison of the two educational models. More specifically, this study aims to: (1) examine the perception of Islamic education by the Fulani community, (2) describe the Islamic educational process, with an emphasis on methods of memorizing the Quran, and (3) compare the foundations of Islamic education and formal education, with regard to the principles specific to each.

State of the Problem

The issue of children's basic education occupies a central place on the agendas of national and international institutions, raising the challenge of protecting and defending their rights. As such, education is a major concern for both stakeholders in education systems and religious leaders. In this context, numerous measures are being taken to ensure access to basic education and prevent discrimination, particularly between the sexes. In developing countries, access to education and the quality of teaching remain major challenges, particularly with regard to the inclusion of all children. Many factors explain non-enrollment or early school leaving, including sociocultural constraints, inequalities, conflicts, negative perceptions of formal education, poverty, outdated education systems, unemployment among young graduates, an unsupportive school environment, and the distance between school and home. In some regions of Africa, the loss of confidence in education systems is calling into question formal learning, highlighting the urgent need for in-depth reform. This situation also highlights the lack of adequate training, essential for

successful professional integration after school or university. According to the Program for International Student Assessment (OECD, 2019), more than 40% of 15-year-old students in middle-income countries do not achieve the minimum level in reading and mathematics. This finding highlights the ineffectiveness of these systems and the mismatch between educational programs and the sociocultural realities of African countries. Indeed, Western educational models, particularly French and English, implemented in most former colonies, have shown their limits, generating many unemployed graduates and thus worsening unemployment. In this context, some parents, to avoid educational investments with no return, give up enrolling their children in the formal system and favor models deemed more profitable, such as Islamic education. From the 1950s until independence, UNICEF (2018) reported the proliferation of private educational centers and the development of madrasas (Arab-Islamic schools) within the Muslim communities of West and Central Africa, reflecting a diversification of the school offer in competition with formal education. Arab-Islamic schools, founded on the knowledge of God, offer an education that takes into account the child in all his dimensions: body, instincts, feelings, intelligence, mind and soul (UNICEF, 2018, p.14). Thus, Quranic and Islamic education ideally aims to strengthen the family and cultural values of Islam, by providing a holistic education that structures religious, social and cultural values. Religious education is therefore closely linked to Islamic morality and ethics, with the moral elevation of the child being at the heart of the Quranic and Islamic education project (ibid.).

From this perspective, Quranic schools and madrasas are gaining importance compared to formal education, which is perceived as a dead end, because they offer greater opportunities and guarantee a future based on mastery of the Quran and Islamic sciences, centered on respect and submission to Allah. In his book *L'école, mode d'emploi*, Meirieu (2005, p. 98) emphasizes: "It is not enough to send children to school; they must also learn something that is meaningful to them and to society." This reflection highlights the limitations of a massive inclusion approach in formal education, without taking into account the quality of teaching programs. Indeed, the desire to educate all children sometimes obscures the relevance of content and teaching methods, leading to an education disconnected from the economic and social realities of less industrialized countries. Conversely, Ferkous (n.d.) and Rahal (2018) have shown that, in Islamic logic, submission to God requires every believer, especially children, to respect Allah before their parents.

In Islam, a child must love God more than their parents. Thus, "obedience to Allah is more important than obedience to parents or any other authority. If any authority goes against divine obedience, it must be rejected, even opposed" (Rahal, 2018, p. 3). From this perspective, learning the Quran and Islamic teachings are seen as a way to connect with the supreme being and to aim for a future reward: paradise.

By opting to study the Quran or Islamic teachings, those who choose this path consider the outcome to be more favorable and guaranteed, unlike the formal system, which is perceived as too long, requiring more investment, and offering an uncertain future. Furthermore, the principles governing the school environment and inequalities within education systems also constitute obstacles to children's education. Indeed, in many predominantly Islamic countries that have adopted an education system modeled on the colonial model, inequalities persist. These inequalities may be linked to ethnic origin, income, gender, disability, or religion, and lead to marginalization within the school environment. For example, Islamic precepts prohibit the mixing of girls and boys in class, while the colonial education system-imposed coeducation without distinction of sex. This practice hinders the schooling of students from Muslim families where gender separation is strict and Islam prevails over all other considerations. Faced with the inability to decide in dilemma situations, children from these families tend to play truant, often ending up dropping out with the support of their parents.

Caught in this dynamic, the gap between the two paradigms becomes evident: one is based on a material vision of the world, the other on obedience to an invisible supreme being (Ibraheem et al., 2023). Yet, one of the major objectives of these two educational models is to train responsible, virtuous citizens who respect the laws of society. This mission constitutes an ideal for all decision-makers involved in the design of educational systems. By promoting an education based on just and equitable values, Islam, like Western schools, highlights the intrinsic qualities of educators, who are expected to support learners with appropriate methods.

