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Bissau Guinean Quran schoolboys begging midst a pandemic: Qualitative study

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Bissau Guinean Quran schoolboys begging midst a pandemic: Qualitative study

Hamadou Boiro, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0659-2639>

Jónína Einarisdóttir, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5868-4615>

Geir Gunnlaugsson, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6674-2862>

Hamadou Boiro

National Institute for Studies and Research (INEP), Bissau, Guinea-Bissau; and

Faculty of Sociology, Anthropology and Folkloristics, University of Iceland, Reykjavik, Iceland

Jónína Einarisdóttir

Faculty of Sociology, Anthropology and Folkloristics, University of Iceland, Reykjavik, Iceland

(je@hi.is)

Geir Gunnlaugsson

Faculty of Sociology, Anthropology and Folkloristics, University of Iceland, Reykjavik, Iceland

(geirgunnlaugsson@hi.is)

Corresponding author:

Geir Gunnlaugsson, Faculty of Sociology, Anthropology and Folkloristics, Gimli v/Sturlugata 6,

University of Iceland, IS-102 Reykjavik, Iceland. Tel. work +354-525 4369; mobile +354-843

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What is known about the subject

- Lockdowns and containment measures threaten beggars’ survival in the time of a pandemic.
- Quran schoolboys (*almudos*), who beg for survival and education, are identified by international and child rights organisations as victims of child trafficking.
- The Quran school teachers (*chernos*), accused of child trafficking, are respected religious teachers and community leaders.

What this study adds

- The Quran schools were not closed during the national lockdown in Guinea-Bissau in response to the pandemic.
- Bissau-Guinean Quran schoolboys know key preventive Covid-19 measures from radio and their teachers, yet adherence was contextual.
- The challenges caused by lockdown came on top of other daily struggles of Quran school boys’ to fulfil their aspirations of becoming a respected *cherno*.

Abstract

Background: COVID-19 is mainly a disease of adults but can affect vulnerable children indirectly through social containment measures. The study aimed to explore the impact of the pandemic on Quran schoolboys, *almudos*, who beg on behalf of their teachers, *chernos*, in Guinea-Bissau.

Methods: Data was collected in July 2020 during a state of emergency. Data rests on semi-structured interviews and informal chat with 14 Quran schoolboys and observations in their Quran schools, *dudal*. The boys, aged 12-16 years, were identified when begging in the capital Bissau and the regional centre Gabú.

Results: COVID-19 brought hardship and hunger with lockdown and police threats resulting in a sharp decrease in alms. The boys listed essential preventive measures they had learned from their *chernos* and radio. They said they had attempted to follow them, but crowdedness impeded social distancing. Observations indicated deficient practice. The boys and the *chernos* prayed to God to stop the pandemic. Almost all the boys had contact with their parents, who encouraged them to continue their studies. Though, more boys than usually returned to their rural villages to work in agriculture. The Quran education continued, but hunger caused difficulties in concentrating on the studies. The boys and their *chernos* mainly lived in a large “bubble”, and nobody got sick. They aspired to complete the studies, of which begging was seen as an integral part, to become respected *chernos*.

Conclusion: The COVID-19 was an additional burden to Quran schoolboys, who faced many challenges begging to complete their religious education. According to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, children have a right to develop their capabilities in line with their future aspirations. Governments and child rights organisations need to address the specific needs of Quran schoolboys in collaboration with the boys, their parents, the *chernos* and their communities.

Introduction

While COVID-19 has mainly infected adults, all have suffered from lockdowns and social containment measures, albeit unequally [1–3]. In West Africa, the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted harshly on vulnerable groups, such as the elderly, persons with disabilities, prisoners, and informal workers, through loss of income, human rights abuses, lack of access to health care and education, domestic violence, soaring commodity prices and food insecurity [1,4]. There are concerns that the number of beggars in the region will rise in the wake of the pandemic, not least child beggars [5–7], but also that regular beggars will lose their income due to curfew and restriction of movement of people [8–10].

Quran boarding schools with students residing with their teachers have a long history in the West African region [11]. Such education is common among the Fula, who refer to the Quran schools as *dudal*, the students as *almudos* and the schoolmasters as *chernos*. The in-house students, entirely boys, stroll around in cities asking for alms on behalf of their teachers; thus, international agencies and child rights organisations classify them as victims of child trafficking [12–14]. Despite accusations of child trafficking, the parents continue to send their sons to live under the *chernos*’ tutelage [12,13,15,16].

After the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, begging Quran schoolchildren in the West African region have become a subject to governmental actions. In the northern states of Nigeria, despite travel bans and warnings not to spread the disease, tens of thousands of Quran schoolchildren were sent long distances to their homes of origin for reasons such as to prevent them from becoming infected, cut expenses and end the *almajirai* educational system [17,18]. In Senegal, Quran schoolboys referred to as *talibés*, curfew enforced by police violence in the streets resulted in a reduction of alms and long hours of studies into the night without food [19]. There are also reports of hundreds of boys taken off the streets for quarantine, during which they received food and hygiene materials, and thereafter sent back to their families [20].

In Guinea-Bissau, the begging of Quran schoolboys has been subject for the engagement of child rights organisations, without satisfactory results [15,21,22]. A child rights-based response in the time of a pandemic includes keeping children and young people visible and hearing their voices [3]. Here, we aimed to explore the pandemic’s impact on the life of Bissau-Guinean Quran schoolboys during a state of emergency, their knowledge and practice regarding prevention and its potential impact on their future aspirations.

Methods

The government of Guinea-Bissau took preventive measures against the pandemic even before the first case of COVID was confirmed in the country (Box 1). Data collection was conducted in July 2020, when the country was still in a state of emergency. The data rests on semi-structured, open-ended interviews, informal chat, and observations. Participants were 14 Quran schoolboys aged 12-16 years in the capital, Bissau, and in Gabú, a regional centre in the eastern part of the country, with seven participants in each area. Almost all the boys originated from rural villages; one was from Guinea-Conakry. All the boys studied the Quran with a *cherno* to whom their parents had entrusted them, and they begged as a part of their religious studies. The participants were identified when begging in the two settings. The first author (HB) conducted the interviews in the Fula language and did the observations. The interviews were either directly recorded or written down, depending on the boy's preferences. The interviews were translated into Portuguese and analysed in Atlas.ti.

As part of a larger ethnographic research on the Bissau-Guinean *almudos*, their parents and *chernos*, the participants were given information about the study by one of the authors (HB); informed consent was verbal [23–25], and the children decided on their participation without any personal identifiers. The interviews were taken individually, some in the street and others at the Quran school. The interview time ranged from 20-30 minutes, yet afterwards, the discussions were informal.

Patient and public involvement. In 2009, the authors initiated research in Guinea-Bissau on the theme of Quran schoolboys, claimed to be subjects of child trafficking (Einarsdóttir et al., 2010). The community members were outraged over the use of the concept for their efforts to give their children a religious education. The first author (HB), in collaboration with co-authors, has since been working with the government, international organisations, and NGOs to improve and strengthen work with this group of children. The gained experience shaped our research questions with due consideration given to the local context. The boys were given the opportunity to reject participation but none did. The boys were given ample space to add to the discussions whatever concern they might have. The interviews were taken in the local language in their respective *dudal* with permission of their *chernos*, who are *de facto* guardians of the *almudos*. Each boy was interviewed in isolation from others. The first author (HB) is currently working with risk communication and community engagement for WHO and the National COVID-19 High Commissioner in Guinea-Bissau, and the results of this research will guide further work on the pandemic and with the *almudos*.

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Results

Survival in times of lockdown

The boys used the term *tampere* when describing the corporal and mental fatigue they suffered from the pandemic. The “*Corona* hunger” was the worst. The boys’ access to food was scarce yet varied; some had their meals at their *cherno*’s house, others had their meals on the street, two of the boys had their meals at a relative’s home. With *Corona*, begging brought neither money nor food. “Access to food is difficult with *Corona*; many services are not functioning, including the bus stations where we used to receive a lot of money from passengers and others,” a boy explained. Another said: “Now we can’t eat another person’s leftovers, and we don’t have money to buy food.” Yet another pointed out: “The alms have decreased, and many restaurants are closed that used to give us food. Customers are few.” In Bissau, the boys were also struggling to collect money to pay the rent every month for the premises where they stayed with their *cherno*; in Gabú, the *chernos* had constructed their own huts.

During a state of emergency, the boys, like everybody else, were harassed by the police when they went out searching for food and money. The police marched the streets beating people with batons. Nonetheless, staying at the *dudal* was not an alternative; it would have resulted in starving. A boy explained: “Our income from begging has drastically decreased, and the police have stopped us from begging, and they chase us every time we meet them.”

