The Itinerant Koranic School
Contested Practice in the History of Religion and Society in Central Chad

Mirjam de Bruijn

The daily market in the small town of Mongo in Guera Province in Central Chad is crowded with malnourished and badly dressed children between the ages of 6 and 16. They gather around any newcomer who may need someone to carry their luggage or who might hopefully give them a small gift out of pity or just because it is normal to do so. The majority are Koranic students who come to the market or wander the streets to find their daily meal by begging or doing small jobs. In the early morning, afternoon and evening they study the Koran, supervised by older students and their teacher, the fâkih. Many of these ‘schools’ come from regions other than the Mongo area, in most cases from the northeast. Although travelling schools are an accepted reality in the Chadian social landscape, their numbers are outgrowing the capacity of the population of this small town. People in Mongo are complaining that they cannot supply all these children with food every day. Indeed, it is clear from the children's appearance that they are not getting a balanced diet. There is no organised social care for these children nor do they find any structural support from NGOs or the local community.

observations summarized by Mirjam during fieldwork in 2003

Introduction

I made these observations during my stay in Mongo in Central Chad in 2002 and 2003. It was shocking to see such children and so I tried to find out more about these schools and understand why the children were in Mongo and not at home with their families. The main explanation for the situation could be Chad’s recent history and the current levels of poverty in a country that recently experienced 30 years of civil war and where development has been virtually impossible because of a lack of political will. In these terms the rights of the children are violated and the schools could be interpreted as a form of (structural) violence, like forms of poverty can be. However such a perspective would set the schools and the teachers in the position of perpetrators and the children in the position of victims. I will not
deny that what I saw in the schools and the condition of the pupils can indeed easily fit an explanation of structural violence. However such explanation did not fit the way the pupils, their parents and the teachers see it themselves. Why do children join these schools voluntarily? They gave themselves as answer to such questioning that they joined out of religious piety and for the career perspectives the schools offer. From the people who were, like me, observing the schools, the inhabitants of Mongo, nobody outwardly condemned the practice. Instead, I met many people who contributed to the system by inviting the Muslim teachers and their pupils to stay in their houses. Today, however, the practices of these schools are becoming increasingly contested under the influence of NGO activities, who have embraced the structural violence thesis and defend the rights of the children, and the introduction of modern Islamic schools that are considered a good alternative for these itinerant schools.

In this chapter I pursue the discussion about these schools between them being structural violence, violating children’s rights or systems of cultural and social practice. To understand the situation of the schools today it is important to situate them in the historical, religious and socio-economic context of Central Chad. Policy practice, the reactions of civil society and recent contestation of the schools will be discussed to help explain the phenomenon. Each of these players in the theatre of the Koranic school has its own subjective interpretation of the situation. Central question in this article is how these various subjectivities varying from cultural and social practices to structural violence come together in the practice of the Koranic schools in Central Chad. On an empirical level I am also questioning why these itinerant Koranic schools that do have a cultural and social history, have developed into a phenomenon that we can indeed interpret as an act of structural violence against children.

The data presented were collected when I was living in Chad in 2002 and 2003 and during later visits in 2004 and 2005. After making some general observations and interviewing both teachers and pupils, I decided to carry out a more systematic study of the practice. A team of health workers in Mongo did surveys and short interviews and a nutritionist undertook a health survey among the children. Discussions and interviews with the Imam, social workers and ordinary citizens completed the picture. The anthropological approach I used while being in Mongo, i.e. observing and living in town, revealed probably the essential elements to understanding this practice.

Koranic Schools and Society
Teaching the Koran is an important element of Islamic education and almost all Muslim children study the Koran for a few years. This teaching is closely