UNICEF (2018), in a study conducted in 14 West and Central African countries, including Benin, showed that the orientation of children towards certain schools, such as madrasas, is explained by the benefits derived from them by the extended family. In other words, the child's need or interest is not necessarily taken into account; what matters is the potential economic contribution that

their education can make to the family. From these principles, we perceive the difference in practices between the foundations of Islamic education, which aims to strengthen family cohesion and religious knowledge, and those of formal education, which seeks to train the child's intellect by teaching them to read, write and count to promote future professional integration. This analysis also highlights the importance of the invisible world in Islamic education. By favoring a "socio-centered" cultural integration of the child, Islam adopts a dual approach, but gives priority to the knowledge of Allah. This choice corresponds perfectly to the needs of certain communities, such as the Fulani, who are strongly attached to the Koranic school or to Islamic teachings.

Hence the following questions: How does Quranic education affect the retention of children from the Fulani community in the Borgou region of Benin? What is the place of Islam within the Fulani community compared to formal education?

To answer these questions, this study posits that Quranic education and Islamic teachings constitute an obstacle to the retention of Fulani students in the formal education system. Drawing on an in-depth analysis of survey data, the aim is to understand how the Fulani community's attachment to Islam represents a serious threat to the education of its children. The adoption of a rigorous methodology, combining documentary analysis, participant observation, and semi-structured interviews, allows for a better understanding of this issue.

Methodological Approach

This study, strictly qualitative in nature, utilizes documentary research, participant observation, and semi-structured interviews to explore in depth the influence of Quranic education and Islamic teachings on the educational path of primary school students in the Fulani community. The use of documentary research enabled the collection of varied and relevant information on Islam and education. Numerous books, articles, and official documents were analyzed to better understand the impact of Islam, the central religion of the Fulani, on children's basic education. According to Berthier (2016), documentary research consists of collecting information from diverse sources: official documents, archives, press articles, literary works, reports, letters, graffiti, leaflets, statistics, and iconographic documents. This diversity of sources ensures a broad and in-depth view of the phenomenon under study.

The study also relies on participant observation, an essential method in the humanities and social sciences for capturing lived realities. Immersion in several Fulani villages and camps in Borgou made it possible to observe behaviors, religious practices, the organization of community life, and social interactions. This technique, recognized for its richness in qualitative data collection (Lapassade, 2002; Serra-Mallol, 2012; Norimatsu & Cazenave-Tapie, 2017), provided a better understanding of the values and dynamics at work in the community. It also enriched the information from the other methods used.

The field data comes largely from the surveys conducted as part of our doctoral thesis, supplemented by new interviews to explore certain aspects in more depth. During this extended stay in Borgou, we observed the daily practice of Islam: mobilization during the call of the muezzin, learning the Koran, organization of major prayers, behavior of talibé children, profusion of mosques, but also attitudes of families towards formal schooling and parental involvement in school monitoring.

To diversify the perspectives, we also conducted 85 semi-structured interviews with informants selected through reasoned choice and the snowball method, two classic techniques in the human sciences. The interviewees included religious authorities (imams, muezzins), Fulani intellectuals, schoolchildren combining formal schooling and learning the Quran (aged at least ten), and journalists from the Fulani ethnic group.

The interviews were conducted in Fulfulde (Fulani) for the majority of participants, and in French for the journalists, to ensure a better understanding of certain concepts and greater precision in expression. These interviews allowed us to gather testimonies and life stories, essential for measuring the extent of conflicts and tensions between the two educational models. The cross-analysis of data from documentary research, participant observation, and interviews thus offers a rich and nuanced understanding of the issue.

In summary, the combination of these methods allows for exploring the theme from several perspectives: documentary research sheds light on theoretical and historical frameworks; participant observation provides access to field realities; and semi-structured interviews enrich the analysis through the diversity of experiences and perspectives collected.

Results and Discussion

Islam as Seen by the Fulani Community

The introduction of Islam in Africa dates back to 7th century. The religion's roots within the Fulani and Hausa communities were particularly strengthened in the early 19th century, with the penetration of the caliphate of Ousmane Dan Fodio. The latter, a Fulani religious reformer from the Sokoto Empire, led a jihad against the Hausa kingdoms, which he considered to have abandoned Islamic principles (Prier, 2020). His goal was to reform the practice of Islam and transform society. This movement resulted in the conquest of vast territories between Nigeria and Niger, and the imposition of a strict religious ideology in northern Nigeria.

The expansion of the Sokoto Caliphate, despite opposition from Borno State, helped shape the religious dimension of the Fulani community. This history partly explains the strong link between the Fulani's level of belief and the caliphate's ideology. According to Hiribarren, a historian at King's College London, "the Sokoto jihad continues to inspire writers to this day" (Prier, 2020). The term "jihad," used by Dan Fodio, refers to any legitimate effort to elevate the word of Allah, convey the message of Islam, and promote justice and mercy in society.