Preventive measures

All except three boys knew how *Corona* was transmitted from one person to another; one should not shake hands with others and avoid contact with objects and places contaminated by *Corona*. A boy explained: “It is enough to wear a mask and to wash your hands with soap or bleach to prevent this disease.” At the same time, all the boys prayed to God to stop the pandemic, and all maintained that only God could protect them.

The boys cited their *chernos* and radio as the primary sources of knowledge about *Corona*. Some had also discussed the issue with their parents, who called them to advise how to protect themselves. “They advise me to use soap, wash my hands and avoid going into crowds,” a boy explained. All the boys maintained their *chernos* had advised them to respect the preventive measures, particularly handwashing, physical distancing, and wearing face masks. “He always encourages us to wear face masks and wash our hands and not to go out during the state of emergency,” a boy pointed out. In some cases, the *chernos* had located handwashing tools at the entrance to their residences so that every person going out or coming in could wash their hands.

Nonetheless, none of the boys wore masks when identified or was observed washing their hands when entering their *cherno's* house.

Crowdedness became a theme frequently raised. The boys slept at the place of their *chernos*, except two who stayed with relatives. They shared their room and sleeping mat with other boys of similar age. In some cases, as many as eight boys had to share a mat. A boy in Bissau explained: "We are 32 *almudos*; some sleep on mats in the living room and others sleep in other rooms. The youngest ones sleep together." Another boy in Bissau said: "There are 42 of us boys studying here; we are sleeping like sardines. We haven't received the mosquito nets distributed by the government." In Gabú, the situation was better: "We sleep on mats in the huts built by the *cherno*. In each hut, three to four *almudos* sleep together on a mat. There are more than 50 *almudos* in the *dudal*." The boys did not know anyone who had become sick in *Corona*, and no case of *Corona* had been identified in their schools. The boys were aware that crowded living put them at risk for infection, or as one explained: "How do you think we can respect the distancing measures in practice? We live in groups, we eat in groups, we sleep in groups, and we work in groups."

The boys meant that their *cherno* did not cure *Corona*, but prayers were considered important for health prevention and cure. A boy confirmed: "We pray to God every day to protect us from this disease and to protect the whole country." They said the *cherno* looked after the health of the people under his responsibility. Moreover, according to some of the boys, part of the *cherno's* share of the alms was kept apart to pay for health care when needed.

The Quran schoolboys gave three answers when asked about their fear of *Corona*. First, some said they were afraid of *Corona* because it was a deadly disease. Another group of participants said they were not scared because what happened depended on God's will. Finally, a group of boys in Gabú were not afraid of *Corona* because the disease had not yet reached their region.

Begging and future aspirations

The boys have a common future aspiration to become a great *cherno*. One explained: "I want to continue my Quran studies, become a *cherno* and have my *dudal*." The pandemic could have severe consequences for that plan, as one boy speculated: "If the disease continues at this rate, it could be difficult for us to survive and continue our study because we will no longer have food and we will no longer be able to study." Most parents had called the boys after the outbreak of *Corona*. They were anxious to hear about their situation and worried mainly about the continuation of the Quran studies; none demanded their son to return home.

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The boys confirmed that the Quran studies had continued mostly uninterrupted, despite the pandemic. At the beginning of the pandemic, with a curfew except in the morning hours, the teaching continued in hiding. Otherwise, a boy maintained, “nothing has changed; we learn in the same way as before.” However, the boys and their *chernos* had difficulties concentrating on their Quran studies because of hunger. A group of the *almudos* at their *dudal* had left to their rural villages for agricultural work, which happens even in normal times, though more boys had gone this time. “When they come back, they will continue to learn with us,” one boy argued. The boys agreed that begging would continue; they needed their *chernos*’ blessing (Fula: *barkê*) to continue their religious education in Senegal or Mauritania. The boys had already experienced hardship, of which *Corona* was only one, and there were more challenges ahead in finding food and completing the religious studies.

Discussion

This study aimed to explore the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the life of Quran schoolboys, who beg for their survival and education in Guinea-Bissau. Semi-structured, open-ended interviews and informal chats with 14 boys aged 12-16 years revealed that the pandemic brought hardship and hunger. During the state of emergency, police threats and beating, closed restaurants and limited movement of people resulted in meagre income from begging. Most of the boys listed key preventive measures against COVID-19, based on knowledge gained from their *chernos* and radio; however, the corresponding practice was not observed. The boys and their *chernos* mainly lived in a well-defined ‘bubble’ [26], and there were no reports of infection in their respective groups. Almost all the boys had contact with their parents, who encouraged them to continue with the Quran studies to fulfil their aspiration to become respected *chernos*.

The data collection was carried out when the boys had struggled 3-4 months under a state of emergency, which meant the closure of borders and lockdown of places of worship, educational facilities, restaurants, and bars (Box 1). Further, gatherings were forbidden and wearing masks in public places and social distancing was mandatory. Curfew had been lifted at the time of data collection, but various curfew regulations were in place. The “*Corona* hunger” was their everyday experience. Participatory research with more prolonged participant observation [27] was not an option this time, yet some observations were made. The creation of story maps, as has been reported elsewhere [9], would not have worked due to lack of access to digital technology, skills in its use, and language proficiency [9,28].

Our findings caution against simple assumptions that vulnerable groups, including beggars and street children, are ignorant [9]. Most of the Bissau-Guinean Quran schoolboys knew how to avoid infection, as those in Senegal [19]. Nonetheless, the crowdedness in their daily living hampered social distancing and adherence to other measures was inadequate. Like young gold miners in Ghana [29], the boys knew nobody who had got *Corona*, and the “*Corona* hunger” was only one of many challenges that threatened the fulfilment of their future goals.

The Quran schoolboys felt the heavy burden of the pandemic through a sharp decrease of income from begging, resulting in hunger. Begging is a multifaceted phenomenon that may symbolise exploitation, poverty, pity, dependency, shame, fear, revulsion, irony, charity, humility, asceticism, piety and power, and the relationship between the beggar and the benefactor is complex [6,12,30–37]. Context is crucial. While people’s motives for giving alms vary, the judgement or respective beggar’s worthiness tends to be crucial [34,35]. When child begging is on the agenda, the *chernos* underline piety and the learning of humility, the parents talk about meaningful suffering resulting in something positive, the *almudos* are concerned with their *chernos’* blessing and physical survival, and the child rights organisations see exploitation and child trafficking [15,30,38,39].

Banning begging is increasingly practised to curb human trafficking, without success [14,38,40]. There are also calls to stop giving alms to get the children from the streets [7,33]. Street children and beggars suffer when their food sources are blocked, as happened during the COVID-19 lockdown; simultaneously, they frequently resist “being caught” by police and social services [9,21]. In normal times and in times of crisis, the government and other relevant stakeholders need to seek long-term, sustainable solutions in collaboration with the Quran schoolboys, their parents, the *chernos* and their communities. Searching for such solutions should be the work of social engagement and future research.

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The authors completed the Unified Competing Interest form at www.icmje.org/coi_disclosure.pdf and declare no conflicts of interest.

Author’s contribution

HB took part in the conception and design of the study, acquisition, analysis, and interpretation of data, drafted the first version of the manuscript, revised it, approved the final version, and agrees to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

JE took part in the conception and design of the study, analysis, and interpretation of data, revised the work, approved the final version, and agrees to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

GG took part in the conception and design of the study, analysis, and interpretation of data, revised the work, approved the final version, and agrees to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

Any checklist and flow diagram for the appropriate reporting statement

COREQ checklist

Patient consent form

Not relevant.

Data sharing statement

Not relevant.