This conception of jihad has profoundly marked the religious identity of the Fulani. For a large part of this community, Islam is perceived as the only authentic belief, Allah being the only supreme deity and his word considered sacred. Local cultural practices have gradually given way to religion, which now occupies a central position in daily life. Celebrations of births, marriages and funeral rites strictly obey the prescriptions of the Quran. The first names given to children are of Islamic origin, often adapted and contextualized by the community (e.g.: Oumarou, Mohammadou, Aïssatou, Adamou), testifying to a cultural mix and an appropriation of identity.

Children are educated according to Islamic precepts. Islamic education is considered the ideal model, providing children with the skills and knowledge necessary to become virtuous and law-abiding citizens. This model aims to develop children in all their dimensions. One respondent (S. D.) summarized this vision as follows: "For us, the Fulani community, but not all of us, Islam is above all. Choosing to educate children from various perspectives is desirable, but educating

them in Islam is even better. Through the knowledge we instill in them, children grow up to be both pious and fearful of Allah. This is why we channel our children and guide them towards this religion."

This statement highlights the depth of the Fulani belief in Islam, inherited from Dan Fodio's jihad. Today, the Fulani are sometimes wrongly accused of maintaining links with terrorist groups in several African countries. On this subject, interviewed by Prier, Hiribarren explains:

"Yes. They are caricatured as God-loving people, and this jihad is cited as a reference to designate them as responsible for all the ills in the Sahel. The accusation against the Fulani dates back to the jihad of Dan Fodio, where they were already supposed to invade their southern neighbors. Many Pentecostal Christian groups believe that there is a Fulani plot to "dive the Quran into the sea," meaning that there is pressure from northern Muslims to convert or push southern Christians into the sea."

The Fulani, referred to here as "Fulani," thus experience stigmatization related to their strong religiosity. In countries affected by the terrorism crisis, they are often targeted because of their attachment to Islam.

"Conarization," the Basic Foundation of Islamic

Education According to the logic of Islam, a child is born pious, but the educational contribution of parents in ensuring the continuity of divine work depends on their availability and the type of education offered. This concept places the child's education at the heart of the debate and the support of parents in their mission. But what type of education is it? Education in the Islamic context is not any kind or type of education, but an education centered on the values of the Islamic religion. It is therefore not an education based on the child's culture, much less that of Christianity or any other religion. Islamic law only recognizes the education of children in the precepts of Islam, which aims to prevent them from going astray, corruption, banditry, deviance, and bad morals (Ferkous, nd). This is why the Prophet said: "Every child comes into the world with true faith. But it is his parents who Judaize him, Christianize him, or make him a Mazdean. Similarly, every animal is born in all its integrity. Have you seen any animal born with its ears cut off? (Ferkous, nd). However, "The Quran does not limit itself to specifying the duties of parents and Muslims towards children, but it also develops the

duty of children towards their parents" Rahal (2018: 3). This educational mission helps prepare the child for successful social and religious integration, highlighting his faith and the actions he is called upon to perform within society, which necessarily involves learning the Koran, which we refer to here as the concept of "Koranization".

Here, for the first time, we use the term "Quranization" to refer to the learning of the Quran, which is seen as a crucial stage in a child's development in the Fulani community. The use of this term is justified by the lack of terminology to describe the act of learning the Quran. It is a decisive stage in Islamic thought, offering a broad spectrum of the content of the Holy Book to talibés. By studying the Quran, initiates embrace several aspects that take into account memorization, recitation, exegesis, i.e., Tafsir, and linguistic analysis. The aim is thus to focus on the holistic study of the Quran in order to discover its significance.

Quranization, a crucial method of Islamic child education

From an Islamic perspective, children are born with a natural disposition toward piety. However, the continuity of this orientation depends heavily on the educational commitment of parents and the type of education they choose to impart. This vision places the child's education at the center of family concerns, emphasizing the decisive role of parents in supporting their offspring. But what kind of education are we talking about?

In the Islamic context, it is not just any form of education, but rather an education based on the values of Islam. Education based on local culture, Christianity, or any other religion is not recognized by Islamic law. Only education that is in line with the precepts of Islam is valued, as it aims to protect the child from misguidance, deviance, and bad morals (Ferkous, n.d.).

It is in this sense that the Prophet states: "Every child comes into the world with true faith. But it is his parents who Judaize him, Christianize him, or make him a Mazdean. Similarly, every animal is born in all its integrity. Have you seen any animal born with its ears cut off?" (Ferkous, n.d.). The Quran does not limit itself to defining the duties of parents towards their children; it also emphasizes the obligations of children towards their parents (Rahal, 2018: 3). This dual duty aims to prepare the child for successful integration, both socially and religiously, by emphasizing their faith and the expected

behaviors within society. This preparation necessarily involves learning the Quran, which we refer to here as "Quranization."