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Box 1

Early development of COVID-19 pandemic in Guinea-Bissau and response of the government

- Closure of the national land and sea borders on March 17, 2020, and all international flights suspended
- First two cases of COVID confirmed on 25 March 2020
- State of emergency declared on 27 March, 2020, with nationwide curfew initially from 11:00 AM to 07:00 AM next day, with later gradual prolongation of outside curfew hours
- Supermarkets and mini-markets open in periods outside curfew hours, allowing individuals wishing to leave their homes for essential goods and services
- Public transport limited and no transport between regions
- Closure of social institutions, e.g., schools, places of worship, restaurants/bars and banks
- Ban on public gatherings, and leisure and sport activities prohibited
- People ordered to use face masks and respect social distancing

Covid-19 and begging on the street in Guinea-Bissau

Themes	Questions for beggars on the street
General	<p>Can you tell me a little about yourself?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. When and where were you born? Other countries, in this case, when did you come to Guinea-Bissau? How long in Bissau?2. Are you a student of a specific <i>cherno</i>?3. If you are an <i>almudu</i>, in Bissau? Another place, which one? Senegal, rural countryside? Who do you study with and where? If not, who do you stay with?4. Where do you currently sleep and eat? Neighborhood? How many people sleep in the same bed? Children <18 years (n)? adults (n)
Knowlegde/ Experience	<p>Can you tell me a little bit about what you know about Covid 19?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. What is this?2. What impact might this have?3. Are you afraid of getting the disease? Why?4. How is it transmitted/how do people get this disease?5. Do you believe in the existence of Covid 19 in Guinea-Bissau? Yes or No, Why?6. Through which channels do you receive information about Covid 19?7. What is Covid's impact on your day-to-day activity?8. How can you beg now compared to before Covid-19?9. What is the impact of Covid-19 on your access to food?
Education	<p>Can you tell me a little bit about how you feel Covid 19 has impacted on your Quran school education?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Do you still attend Quran school classes run by your <i>cherno</i>?2. Do you meet with other <i>almudus</i> to study together? How are they doing?3. Do you have or lack any service or support from your <i>cherno</i> (or others) at this stage of the pandemic?4. What type of service or support would you like to have?
Family	<p>Can you tell me a little bit about how Covid 19 has influenced your life and that of your family?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Do you communicate with your family about Covid-19 and your personal situation?2. Has Covid 19 affected your family's daily life? Like?3. Has Covid 19 had any positive/negative impact on your life, explain!4. How is your family reacting to the illness?5. Do you and your family support physical distance (2 meters), if not, why?6. Have you noticed any psychological impact of the epidemic on your family members? Explain!7. Did anyone in your family need to go to a health center to get services but was not seen because of Covid-19?8. Has anyone in your family had Covid-19?9. Are there people under the age of 10 and those over 60 in your family who were the family's concern with Covid 19? Explain!

Covid-19 and begging on the street in Guinea-Bissau

Neighbourhood	<p>Can you tell me a little bit about if/how Covid 19 has influenced your neighborhood where you go begging or during your daily activity?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Have you noticed any changes in your neighborhood? Explain! 2. In your opinion, do people follow the physical distance rule of 2 meters? Yes or No, Why? 3. What is the hardest thing to do in these times of restricted movement? 4. How do you see violence now compared to moments before the restrictions? In the family? In the streets? Between neighbors? Between beggars/<i>almudus</i>? Another violence? 5. Do people go to the health center when they are sick? If not, why? 6. Has anyone in your neighborhood/colleague <i>almudu</i> been infected with Covid-19? If so, please explain! 7. What was the reaction of neighbours to hearing about this disease?
Friends	<p>Can you tell me a little bit about your feelings in times of Covid 19? How has this influenced your social life?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Have your activities in your free time/work/daily activities changed? Like? 2. What do you do during the day? Has Covid-19 changed the pace of your daily activity, how? 3. What would you like to do but was affected by Covid 19?
Internet	<p>Can you tell me a little bit if Covid 19 has influenced the way you use the Internet or social media?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Do you have a phone? What type? 2. Do you have internet access? Like? Cost? What are you used to using on the internet? 3. In your opinion, what was the role played by the internet in the fight against Covid 19?
Future	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Can you tell me a little bit if Covid 19 will have any influence on your future prospects? If yes, how? If not, why? 2. After Covid-19, do you want to continue begging? If yes, why? If not, what do you want to do? What is your life's dream?

Manscript: Bissau Guinean Quran schoolboys begging midst a pandemic: Qualitative study

COREC guidelines

Domain 1: Research team and reflexivity

Personal characteristics

1. Interviewer/facilitator	Which author/s conducted the interview or focus group?	Hamadou Boiro (HB)
2. Credentials	What were the researcher's credentials? E.g. PhD, MD	HB is a researcher at the Nacional Institute of Study and Research (INEP), Bissau, Guinea-Bissau. He has an MA degree (1999) and DEA (2000) in social anthropology from Université Cheikh Anta Diop, Dakar, Senegal; since 2016 he is a PhD student in anthropology at the University of Iceland.
3. Occupation	What was their occupation at the time of the study?	Anthropologist, working with risk communication and community engagement for WHO and the National COVID-19 High Commissioner in Guinea-Bissau.
4. Gender	Was the researcher male or female?	Male
5. Experience and training	What experience or training did the researcher have?	HB has extensive experience in the collection and analysis of data in Senegal, The Gambia, and Guinea-Bissau. For WHO, he worked as a social scientist in the Ebola epidemics in West Africa in 2015 and the Democratic Republic of Congo 2018–2020, and in the COVID-19 pandemic response in Guinea-Bissau.

Relationship with participants

6. Relationship established	Was a relationship established prior to study commencement?	No prior relationship with study participants who were identified on the streets of Bissau and Gabú. Thereafter, HB followed the boys to the Quran school where he got permission from the marabout (teacher) to interview the boy. According to tradition, the parents have entrusted their son to the teacher who becomes their guardian.
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7. Participant knowledge of the interviewer	What did the participants know about the researcher? e.g. personal goals, reasons for doing the research	Before the interview, the participants were given information on the research, and about the researcher who would conduct the interview.
8. Interviewer characteristics	What characteristics were reported about the interviewer/facilitator? e.g. bias, assumptions, reasons and interests in the research topic	<p>After short presentation of the researcher and his former engagement with <i>almudus</i> and Quran school teachers, the participants were informed that the researcher was interested to know more about their knowledge about Covid and the daily experience of the Covid-19 pandemic. The interviews were anonymous and recorded with participant's permission; if expressing reluctance for recording, written notes were taken.</p> <p>Observations, with focus on adherence to preventive measures against Covid, were made when HB met the boys in the street and at their Quran school.</p>

Domain 2: study design

Theoretical framework

9. Methodological orientation and Theory	What methodological orientation was stated to underpin the study? e.g. grounded theory, discourse analysis, ethnography, phenomenology, content analysis	<p>The study is part of a larger ethnographic study, ongoing since 2009, about the Bissau-Guinean Quran schoolboys in Senegal, The Gambia, and Guinea-Bissau.</p> <p>This study applied content analysis of semi-structured and open-ended interviews. The interview guide was adapted in the Fula language for better comprehension of the participants, and how to communicate the questions in a local context.</p>
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Participant selection

10. Sampling	How were participants selected? e.g. purposive, convenience, consecutive, snowball	Purposive sampling.
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11. Method of approach	How were participants approached? e.g. face-to-face, telephone, mail, email	Face-to-face
12. Sample size	How many participants were in the study?	14 boys, aged 12-16 years
13. Non-participation	How many people refused to participate or dropped out? Reasons?	None of those invited declined to participate.

Setting

14. Setting of data collection	Where was the data collected? e.g. home, clinic, workplace	The data was collected in the capital Bissau, and the regional centre Gabú in the boys <i>dudal</i> (Quran school). Participants in the study did not mix or have contacts within the group. Interviews and observations were made at the Quran school but also when the boys were identified in the street.
15. Presence of non-participants	Was anyone else present besides the participants and researchers?	Only the researcher and the participant were present during the interviews
16. Description of sample	What are the important characteristics of the sample? e.g. demographic data, date	Children, boys, aged 12-16 years. All from Guinea-Bissau, except one came from Guinea (Conakry).

Data collection

17. Interview guide	Were questions, prompts, guides provided by the authors? Was it pilot tested?	The interview guide (both in English and Portuguese) was adapted by the researchers to the local situation. There was no formal pilot of the interview guide.
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18. Repeat interviews	Were repeat interviews carried out? If yes, how many?	No.
19. Audio/visual recording	Did the research use audio or visual recording to collect the data?	Audio-recording.
20. Field notes	Were field notes made during and/or after the interview or focus group?	Field notes were kept by the researcher to help in the work, for planning, etc..
21. Duration	What was the duration of the interviews or focus group?	20-30 minutes for each interview
22. Data saturation	Was data saturation discussed?	During implementation, similar information gradually emerged from participants.
23. Transcripts returned	Were transcripts returned to participants for comment and/or correction?	No.

Domain 3: analysis and findings

Data analysis

24. Number of data coders	How many data coders coded the data?	HB was the only data coder.
25. Description of the coding tree	Did authors provide a description of the coding tree?	No.
26. Derivation of themes	Were themes identified in advance or derived from the data?	The interview guide was set up with the following themes, each with several sub-questions: general, background, education, family, neighbourhood, friends, internet and future. See supplementary material. The themes and sub-questions guided the data collection and the interview. During the coding of the data, themes emerged and were continuously developed.
27. Software	What software, if applicable, was used to manage the data?	Microsoft Word and Atlas.ti

28. Participant checking	Did participants provide feedback on the findings?	No.
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Reporting

29. Quotations presented	Were participant quotations presented to illustrate the themes / findings? Was each quotation identified? e.g. participant number	Yes, but without participant number.
30. Data and findings consistent	Was there consistency between the data presented and the findings?	Yes
31. Clarity of major themes	Were major themes clearly presented in the findings?	Yes
32. Clarity of minor themes	Is there a description of diverse cases or discussion of minor themes?	Description of both diverse cases and discussion of minor themes.