We introduce the concept of "Quranization" here to describe learning the Quran, considered an essential stage in the development of the Fulani child. This rarely used term responds to a lack of vocabulary to express the importance of this learning in the educational trajectory. "Quranization" represents a decisive step in Islamic thought, because it exposes the child to the richness of the Holy Book. The study of the Quran is not limited to memorization; it includes recitation, exegesis (Tafsir) and linguistic analysis. It is therefore a comprehensive approach, aimed at allowing the child to grasp the full scope of the sacred text and to make it the foundation of his spiritual and social life.

Being a Talibé in a Fulani community: a Quranic principle or a source of begging?

Learning the Quran in a Fulani community is based on specific methods and requirements. The child, called a talibé, is entrusted to a Quranic teacher and lives with him or her as a member of the family. They participate in their mentor's agricultural or pastoral tasks and must adapt to community life. Despite their parents' economic situation, children enrolled in Quranic school are often confronted with begging. In the Fulani community of Borgou, this practice is seen as a necessary step in preparing children for adult social life. Although it is sometimes justified by religious prescriptions, the living conditions observed during our immersion are concerning.

The majority of the talibés we met, aged 5 to 15, walk around in worn clothes, sometimes without shoes, especially on Fridays, the day of the main prayer (Jumah). Their hygiene is often neglected, and access to healthcare remains limited. However, the community's perception differs from that of child rights advocates. For many, the priority is not the protection of the child, but the fulfillment of a religious and social duty. One respondent (A. M. F.) explains:

"For some alphas, being a talibé is a blessing in learning the Quran, since it is said that you go, you suffer, you learn about life in fact. You learn to search for yourself, to nourish yourself. For example, by going to meet people to ask, there, you learn to manage yourself, to search for yourself and perhaps convince someone to give you something."

Talibé begging can be explained by several factors. Often, the number of children in the care of the Quranic teacher exceeds their capacity to accommodate and provide for them. To cope with this constraint, the children spend the day begging, only returning home in the evening to continue their learning. In the past, each child had to bring a sum of money set in advance by the teacher. According to A. M. F.:

"People are brought to you, there are so many of them that you don't have enough space to produce and feed them all. And even before that, in the village, you'll see that it's people who have left elsewhere, who have come to settle in the village, who take care of this. So, for most of those who are from here, the talibé phenomenon isn't very common. So, it's often those who leave elsewhere, who come to settle in the village, in a locality, who engage in this practice."

This testimony suggests that the talibé phenomenon is linked to the economic difficulties of Quranic teachers and the mobility of certain families. A study conducted in Parakou by Tano et al. (2022) confirms that begging among talibé children stems from the low economic power of parents, who entrust their children to Quranic school in the hope of religious instruction. The authors show that learning the Quran is an explanatory factor for begging in this city.

However, this practice raises a paradox. Islam encourages education in noble social values, but begging imposed on talibés seems to run counter to this ideal. It appears to be a solution adopted by teachers to provide for their children, due to a lack of sufficient resources. For the Fulani community, begging prepares children to face adult life. Yet, as Tano et al. note, (2022: 774), it "aims more to exploit children than to educate them," exposing them to an adult life marked by irresponsibility.

The phenomenon is complex and has intensified in recent years (Ouédraogo, 2020). As adults, some former talibés continue to solicit zakat during harvests, even though Islamic doctrine stipulates that zakat should be given freely, without solicitation. This shift demonstrates the ambivalence between religious principles and the socioeconomic realities experienced by talibés in Fulani communities.

Picture 1 highlights the lifestyle of talibé children in Fulani communities. In this community, learning the Quran is considered a necessary step toward becoming a religious scholar in adulthood. However, by equating

begging with a Quranic requirement, the Fulani community maintains a clear contradiction. Observations made during this study reveal that, in practice, a large portion of the population rejects these children: they rarely receive gifts, whether food or financial, and are sometimes even rejected when they attempt to share a meal. This social attitude further marginalizes the talibés, who find themselves in a situation of great vulnerability. Faced with such a dichotomy, it is legitimate to question the relevance of this educational model, which exposes children to exclusion and precariousness, far removed from the principles of protection and well-being advocated by Islam and children's rights.

Walima, a stage marking the end of Quranic training

As in any learning process, Quranic training in the Fulani community ends with a validation of acquired knowledge. In Islam, this stage takes the form of a public ceremony, the walima, which brings together Quranic teachers, parents, and relatives. Similar to an academic defense, the walima marks the end of the Quranic curriculum (jandde duddal): the candidate must recite the entire Quran before the assembly. A former student (M. A. F.) explains:

"They have the ceremony they call walima that marks the end. Again, it's not the end; it's only the reading that the person has completed. They will then begin by learning the Hadiths and everything that goes with them, that is, the religious prohibitions, the obligations, how to wash, and how to purify themselves after sexual acts. It is after reading the Quran that a person learns religion in depth."

After this stage, learning can continue with the same teacher or another, depending on the required level. One respondent explained: "You can stay with the same person, or if they don't have the required level, they can refer you to another teacher. But for the most part, they grow up there. They are taken from a young age, and before they finish the Quran, they are adults and prefer to return to continue elsewhere or complete their learning."

The walima also has a protective dimension. According to several respondents, their absence can lead to psychological problems in the learner. On this subject, one respondent (M. A. F.) explains: "For the walima, for example, there are some for whom, when we don't do that, there is a disruption. They have mental disorders, mental problems." Obviously, we make sacrifices, that is to say we give colas, sweets, we read the Koran and we bless.

The objective of this stage is to develop pious citizens, free from antisocial behavior. According to Human Rights Watch, cited by Tano et al. (2022: 779), in a predominantly Muslim country, "learning Islam and the Quran is of paramount importance for a child's social development." This quest for knowledge drives some talibés to migrate to northern Nigeria or Niger to deepen their knowledge.

In many Fulani families, every activity begins with the invocation "Bismillah" (in the name of Allah), a symbol of trust and dependence on God. Scientific literature, notably Pargament (1997), shows that religious practice plays a key role in managing stress and hardship: religious coping. This concept refers to all the cognitive, emotional, and spiritual efforts mobilized to cope with adversity through religion (prayers, meditation, group support, collective rituals). Thus, for the Fulani community, obedience to Allah and the pursuit of religious knowledge are seen as remedies for life's difficulties. Faith becomes both a source of consolation and a lever for resilience, strengthening individuals' ability to overcome social obstacles.

The Proliferation of Mosques: Between Belief and Disregard for Children's Rights

Islam is a religion whose ideology is based on the promotion of righteous principles and values. Every word in Islam carries a profound meaning related to peace and social cohesion. This peace is expressed in the sacred formula: "Salam aleykoum wa rahmatullah wa barakatuh" (may the peace, mercy, and blessings of God be upon you). The Holy Quran, through its various verses, links faith to pious actions. It also makes the education of children a key factor in social development. However, a better interpretation of the word of Allah requires a minimum level of education and contributes to proper understanding. This suggests that education, in an individual's development, is crucial to ensuring good religious practice. It helps to better analyze and understand the different contours and, above all, establish a link between religion and the culture of belonging.

Based on the findings of our immersive stay, the observation is overwhelming. In most rural families, the education of children, supposedly at the heart of building a religious society through the values they are taught, lacks direction. Indeed, Islam recommends that children begin by committing themselves to respecting the words of the Prophet from the age of seven. Contrary to this

prescription, in some families, children younger than this age are forced to behave like true believers, practicing the religion as desired by their parents: respecting the five daily prayers, veiling when they are girls. It also emerges from the results of the observation that parents pay more attention to the religious conduct of children than to their health. This observation highlights the lack of awareness of children's rights in a community where the majority of the population is neither literate nor educated. In many families, children's health is often managed by their mothers, with the father unable or unwilling to assume his responsibilities.

Analysis of the testimonies collected highlights contrasting trends. Intellectuals and scholars of Islam generally adopt a nuanced view of the faith, recognizing the complementarity between scientific knowledge and religious belief. They question "blind belief" and value critical thinking. Conversely, some practitioners, claiming great piety, defend the religion literally, sometimes going so far as to invent principles that deviate from the fundamental teachings of Islam. This dichotomy is also reflected in the community's lifestyle choices. According to information gathered, the Fulani today represent nearly a third of Beninese pilgrims. Many of them, in order to perform the Hajj—one of the five pillars of Islam—do not hesitate to sell most of their possessions, particularly livestock. This choice, motivated by the search for honor and social recognition (the title of Aladji being highly valued), is sometimes made to the detriment of the education and training of children. However, the Quran recommends performing the pilgrimage only when the believer truly has the means.

One respondent summed up this logic thus: "Do you know that some of our parents don't know what to do with their children? How to take care of them isn't their concern. Others prefer to use everything they have left to go East and leave the children with nothing. It's a way of telling them, 'Look for yourself.' Yet, they are your children. Imagine!" (A. H.).

Regarding access to education and the issue of early marriage in the Fulani community, one respondent highlights the difficulties encountered by young people:

"There are parents from whom a student cannot ask for 100 francs. Every time you ask, you receive insults, even when you're little. When you're in middle school, you make arrangements with your mother if she understands you, or you manage on your own if you can. The day you

can't manage anymore, you drop out. That's why our villages don't always have senior officials. But if you drop out of school and, a few days later, announce that you've found a girl in a neighboring village, you're surprised to see how quickly the money for the dowry, and then the marriage, is raised. That's how it is here. We're used to it." (D. M.)

This testimony highlights the low priority given to formal education, contrasting with the rapid mobilization of resources for marriage. This reality helps explain the low school enrollment rate and the persistence of early marriages in the Fulani community, thus limiting the prospects for upward social mobility for younger generations.