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The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the life of Bissau-Guinean Quranic schoolboys during a state of emergency: A qualitative study

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The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the life of Bissau-Guinean Quranic schoolboys during a state of emergency: A qualitative study

Hamadou Boiro, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0659-2639>

Jónína Einarsdóttir, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5868-4615>

Geir Gunnlaugsson, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6674-2862>

Hamadou Boiro

National Institute for Studies and Research (INEP), Bissau, Guinea-Bissau; and

Faculty of Sociology, Anthropology and Folkloristics, University of Iceland, Reykjavik, Iceland

Jónína Einarsdóttir

Faculty of Sociology, Anthropology and Folkloristics, University of Iceland, Reykjavik, Iceland
(je@hi.is)

Geir Gunnlaugsson

Faculty of Sociology, Anthropology and Folkloristics, University of Iceland, Reykjavik, Iceland
(geirgunnlaugsson@hi.is)

Corresponding author:

Geir Gunnlaugsson, Faculty of Sociology, Anthropology and Folkloristics, Gimli v/Sturlugata 6, University of Iceland, IS-102 Reykjavik, Iceland. Tel. work +354-525 4369; mobile +354-843 6237

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What is known about the subject

- Lockdowns and containment measures threaten children and young peoples' survival in the time of a pandemic.
- Quranic schoolboys (*almudos*), who beg for survival and education, are identified by international and child rights organisations as victims of child trafficking.
- The Quranic teachers (*chernos*), accused of child trafficking, are respected religious teachers and community leaders.

What this study adds

- The Quranic schools were not closed during the national lockdown in Guinea-Bissau in response to the pandemic.
- Bissau-Guinean *almudos* know key preventive COVID-19 measures from radio and their *chernos*, yet adherence was contextual.
- The challenges caused by lockdown came on top of other daily struggles of *almudos* to fulfil their aspirations of becoming a respected *chernos*.

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Abstract

Background: COVID-19 is mainly a disease of adults but can affect vulnerable children indirectly through social containment measures. The study aimed to explore the impact of the pandemic on the lives of Quranic schoolboys, *almudos*, who beg on behalf of their teachers, *chernos*, in Guinea-Bissau.

Methods: Data was collected in July 2020 during a state of emergency. Data rests on semi-structured interviews with 14 *almudos* and observations. The *almudos*, aged 12-16 years, were identified in the capital Bissau and the regional centre Gabú.

Results: Four interconnected themes were found. The first, hardship, was brought by the COVID-19 pandemic and caused by lockdown and police threats, resulting in a decrease in alms and hunger. The second, to circumvent the calamity, included preventive measures and crowdedness impeding social distancing. Relations with others is the third theme. These had changed with sharply reduced contacts with neighbours and other providers of alms. The parents had more frequent telephone contact with their sons, and encouraged them to continue their studies. At the same time, the *chernos* and *almudos* passed more time together, and they dedicated more time than earlier to the studies and prayers. The fourth theme englobes the boys' aspirations to complete their studies and become respected *chernos*, for which begging was seen as necessary and an integral part.

Conclusion: The *almudos* suffered from decreased alms, resulting in hunger. Though, the COVID-19 was only an additional burden to them, used to face challenges when begging to complete their religious education. According to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, children have a right to develop their capabilities in line with their future aspirations. Governments and child rights organisations need to address the specific needs of *almudos* in respectful collaboration with them, their parents, the *chernos* and their communities.

Introduction

While COVID-19 has mainly infected adults, all have suffered from lockdowns and social containment measures, albeit unequally (1–4). In West Africa, the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted harshly on the livelihood of vulnerable groups, such as the elderly, persons with disabilities, prisoners, and informal workers, through loss of income, human rights violations, lack of access to health care and education, domestic violence, soaring commodity prices and food insecurity (1,5). There are concerns that the number of beggars in the region will rise in the wake of the pandemic, not least child beggars (6–8), but also that regular beggars will lose their income due to curfew and restriction of movement of people (9–11).

Islamic boarding schools with boys residing with their teachers to learn how to recite the Quran have a long history in the West African region (12). Such education is common among the Fula, who refer to the Quranic schools as *dudal*, the students as *almudos* and the schoolmasters as *chernos*; corresponding terms commonly used in neighbouring Senegal are *daaras*, *talibés* and *marabouts*. The in-house students, entirely boys, stroll around in cities asking for alms on behalf of their teachers; thus, international agencies and child rights organisations classify them as victims of child trafficking (13–15). Despite accusations of child trafficking, the parents continue to send their sons to live under the *chernos*' tutelage without paying for their livelihood (13,14,16,17). In West Africa, for example in Senegal, girls increasingly attend Islamic schools with boarding facilities that provide Arabic-Islamic education; they do not beg, and the parents generally pay for their education under the tutelage of primarily females (18).

After the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, begging Quranic schoolboys in the West African region have become subject to governmental actions. In the northern states of Nigeria, despite travel bans and warnings not to spread the disease, tens of thousands of Quranic schoolboys (called *almajirai*) were sent long distances to their homes of origin for reasons such as to prevent them from becoming infected, cut expenses and end the *almajirai* educational system (19,20). In Senegal, curfew enforced by police violence in the streets resulted in a reduction of alms for the Quranic schoolboys and long hours of studies into the night without food (21). There are also reports of hundreds of boys taken off the streets for quarantine, during which they received food and hygiene materials and thereafter sent back to their families (22).

In Guinea-Bissau, the begging of Quranic schoolboys has been subject to the engagement of child rights organisations without satisfactory results, partly due to failure to listen to the involved communities (16,23,24). A child rights-based response in the time of a pandemic includes keeping children and young people visible and hearing their voices (3). Here, we aimed

to explore the pandemic’s impact on the life of Bissau-Guinean Quranic schoolboys during a state of emergency, their knowledge and practice regarding prevention and thoughts about their future.

Methods

The government of Guinea-Bissau took preventive measures against the pandemic even before the first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in the country (Box).

Box

Early development of COVID-19 pandemic in Guinea-Bissau.

- Closure of the national land and sea borders on 17 March 2020, and all international flights suspended
- The first two cases of COVID-19 confirmed on 25 March 2020
- State of emergency declared on 27 March 2020:
 - Nationwide curfew initially from 11:00 AM to 07:00 AM next day, with later gradual reduction of curfew hours
 - Supermarkets and mini-markets open in periods outside curfew hours, allowing individuals wishing to leave their homes for essential goods and services
 - Public transport limited and no transport between regions
 - Closure of social institutions, e.g., schools, places of worship, restaurants/bars and banks
 - Ban on public gatherings and leisure and sports activities prohibited
 - People ordered to use face masks and respect social distancing

Data collection was conducted in July 2020, when the country was still in a state of emergency. At the end of July 2020, 1,981 cases of COVID-19 had been diagnosed, including 171 children aged 0-19 years, most in the capital Bissau (90%), but also in Biombo and Cacheu regions with 27 deaths (25). The data rests on semi-structured, open-ended interviews, informal chats, and observations (See Appendix 1). Participants were 14 *almudos* aged 12-16 years in the capital, Bissau, and in Gabú, a regional centre in the eastern part of the country, with seven participants in each area. Almost all the boys originated from rural villages; one was from neighbouring Guinea-Conakry. They studied the Quran with a *cherno* to whom their parents had entrusted them, and they begged as a part of their religious studies. The participants were identified in the two settings when begging or in their respective *dudal*. The first author (HB) conducted the

interviews in the Fula language and did the observations (See Appendix 2). The interviews were either directly recorded or written down, depending on the boys' preferences. The interviews were translated into Portuguese and analysed in Atlas.ti.

Initially, leaders of the main Islamic association in Guinea-Bissau were contacted and informed about the research. With their permission, the participants were given information about the study by one of the authors (HB); informed verbal consent was given by their *chernos*, who are in line with the tradition *de facto* guardians of the boys, and the boys ahead of the interview (26–28). No personal identifiers were used. The interviews were taken individually, and the time ranged from 20–45 minutes. After inquiring about the general background of the participants, the interview focused on their understanding of the pandemic, its impact on their daily life and thoughts about the future.