Picture.1 Talibé children at the Grand Mosque 2 of Sissigourou in the commune of Bembéréké



Source: BANI photo, February 2025

Picture.2 Image showing a newly erected mosque



Source: BANI photo, February 2025

All these statements highlight the central importance of belief in the philosophy of pulaaku. They reveal that, for the Fulani community, faith is not simply a religious aspect, but constitutes a true foundation of identity and social development, structuring educational practices, life choices, and relationships with authority and tradition. Thus, belief profoundly shapes the worldview and values transmitted within the Fulani community, in accordance with the spirit of pulaaku. The prevalence of religious belief within the Fulani community is reinforced today by the proliferation of Islamic associations, which are building mosques even in the most remote rural areas. According to those interviewed, this strategy aims to bring the community closer to God and provide each believer with a framework conducive to regular religious practice and hope for a better future. Before the expansion of these associations, it was common for wealthier families to build their own mosque within their compound, allowing neighbors to gather there for prayer.

The rise of mosques, driven by Islamic associations, nevertheless contributes to maintaining the Fulani community in a form of cultural and religious dependence. This dynamic, described by some respondents as "religious recolonization," tends to impose a single interpretation of Islam, sometimes far removed from the precepts of the Holy Book. In this context, children, exposed to a rigid religious practice and unreceptive to other educational models, can find themselves in situations of social vulnerability, or even deviance, by entering environments where the values of their own religion are distorted.

This issue has already been explored by Cheikh Hamidou Kane in his book *Ambiguous Adventure*. The author portrays the character of Samba Diallo, a young Fulani torn between Islamic tradition and the influence of Western society. Kane (1961, cited in UNICEF, 2018: 7) writes: "We refused school to remain ourselves and to preserve God's place in our hearts. But do we still have enough strength to resist school and substance to remain ourselves? This questioning highlights the conflict between traditional values and Western education, as well as the way in which Islam has structured Fulani society through Quranic education and spiritual initiation.

Kane's analysis remains relevant in the contemporary context, marked by globalization and the questioning of cultural authenticity. By questioning the Fulani's ability to "resist school," the author does not challenge the

Islamization of the community, but invites reflection on the consequences of this development on the Fulani's cultural and social identity.

The gradual integration of Quranic schools and Islamic teachings into public policies aims to encourage the reconciliation of religious and Western education, particularly in societies deeply rooted in Islam (UNICEF, 2018). This approach has fostered the growth of madrasas in several municipalities of Borgou. However, our observations show that these educational centers remain absent from rural areas, where the majority of Fulani reside. This situation raises the question of the acceptability and commitment of the Fulani community to Franco-Arabic teachings, if such centers were accessible. Unlike mosques, which are built and offered free of charge to the population, enrollment in Franco-Arab educational centers is subject to a fee. However, it appears that the Fulani community is reluctant to invest in educational projects deemed lengthy and uncertain, such as formal education for children.

Given this situation, it is essential that educational decision-makers, particularly public authorities, develop strategies to integrate the Fulani community into an education system that respects their beliefs and encourages their participation. The goal is to create an environment where the Fulani feel comfortable engaging in education, while reconciling their religious values with the demands of formal education.

Picture 2 illustrates the proliferation of mosques in rural Fulani communities. Located in a bush area, this mosque is rarely visited, which can be explained by the low population density in its immediate vicinity. This location reflects the desire to expand places of worship into the most isolated areas, regardless of the number of households present.

The Islamic Model versus the Formal System: A Difficult Coexistence

The issue of child education within the Fulani community is the subject of much debate, due to the complexity of this mission for those involved in the formal education system. Several factors explain this situation, including the long-standing introduction and deep roots of Islam in certain African societies, well before colonization. Many studies contrast the Islamic educational model with the Western-inspired formal system, highlighting their differences in terms of methods and objectives. According to a report by the

West and Central African Education Research Network (ROCARE, 2009), Islamic education contributes to inclusive education, but it is divided into three types of schools: traditional Quranic schools, Arab schools, and Franco-Arab schools. While Arab and Franco-Arab schools adopt a similar organization to the formal system, their curricula and educational programs remain less structured.

The report also highlights that Islamic education aims to impart know-how and skills, without necessarily preparing for professional integration. Conversely, the formal system, by providing academic training to learners, seeks to facilitate their integration into the job market. However, according to the Islamic perspective, a successful education is one that shapes a balanced, competent, and virtuous citizen (Wenzek, 2023). Thus, coexistence between these two educational models remains difficult, due to profound differences in their purposes and practices. This situation calls for reflection on strategies to promote better coordination between religious and formal education, for the benefit of the development of children in the Fulani community.

The Islamic educational model is based on a holistic approach, aiming to develop not only the intellectual capacities of children, but also their moral and spiritual dimensions. The goal is to develop a balanced individual, capable of contributing positively to society while remaining faithful to the principles of Islam. This concept places a central role on the guidance of the child, perceived as a being requiring support to fully assume his adult life. The interviews conducted as part of this study confirm that, according to the Islamic perspective, education aims to establish a pious life and to transmit respect for the sacred. As UNICEF (2018: 14) emphasizes, "the child, in this conceptualization, is a moral being who must be integrated into a broader society through appropriate socio-centered education." For the Fulani community of Borgou, this model is considered ideal, because it protects against all forms of deviance and promotes attachment to Islamic values. Islam is thus perceived as a structuring tradition, the perpetuation of which begins with family education, under the primary responsibility of parents (Ferkous, n.d.), before extending to the school setting.

In contrast, the Western education system pursues fundamental objectives such as the harmonious development of children and the acquisition of essential skills for their social and professional integration. This model emphasizes instruction, communication, critical

thinking, autonomy, and lifelong learning. Formal education aims to prepare children for professional life, drawing on curricula focused on language proficiency, mathematical and scientific skills, digital literacy, as well as social and civic abilities. The goal is to ensure equal opportunities in a constantly changing world, hence the importance attached to educational inclusion.

Analysis of the aims of each model reveals that Islamic education primarily prepares for the hereafter, while maintaining a moderate perspective on material aspects. Conversely, Western education prioritizes the development of skills that enable successful professional integration. Ferkous (n.d.) summarizes the specificity of Islamic education as follows:

"Islamic education is based on establishing a balance between the spiritual and material aspects, which are the two realities of human existence and on which human life is organized. Man should not be materialistic to the point of believing himself to be eternal or indulging in the passions of this world or its pleasures. Rather, he should consider his own spiritual world, which is profound in its depths. It is in this sense that Islamic education has distinguished itself from other educational systems, not only in preparing man for life in this world, but also for eternal life in the hereafter."

This vision, widely shared by the Fulani community, places an education based on the veneration and knowledge of Allah in tension with a Western model focused on professional integration. One respondent expressed this point of view:

"You know that Islam only offers advantages? When you learn and master the content of the Quran, you are better. It's not the same for many young people who go to the white man's school to spend several years and then come back to weed with us. When you don't earn the job after the white man's school, everything you've invested is a waste. With the Quranic school, it's different; even if you don't become a religious leader who organizes baptisms, weddings, or runs a mosque, you are still sometimes involved, and later, you can wait your turn. But I see our brothers who attended here doing nothing with their knowledge of the French school."

Thus, comparing the two educational models highlights different conceptions of success and the role of education, with each system carrying specific values and goals, shaping the choices and trajectories of children in the Fulani community. Analysis of these statements

highlights the negativity that formal education represents within the Fulani community in Borgou. While it is recognized that the community has many school dropouts or unemployed graduates who seek no way out of poverty, it is also understandable that the rural exodus for the purpose of learning the Quran, which has become recurrent among Fulani communities, continues to plunge the community into a deep social crisis, making young people lazier and less productive.

The establishment of Islam in Africa on the one hand and that of the French or British school on the other took place in imperialist conflict situations that left unfortunate consequences for the African continent. Islam introduced and propagated in Africa before the 10th century suffered, like ancestral African values, the harm of colonization with the introduction of French or English as languages to be learned in schools by colonized African peoples, leading to the banning of African languages described as vernacular. Faced with this competition, Islam, although having managed to impose its practice within several sub-Saharan societies, notably Beninese such as the Fulani, the Hausa, the Yoruba, did not succeed in introducing its curricula into the teaching programs developed during the colonial period. On the contrary, these programs were entirely controlled by the Catholic Church, as demonstrated by the work of Kamuzinzi (2012, 2019). Indeed, the first roles played by the colonial school in Africa were entrusted to Christian missionaries. The author highlights the colonial pressure in the inauguration of the Rwandan education system under the German colonizers. According to him, education took the form of "chapel-schools" before being entirely under the charge of the Catholic Church. It should be remembered that at the end of the First World War, Rwanda came under the tutelage of the Belgian metropolis, leaving control of the educational programs entirely to the Catholic Church, which retained a monopoly (*ibid.*).

Furthermore, the training of an African elite to serve under the colonizer's orders was the primary mission assigned to colonial schools (Jean, 2014). The educational content determined for this purpose by the Catholic Church (Jean, 2014; Kamuzinzi, 2012, 2019) aimed to satisfy the teachers and was oriented toward colonial culture.

Faced with all this colonial hegemony, which resulted in the domination of Western values, Islam multiplied strategies to occupy and maintain the religious beliefs of the communities under its control. Thus, assistance for

the development of Islamic associations began through the construction of mosques and financial support. This then led to the development of a new phase with the emergence of madrasas, which pursued a dual objective: teaching the word of Allah while reconciling the learning of Western languages. From then on, the power of Islam began to grow and constituted a significant threat to the Western model. Faced with the multiple aids generated by Asian countries through bilateral and multilateral relations with other countries in the world, the imposition of the Arab model is becoming increasingly dominant and constitutes a worrying situation for the West, particularly France, giving rise to cries of alarm.