Patient and public involvement. Since 2009, the authors have been researching the context of the Quranic education in Guinea-Bissau (16,23,24,29). As part of the first author's (HB) doctoral study, an application for ethics review to collect data among begging children in Guinea-Bissau was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Iceland. HB is a senior researcher at the Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisa (INEP) in Bissau, but at the time of the collection of data presented in this article coordinator of risk communication and community engagement for WHO and the National COVID-19 High Commissioner in Guinea-Bissau. Based on gained knowledge on the living conditions and wellbeing of *almudos*, the authors aimed to give voice to this group of children in a state of emergency caused by the pandemic; due consideration was given to the local context and the age and vulnerability of the study participants (30). The boys, aged 12–16 years, were invited to participate, or reject but all accepted. During the interview, they were encouraged to add to the discussion whatever concerns they might have. The interviews were taken in their respective *dudal*, except in two instances in the street. Each boy was interviewed in isolation from others. Before and after the interviews, discussions were informal.

Results

The analysis of the interviews revealed four interconnected themes. The first is hardship that resulted in fatigue and hunger. The second one, circumventing the calamity, had to do with the possibility and impossibility to prevent infection. The third theme, relationships with others, including the boys' social contacts with their parents, *cherno* and other *almudos*, as well as neighbours and compatriots. The last theme, the future, has to do with the boys' concerns about their longterm visions.

Hardship

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The boys used the term *tampere* when describing the corporal and mental fatigue they suffered from the pandemic. The “*Corona* hunger” was the worst. The boys’ access to food was scarce yet varied; some had their meals at their *cherno*’s house, others had their meals on the street, two of the boys had their meals at a relative’s home. With *Corona*, begging brought neither money nor food. “Access to food is difficult with *Corona*; many services are not functioning, including the bus stations where we used to receive a lot of money from passengers and others,” a boy explained. Another said: “Now we can’t eat another person’s leftovers, and we don’t have money to buy food.” Yet another pointed out: “The alms have decreased, and many restaurants are closed that used to give us food. Customers are few.” In Bissau, the boys were also struggling to collect money to pay the rent every month for the premises where they stayed with their *cherno*; in Gabú, the *chernos* had constructed their own huts.

During the state of emergency, the boys, like everybody else, were harassed by the police when they went out searching for food and money. The police marched the streets beating people with batons. Nonetheless, staying at the *dudal* was not an alternative; it would have resulted in starving. A boy explained: “Our income from begging has drastically decreased, and the police have stopped us from begging, and they chase us every time we meet them.”

Circumvention of calamity

The *almudos* had heard about the new disease and how to avoid becoming sick. All the boys except three explained how *Corona* was transmitted from one person to another; one should not shake hands with others and avoid contact with objects and places contaminated by *Corona*. A boy argued: “It is enough to wear a mask and to wash your hands with soap or bleach to prevent this disease.” At the same time, all the boys prayed to God to stop the pandemic, and all maintained that only God could protect them.

The boys cited their *chernos* and radio as the primary sources of knowledge about *Corona*, while nobody mentioned the Internet. Most had also discussed the issue with their parents, who phoned them to advise how to protect themselves. “They advise me to use soap, wash my hands and avoid going into crowds,” a boy explained. All the boys maintained their *chernos* had advised them to respect the preventive measures, particularly handwashing, physical distancing, and wearing face masks. “He always encourages us to wear face masks and wash our hands and not to go out during the state of emergency,” a boy pointed out. In some cases, the *chernos* had located handwashing tools at the entrance to their residences so that every person going out or coming in could wash their hands. Nonetheless, no *almudos* wore masks when identified or were observed washing their hands when entering his *cherno*’s house.

Crowdedness became a theme frequently raised. The boys slept at the place of their *chernos*, except two who stayed with relatives. They shared their room and sleeping mat with other boys of similar age. In some cases, as many as eight boys had to share a mat. A boy in Bissau explained: “We are 32 *almudos*; some sleep on mats in the living room and others sleep in other rooms. The youngest ones sleep together.” Another boy in Bissau said: “There are 42 of us boys studying here; we are sleeping like sardines. We haven’t received the mosquito nets distributed by the government.” In Gabú, the situation was better: “We sleep on mats in the huts built by the *cherno*. In each hut, three to four *almudos* sleep together on a mat. There are more than 50 *almudos* in the *dudal*.” The boys did not know anyone who had become sick in *Corona*, and no case of *Corona* had been identified in their schools. The boys were aware that crowded living put them at risk for infection, or as one explained: “How do you think we can respect the distancing measures in practice? We live in groups, we eat in groups, we sleep in groups, and we work in groups.”

The Quranic schoolboys gave three answers when asked about their fear of *Corona*. First, some said they were afraid of *Corona* because it was a deadly disease. Another group of participants said they were not scared because what happened depended on God’s will. Finally, a group of boys in Gabú were not afraid of *Corona* because the disease had not yet reached their region.

Relations with others

The pandemic and the state of emergency changed the boys’ relations. The ties with neighbours and others who provided alms were reduced while everybody was included in their prayers. The boys meant that their *chernos* did not cure *Corona*, but prayers were important for protection and cure. A boy confirmed: “We pray to God every day to protect us from this disease and to protect the whole country.”

The boys’ telephone contact with their parents were more frequent. Most parents had called them after the outbreak of *Corona*. They were anxious to hear about their situation and worried mainly about the continuation of the Quranic studies. Despite the additional hardship caused by the pandemic and state of emergency, the parents had encouraged them to continue with their studies. The boys and their parents shared the vision that they would master the Quran. Nonetheless, as the boys reported, a bigger group of *almudos* than normally had left their *dudal* temporarily to stay with their parents to help with the agricultural work. “When they come back, they will continue to learn with us,” one boy argued.

As a result of the state of emergency, the relations between the boys and their masters increased. The boys spent more time than earlier in the *dudal*, crowded with other *almudos* studying the Quran. Together the *almudos* and their *chernos* were suffering, with difficulties in concentrating on their

studies because of hunger. At the same time, *Corona* could risk the boys' relationship with their Quranic master in a long-term perspective. Without begging, the *chernos* would not be able to continue with their teachings. One boy said: "I want to continue begging to support my Quranic teacher to ensure our food." Further, the *chernos* looked after the health and wellbeing of the people under his responsibility, and part of his share of the alms was kept paying for health care when needed. One participant said: "The Quranic master keeps the money from begging for our health." Another explained: "He calls on people of goodwill to bring a sick *almudo* to the hospital." Boys who aimed to continue their religious education in Senegal or Mauritania also needed their *chernos'* blessing (Fula: *barke*).

Future aspirations

All the boys except two had the future aspiration to become great *chernos*, or as explained by one boy: "I want to continue begging and working for my master, sacrificing myself for him, to have [access to] *dudal* and his blessings." Another wished for his future: "I want to continue my Quranic studies, become a *chernos* and have my *dudal*." The pandemic could have severe consequences for that plan, as one boy speculated: "If the disease continues at this rate, it could be difficult for us to survive and continue our study because we will no longer have food and we will no longer be able to study." In contrast, two of the boys admitted that they did want to beg anymore, and they did not aim to become *chernos* in the future. One of them said: "If it was up to me, I wasn't going to continue begging because I'm tired of begging."

All the boys confirmed that the Quranic studies had continued mostly uninterrupted, despite the pandemic, and they were grateful for that. At the beginning of the pandemic, with a curfew except in the morning hours, the teaching continued in hiding. Otherwise, a boy maintained, "nothing has changed; we learn in the same way as before." The boys had already experienced hardship, of which *Corona* was only one, and there were more challenges ahead in finding food, completing the religious studies, or looking for whatever other directions in life.

Discussion

In this study, we aimed to explore how the COVID-19 pandemic had affected the lives of Quranic schoolboys, *almudos*, who beg for their survival and education in Guinea-Bissau. Semi-structured, open-ended interviews and informal chats with 14 boys aged 12-16 years revealed that the pandemic brought hardship and hunger. During the state of emergency, police threats and beating, closed restaurants and limited movement of people resulted in meagre income from begging. Most of the boys listed key preventive measures against *Corona* based on knowledge gained from their *chernos* and radio; however, the corresponding practice was not observed. The

boys and their Quranic teachers, *chernos*, mainly lived in a well-defined 'bubble' (31), and there were no reports of infection in their respective groups. Almost all the boys had contact with their parents, who encouraged them to continue with the Quranic studies to fulfil their aspiration to become respected *chernos*.

Giving voice to a vulnerable group of 12-16 years old *almudos* who are begging on the street is a strength of the study. In line with the United Nations Convention on the Right of the Child (Art. 12 and 13), children have a right to express an opinion on matters of concern to them (3,28). The data collection was carried out when the boys had struggled 3-4 months under a state of emergency, which meant the closure of borders and lockdown of places of worship, educational facilities, restaurants, and bars (Box). Further, gatherings were forbidden and wearing masks in public places and social distancing was mandatory. Curfew had been lifted at the time of data collection, but various curfew regulations were in place. The "Corona hunger" was their everyday experience. Participatory research, including prolonged participant observation (30), was not an option this time, yet some observations were made. Similarly, the creation of story maps, like reported elsewhere (10), would not have worked due to lack of access to digital technology, skills in its use, and language proficiency (10,32). Finally, *chernos* vary in their demand and support to their students; thus what the boys shared with us should not be taken to be valid for all.

Our findings caution against simple assumptions that vulnerable groups, including beggars and street children, are ignorant (10). Most of the Bissau-Guinean *almudos* knew how to avoid infection, like those in Senegal (21). Nonetheless, the crowdedness in their daily living hampered social distancing and adherence to other measures was inadequate. Like young gold miners in Ghana (33), the boys knew nobody who had got *Corona*, and the "Corona hunger" was only one of many challenges that threatened the fulfilment of their future goals.

The relationships between *almudos*, their parents, and the *chernos* are poorly documented. Our earlier research has revealed that the parents do not abandon, as claimed, their least attractive children in the hands of unknown religious teachers without worrying about their whereabouts and wellbeing (16,24). With the advent of the pandemic, parental contacts became more frequent, and the parents encouraged their sons to endure the hardship brought on by *Corona*. Further, the *almudos* respected their *chernos* and understood their important role in keeping the religious studies ongoing through alms, even in a state of emergency. The *almudos* were also aware of how the alms were used for food and healthcare. The continuity of begging was at times seen as the means by which the blessings of the *chernos* could be obtained. The quest for blessing by him and wish to become one themselves was evident in our data, and the pandemic put the realisation of such dreams at risk.

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The *almudos* felt the heavy burden of the pandemic through a sharp decrease of income from begging, resulting in hunger. Begging is a multifaceted phenomenon that may symbolise exploitation, poverty, pity, dependency, shame, fear, revulsion, irony, charity, humility, asceticism, piety and power, and the relationship between the beggar and the benefactor is complex (7,13,34–41). Context is crucial. While people’s motives for giving alms vary, the judgement or respective beggar’s worthiness tends to be important (38,39). When child begging is on the agenda, the *chernos* underline piety and the learning of humility, the parents talk about meaningful suffering resulting in something positive, the *almudos* are concerned with their *chernos*’ blessing for the realisation of their dreams, and the child rights organisations see exploitation and child trafficking (16,34,42,43).

Banning begging is increasingly practised to curb human trafficking without success (15,42,44). There are also calls to stop giving alms to get children from the streets (8,37). Street children and beggars suffer when their food sources are blocked, as happened during the COVID-19 lockdown; simultaneously, they frequently resist “being caught” by police and social services (10,23). Growing up begging on the streets is not optimal for a child. In normal times, as well in times of crisis, the government and other involved parties need to seek long-term, sustainable solutions in collaboration with the *almudos*, their parents, the *chernos* and their communities. Inspired by the ten well-defined elements of a global child rights-based agenda for child health and wellbeing (45), searching for such solutions requires respectful social engagement with all involved stakeholders, and further research.

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Author's contribution:

HB took part in the conception and design of the study, acquisition, analysis, and interpretation of data, drafted the first version of the manuscript, revised it, approved the final version, and agrees to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

JE took part in the conception and design of the study, analysis, and interpretation of data, revised the work, approved the final version, and agrees to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

GG took part in the conception and design of the study, analysis, and interpretation of data, revised the work, approved the final version, and agrees to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

Any checklist and flow diagram for the appropriate reporting statement

COREQ checklist

Patient consent form

Not relevant.

Data sharing statement

Not relevant.

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Appendix 1. Questions for Quranic schoolboys during Covid in Guinea-Bissau

Themes	Questions
General	<p>Can you tell me a little about yourself?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. When and where were you born? Other countries, in this case, when did you come to Guinea-Bissau? How long in Bissau? 2. Are you a student of a specific <i>cherno</i>? 3. If you are an <i>almudu</i>, in Bissau? Another place, which one? Senegal, rural countryside? Who do you study with and where? If not, who do you stay with? 4. Where do you currently sleep and eat? Neighborhood? How many people sleep in the same bed? Children <18 years (n)? adults (n)
Knowledge/ Experience	<p>Can you tell me a little bit about what you know about Covid 19?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What is this? 2. What impact might this have? 3. Are you afraid of getting the disease? Why? 4. How is it transmitted/how do people get this disease? 5. Do you believe in the existence of Covid 19 in Guinea-Bissau? Yes or No, Why? 6. Through which channels do you receive information about Covid 19? 7. What is Covid's impact on your day-to-day activity? 8. How can you beg now compared to before Covid-19? 9. What is the impact of Covid-19 on your access to food?
Education	<p>Can you tell me a little bit about how you feel Covid 19 has impacted on your Quran school education?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Do you still attend Quran school classes run by your <i>cherno</i>? 2. Do you meet with other <i>almudos</i> to study together? How are they doing? 3. Do you have or lack any service or support from your <i>cherno</i> (or others) at this stage of the pandemic? 4. What type of service or support would you like to have?
Family	<p>Can you tell me a little bit about how Covid 19 has influenced your life and that of your family?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Do you communicate with your family about Covid-19 and your personal situation? 2. Has Covid 19 affected your family's daily life? Like? 3. Has Covid 19 had any positive/negative impact on your life, explain! 4. How is your family reacting to the illness? 5. Do you and your family support physical distance (2 meters), if not, why? 6. Have you noticed any psychological impact of the epidemic on your family members? Explain! 7. Did anyone in your family need to go to a health center to get services but was not seen because of Covid-19? 8. Has anyone in your family had Covid-19? 9. Are there people under the age of 10 and those over 60 in your family who were the family's concern with Covid 19? Explain!

Appendix 1. Questions for Quranic schoolboys during Covid in Guinea-Bissau

Neighbourhood	<p>Can you tell me a little bit about if/how Covid 19 has influenced your neighborhood where you go begging or during your daily activity?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Have you noticed any changes in your neighborhood? Explain! 2. In your opinion, do people follow the physical distance rule of 2 meters? Yes or No, Why? 3. What is the hardest thing to do in these times of restricted movement? 4. How do you see violence now compared to moments before the restrictions? In the family? In the streets? Between neighbors? Between beggars/<i>almudos</i>? Another violence? 5. Do people go to the health center when they are sick? If not, why? 6. Has anyone in your neighborhood/colleague <i>almudu</i> been infected with Covid-19? If so, please explain! 7. What was the reaction of neighbours to hearing about this disease?
Friends	<p>Can you tell me a little bit about your feelings in times of Covid 19? How has this influenced your social life?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Have your activities in your free time/work/daily activities changed? Like? 2. What do you do during the day? Has Covid-19 changed the pace of your daily activity, how? 3. What would you like to do but was affected by Covid 19?
Internet	<p>Can you tell me a little bit if Covid 19 has influenced the way you use the Internet or social media?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Do you have a phone? What type? 2. Do you have internet access? Like? Cost? What are you used to using on the internet? 3. In your opinion, what was the role played by the internet in the fight against Covid 19?
Future	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Can you tell me a little bit if Covid 19 will have any influence on your future prospects? If yes, how? If not, why? 2. After Covid-19, do you want to continue begging? If yes, why? If not, what do you want to do? What is your life's dream?

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The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the life of Bissau-Guinean religious (Quranic) schoolboys during a state of emergency: A qualitative study

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The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the life of Bissau-Guinean religious (Quranic) schoolboys during a state of emergency: A qualitative study

Hamadou Boiro, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0659-2639>

Jónína Einarsdóttir, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5868-4615>

Geir Gunnlaugsson, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6674-2862>

Hamadou Boiro

National Institute for Studies and Research (INEP), Bissau, Guinea-Bissau; and

Faculty of Sociology, Anthropology and Folkloristics, University of Iceland, Reykjavik, Iceland

Jónína Einarsdóttir

Faculty of Sociology, Anthropology and Folkloristics, University of Iceland, Reykjavik, Iceland
(je@hi.is)

Geir Gunnlaugsson

Faculty of Sociology, Anthropology and Folkloristics, University of Iceland, Reykjavik, Iceland
(geirgunnlaugsson@hi.is)

Corresponding author:

Geir Gunnlaugsson, Faculty of Sociology, Anthropology and Folkloristics, Gimli v/Sturlugata 6, University of Iceland, IS-102 Reykjavik, Iceland. Tel. work +354-525 4369; mobile +354-843 6237

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What is known about the subject

- Lockdowns and containment measures threaten children and young peoples' survival in the time of a pandemic.
- Quranic schoolboys (*almudos*), who beg for survival and education, are identified by international and child rights organisations as victims of child trafficking.
- The Quranic teachers (*chernos*), accused of child trafficking, are respected religious teachers and community leaders.