Brighelli (2015) analyzes the current functioning of the French school system and notes many unfortunate consequences linked to the acceptance of certain Islamic practices due to the penetration of this ideology into the French educational model. According to him, by promoting the creation of private Islamic schools and legislating in favor of foreign practices, France has destroyed the soul of its educational system by introducing the seeds of a policy of frivolity that benefits new ideologies such as Islam. He speaks of "the abolition of scholarly knowledge in favor of a sterile pedagogy" that has marked a tenacious, long-standing policy. His criticisms seem very harsh but raise difficulties of interactions between two opposing ideologies, each tending to dominate the other. The terminologies used to describe France's permeability to suffering and the inability of leaders to find measures to restore French schools to their former glory in the face of a "religious obscurantism" that is spreading and already causing damage as early as primary school reflect the facts. In light of the reading that can be made of the author's analyses, it can be deduced that the French educational model opposes the non-acceptance of the principles of Islam as they operate. For example, the practice of Sharia law and the wearing of the veil are strongly contested in the school environment in France, but these practices persist despite the abolition of the Jospin law in 1989 (Brighelli, 2015). This highlights the problems of applying the texts. This situation is seen by the author as a kind of ignorance that can lead to the loss of identity of French educational policy. "Ignorance feeds superstition and conflicts. And we didn't wait for Jean-Claude Michéa to know that today's school is "the teaching of ignorance" - or the "making of the cretin" (Brighelli, 2015: 80), thus denouncing the open conflicts between a French educational system considered as a European model and for the former colonies and Islam which seeks to assert supremacy.

The ideological quarrels generated by the search for domination jeopardize the school education of children from highly Islamized communities like the Fulani. However, (Brighelli, 2015: 84) believes that "It is not up to the school to adapt to Islam. It is up to Islam to adapt to the school. It is up to Islam to make its *aggiornamento*." Indoctrinated in a limitless belief, the majority of the Fulani population, struck by chronic illiteracy, lacks scientific knowledge, the capacity for discernment to analyze and understand the symbolic significance of each element of the social environment that founds the sociocultural development of a people. As a result, the Fulani adopt everything that comes their way, provided that it has a connection with the word of Allah. The results of the observation carried out as part of this study corroborate this analysis, highlighting the purely Islamic dress style of the Fulani community, which today replaces the *accoutrement*, which formerly aimed to identify this ethnic group. Also, all the thoughts of the community have their origins in Islam, demonstrating the complexity of educating children in a model opposed to this religion. The comments collected from B. Y. M. denounce the full depth of the Islam-French school crisis. He states:

For the Fulani community, education is not a priority, especially sending children to school. Why? We also interviewed some people who felt that for the Fulani, given their roots in the Muslim religion, anything that comes from white people is bad. So, as soon as we detect something that comes from white people, it means a priori that we find school to be a bad thing as well. This is why, according to some indiscretions, some frankly don't go. And we can also be convinced of this by taking a look at the children's membership or the enrollment of children in Koranic schools, these little children who are called *talibés*. In all the localities of the North, 99.99% of them are children from the Fulani community. So, when we make this connection, we easily understand that people have much more faith in religion than in formal school.

This verbatim statement perfectly illustrates the aforementioned findings and confirms the relevance of introducing the concept of "Quranization" to describe the Fulani community's deep roots in Islam and its identification through religious values. The majority of those interviewed in this study emphasized the importance of reconciling Quranic school and formal education. However, their comments reveal a marked preference for religious transmission, deemed more beneficial based on their experience and heritage.

For example, one of the respondents stated: "The schools in our village are the Quranic school, since that's what we inherited." This explicit mention of religious heritage highlights the traditional dimension of Islam within the Fulani community, as well as the difficulty of breaking away from it. The emphasis on this religious affiliation reinforces the idea of a structuring Islamic anchor, which is often accompanied by a gradual erosion of ancestral practices in favor of Islamic values. Thus, the Islamic religion has established itself as a major identity marker for the Fulani community, guiding its educational and social choices, and making any attempt to diversify or transform existing educational models complex.

The study reveals that, in practice, the Fulani community favors the Islamic model, which complicates children's educational paths and contributes to their marginalization in the formal system. This preference is explained by the perception of greater consistency between Islamic education and local cultural values, but also by a distrust of the promises of social advancement offered by Western schools, which are often considered uncertain.

Faced with the scientific and technological changes of the contemporary world, the need for a contextualized connection between the two educational models emerges as a major challenge. This involves moving beyond the logic of opposition to promote integration strategies that respect cultural specificities, with a view to meeting the requirements of the fourth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG4): ensuring inclusive, equitable, and quality education throughout life. Ultimately, only a dialogical and contextualized approach, based on the mutual recognition of values and educational goals, will open up prospects for emancipation for Fulani children, while preserving the richness of their cultural and religious heritage.

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