What this study adds

- The Quranic schools were not closed during the national lockdown in Guinea-Bissau in response to the pandemic.
- Bissau-Guinean *almudos* know key preventive COVID-19 measures from radio and their *chernos*, yet adherence was contextual.
- The challenges caused by lockdown came on top of other daily struggles of *almudos* to fulfil their aspirations of becoming a respected *cherno*.

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Abstract

Background: COVID-19 is mainly a disease of adults but can affect vulnerable children indirectly through social containment measures. The study aimed to explore the impact of the pandemic on the lives of Quranic schoolboys, *almudos*, who beg on behalf of their teachers, *chernos*, in Guinea-Bissau.

Methods: Data was collected in July 2020 during a state of emergency. Data rests on semi-structured interviews with 14 *almudos* and observations. The *almudos*, aged 12-16 years, were identified in the capital Bissau and the regional centre Gabú.

Results: Four interconnected themes were found. The first, hardship, was brought by the COVID-19 pandemic and caused by lockdown and police threats, resulting in a decrease in alms and hunger. The second, circumvention of calamity, included preventive measures the boys undertook and concerns with crowdedness impeding social distancing.

Relations with others is the third theme. These had changed with sharply reduced contacts with neighbours and other providers of alms. The parents had more frequent telephone contact with their sons, and encouraged them to continue their studies. At the same time, the *chernos* and *almudos* passed more time together, and they dedicated more time than earlier to the studies and prayers. The fourth theme has to do with the boys' concerns about their long-term aspirations – to complete their studies and become respected *chernos*, for which begging was seen as an integral part.

Conclusion: The *almudos* suffered from decreased alms, resulting in hunger. COVID-19 was only an additional burden to these boys, who are used to facing challenges whilst begging to complete their religious education. According to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, children have a right to develop their capabilities in line with their future aspirations. Governments and child rights organisations need to address the specific needs of *almudos* in respectful collaboration with them, their parents, the *chernos* and their communities.

Introduction

While COVID-19 has mainly infected adults, all have suffered from lockdowns and social containment measures, albeit unequally (1–4). In West Africa, the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted harshly on the livelihood of vulnerable groups, such as the elderly, persons with disabilities, prisoners, and informal workers, through loss of income, human rights violations, lack of access to health care and education, domestic violence, soaring commodity prices and food insecurity (1,5). There are concerns that the number of beggars in the region will rise in the wake of the pandemic, not least child beggars (6–8), but also that regular beggars will lose their income due to curfew and restriction of movement of people (9–11).

Islamic boarding schools with boys residing with their teachers to learn how to recite the Quran have a long history in the West African region (12). Such education is common among the Fula, who refer to the Quranic schools as *dudal*, the students as *almudos* and the schoolmasters as *chernos*; corresponding terms commonly used in neighbouring Senegal are *daaras*, *talibés* and *marabouts*. The in-house students, entirely boys, stroll around in cities asking for alms on behalf of their teachers; thus, international agencies and child rights organisations classify them as victims of child trafficking (13–15). Despite accusations of child trafficking, the parents continue to send their sons to live under the *chernos*' tutelage without paying for their livelihood (13,14,16,17). In West Africa, for example in Senegal, girls increasingly attend Islamic schools with boarding facilities that provide Arabic-Islamic education; they do not beg, and the parents generally pay for their education under the tutelage of primarily females (18).

After the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, begging Quranic schoolboys in the West African region have become subject to governmental actions. In the northern states of Nigeria, despite travel bans and warnings not to spread the disease, tens of thousands of Quranic schoolboys (called *almajirai*) were sent long distances to their homes of origin for reasons such as to prevent them from becoming infected, cut expenses and end the *almajirai* educational system (19,20). In Senegal, curfew enforced by police violence in the streets resulted in a reduction of alms for the Quranic schoolboys and long hours of studies into the night without food (21). There are also reports of hundreds of boys taken off the streets for quarantine, during which they received food and hygiene materials and thereafter sent back to their families (22).

In Guinea-Bissau, the begging of Quranic schoolboys has been subject to the engagement of child rights organisations without satisfactory results, partly due to failure to listen to the involved communities (16,23,24). A child rights-based response in the time of a pandemic includes keeping children and young people visible and hearing their voices (3). Here, we aimed

to explore the pandemic’s impact on the life of Bissau-Guinean Quranic schoolboys during a state of emergency, their knowledge and practice regarding prevention and thoughts about their future.

Methods

The government of Guinea-Bissau took preventive measures against the pandemic even before the first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in the country (Box).

Box

Early development of COVID-19 pandemic in Guinea-Bissau.

- Closure of the national land and sea borders on 17 March 2020, and all international flights suspended
- The first two cases of COVID-19 confirmed on 25 March 2020
- State of emergency declared on 27 March 2020:
 - Nationwide curfew initially from 11:00 AM to 07:00 AM next day, with later gradual reduction of curfew hours
 - Supermarkets and mini-markets open in periods outside curfew hours, allowing individuals wishing to leave their homes for essential goods and services
 - Public transport limited and no transport between regions
 - Closure of social institutions, e.g., schools, places of worship, restaurants/bars and banks
 - Ban on public gatherings and leisure and sports activities prohibited
 - People ordered to use face masks and respect social distancing

Data collection was conducted in July 2020, when the country was still in a state of emergency. At the end of July 2020, 1,981 cases of COVID-19 had been diagnosed, including 171 children aged 0-19 years, most in the capital Bissau (90%), but also in Biombo and Cacheu regions with 27 deaths (25). The data rests on semi-structured, open-ended interviews, informal chats, and observations (See Appendix 1). Participants were 14 *almudos* aged 12-16 years in the capital, Bissau, and in Gabú, a regional centre in the eastern part of the country, with seven participants in each area. Almost all the boys originated from rural villages; one was from neighbouring Guinea-Conakry. They studied the Quran with a *cherno* to whom their parents had entrusted them, and they begged as a part of their religious studies. The participants were identified in the

two settings when begging or in their respective *dudal*. The first author (HB) conducted the interviews in the Fula language and did the observations (See Appendix 2). The interviews were either directly recorded or written down, depending on the boys' preferences. The interviews were translated into Portuguese and analysed in Atlas.ti.

Initially, leaders of the main Islamic association in Guinea-Bissau were contacted and informed about the research. With their permission, the participants were given information about the study by one of the authors (HB); informed verbal consent was given by their *chernos*, who are in line with the tradition *de facto* guardians of the boys, and the boys ahead of the interview (26–28). No personal identifiers were used. The interviews were taken individually, and the time ranged from 20-45 minutes. After inquiring about the general background of the participants, the interview focused on their understanding of the pandemic, its impact on their daily life and thoughts about the future.

Patient and public involvement. Since 2009, the authors have been researching the context of the Quranic education in Guinea-Bissau (16,23,24,29). As part of the first author's (HB) doctoral study, an application for ethics review to collect data among begging children in Guinea-Bissau was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Iceland. HB is a senior researcher at the Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisa (INEP) in Bissau, but at the time of the collection of data presented in this article coordinator of risk communication and community engagement for WHO and the National COVID-19 High Commissioner in Guinea-Bissau. Based on gained knowledge on the living conditions and wellbeing of *almudos*, the authors aimed to give voice to this group of children in a state of emergency caused by the pandemic; due consideration was given to the local context and the age and vulnerability of the study participants (30). The boys, aged 12-16 years, were invited to participate, or reject but all accepted. During the interview, they were encouraged to add to the discussion whatever concerns they might have. The interviews were taken in their respective *dudal*, except in two instances in the street. Each boy was interviewed in isolation from others. Before and after the interviews, discussions were informal.

Results

The analysis of the interviews revealed four interconnected themes. The first is hardship that resulted in fatigue and hunger. The second one, circumventing the calamity, had to do with the possibility and impossibility to prevent infection. The third theme, relationships with others, including the boys' social contacts with their parents, *cherno* and other *almudos*, as well as neighbours and compatriots. The last theme, the future, has to do with the boys' concerns about their longterm visions.

Hardship

The boys used the term *tampere* when describing the corporal and mental fatigue they suffered from the pandemic. The “*Corona* hunger” was the worst. The boys’ access to food was scarce yet varied; some had their meals at their *cherno*’s house, others had their meals on the street, two of the boys had their meals at a relative’s home. With *Corona*, begging brought neither money nor food. “Access to food is difficult with *Corona*; many services are not functioning, including the bus stations where we used to receive a lot of money from passengers and others,” a boy explained. Another said: “Now we can’t eat another person’s leftovers, and we don’t have money to buy food.” Yet another pointed out: “The alms have decreased, and many restaurants are closed that used to give us food. Customers are few.” In Bissau, the boys were also struggling to collect money to pay the rent every month for the premises where they stayed with their *cherno*; in Gabú, the *chernos* had constructed their own huts.

During the state of emergency, the boys, like everybody else, were harassed by the police when they went out searching for food and money. The police marched the streets beating people with batons. Nonetheless, staying at the *dudal* was not an alternative; it would have resulted in starving. A boy explained: “Our income from begging has drastically decreased, and the police have stopped us from begging, and they chase us every time we meet them.”

Circumvention of calamity

The *almudos* had heard about the new disease and how to avoid becoming sick. All the boys except three explained how *Corona* was transmitted from one person to another; one should not shake hands with others and avoid contact with objects and places contaminated by *Corona*. A boy argued: “It is enough to wear a mask and to wash your hands with soap or bleach to prevent this disease.” At the same time, all the boys prayed to God to stop the pandemic, and all maintained that only God could protect them.

The boys cited their *chernos* and radio as the primary sources of knowledge about *Corona*, while nobody mentioned the Internet. Most had also discussed the issue with their parents, who phoned them to advise how to protect themselves. “They advise me to use soap, wash my hands and avoid going into crowds,” a boy explained. All the boys maintained their *chernos* had advised them to respect the preventive measures, particularly handwashing, physical distancing, and wearing face masks. “He always encourages us to wear face masks and wash our hands and not to go out during the state of emergency,” a boy pointed out. In some cases, the *chernos* had located handwashing tools at the entrance to their residences so that every person going out or

coming in could wash their hands. Nonetheless, no *almudos* wore masks when identified or were observed washing their hands when entering his *cherno's* house.

Crowdedness became a theme frequently raised. The boys slept at the place of their *chernos*, except two who stayed with relatives. They shared their room and sleeping mat with other boys of similar age. In some cases, as many as eight boys had to share a mat. A boy in Bissau explained: "We are 32 *almudos*; some sleep on mats in the living room and others sleep in other rooms. The youngest ones sleep together." Another boy in Bissau said: "There are 42 of us boys studying here; we are sleeping like sardines. We haven't received the mosquito nets distributed by the government." In Gabú, the situation was better: "We sleep on mats in the huts built by the *cherno*. In each hut, three to four *almudos* sleep together on a mat. There are more than 50 *almudos* in the *dudal*." The boys did not know anyone who had become sick in *Corona*, and no case of *Corona* had been identified in their schools. The boys were aware that crowded living put them at risk for infection, or as one explained: "How do you think we can respect the distancing measures in practice? We live in groups, we eat in groups, we sleep in groups, and we work in groups."

The Quranic schoolboys gave three answers when asked about their fear of *Corona*. First, some said they were afraid of *Corona* because it was a deadly disease. Another group of participants said they were not scared because what happened depended on God's will. Finally, a group of boys in Gabú were not afraid of *Corona* because the disease had not yet reached their region.

Relations with others

The pandemic and the state of emergency changed the boys' relations. The ties with neighbours and others who provided alms were reduced while everybody was included in their prayers. The boys meant that their *chernos* did not cure *Corona*, but prayers were important for protection and cure. A boy confirmed: "We pray to God every day to protect us from this disease and to protect the whole country."

The boys' telephone contact with their parents were more frequent. Most parents had called them after the outbreak of *Corona*. They were anxious to hear about their situation and worried mainly about the continuation of the Quranic studies. Despite the additional hardship caused by the pandemic and state of emergency, the parents had encouraged them to continue with their studies. The boys and their parents shared the vision that they would master the Quran. Nonetheless, as the boys reported, a bigger group of *almudos* than normally had left their *dudal* temporarily to stay with their parents to help with the agricultural work. "When they come back, they will continue to learn with us," one boy argued.

As a result of the state of emergency, the relations between the boys and their masters increased. The boys spent more time than earlier in the *dudal*, crowded with other *almudos* studying the Quran. Together the *almudos* and their *chernos* were suffering, with difficulties in concentrating on their studies because of hunger. At the same time, *Corona* could risk the boys' relationship with their Quranic master in a long-term perspective. Without begging, the *chernos* would not be able to continue with their teachings. One boy said: "I want to continue begging to support my Quranic teacher to ensure our food." Further, the *chernos* looked after the health and wellbeing of the people under his responsibility, and part of his share of the alms was kept paying for health care when needed. One participant said: "The Quranic master keeps the money from begging for our health." Another explained: "He calls on people of goodwill to bring a sick *almudo* to the hospital." Boys who aimed to continue their religious education in Senegal or Mauritania also needed their *chernos'* blessing (Fula: *barke*).

Future aspirations

All the boys except two had the future aspiration to become great *chernos*, or as explained by one boy: "I want to continue begging and working for my master, sacrificing myself for him, to have [access to] *dudal* and his blessings." Another wished for his future: "I want to continue my Quranic studies, become a *chernos* and have my *dudal*." The pandemic could have severe consequences for that plan, as one boy speculated: "If the disease continues at this rate, it could be difficult for us to survive and continue our study because we will no longer have food and we will no longer be able to study." In contrast, two of the boys admitted that they did want to beg anymore, and they did not aim to become *chernos* in the future. One of them said: "If it was up to me, I wasn't going to continue begging because I'm tired of begging."

All the boys confirmed that the Quranic studies had continued mostly uninterrupted, despite the pandemic, and they were grateful for that. At the beginning of the pandemic, with a curfew except in the morning hours, the teaching continued in hiding. Otherwise, a boy maintained, "nothing has changed; we learn in the same way as before." The boys had already experienced hardship, of which *Corona* was only one, and there were more challenges ahead in finding food, completing the religious studies, or looking for whatever other directions in life.

Discussion

In this study, we aimed to explore how the COVID-19 pandemic had affected the lives of Quranic schoolboys, *almudos*, who beg for their survival and education in Guinea-Bissau. Semi-structured, open-ended interviews and informal chats with 14 boys aged 12-16 years revealed that the pandemic brought hardship and hunger. During the state of emergency, police threats

and beating, closed restaurants and limited movement of people resulted in meagre income from begging. Most of the boys listed key preventive measures against *Corona* based on knowledge gained from their *chernos* and radio; however, the corresponding practice was not observed. The boys and their Quranic teachers, *chernos*, mainly lived in a well-defined 'bubble' (31), and there were no reports of infection in their respective groups. Almost all the boys had contact with their parents, who encouraged them to continue with the Quranic studies to fulfil their aspiration to become respected *chernos*.

Giving voice to a vulnerable group of 12-16 years old *almudos* who are begging on the street is a strength of the study. In line with the United Nations Convention on the Right of the Child (Art. 12 and 13), children have a right to express an opinion on matters of concern to them (3,28). The data collection was carried out when the boys had struggled 3-4 months under a state of emergency, which meant the closure of borders and lockdown of places of worship, educational facilities, restaurants, and bars (Box). Further, gatherings were forbidden and wearing masks in public places and social distancing was mandatory. Curfew had been lifted at the time of data collection, but various curfew regulations were in place. The "*Corona* hunger" was their everyday experience. Participatory research, including prolonged participant observation (30), was not an option this time, yet some observations were made. Similarly, the creation of story maps, like reported elsewhere (10), would not have worked due to lack of access to digital technology, skills in its use, and language proficiency (10,32). Finally, *chernos* vary in their demand and support to their students; thus what the boys shared with us should not be taken to be valid for all.

Our findings caution against simple assumptions that vulnerable groups, including beggars and street children, are ignorant (10). Most of the Bissau-Guinean *almudos* knew how to avoid infection, like those in Senegal (21). Nonetheless, the crowdedness in their daily living hampered social distancing and adherence to other measures was inadequate. Like young gold miners in Ghana (33), the boys knew nobody who had got *Corona*, and the "*Corona* hunger" was only one of many challenges that threatened the fulfilment of their future goals.

The relationships between *almudos*, their parents, and the *chernos* are poorly documented. Our earlier research has revealed that the parents do not abandon, as claimed, their least attractive children in the hands of unknown religious teachers without worrying about their whereabouts and wellbeing (16,24). With the advent of the pandemic, parental contacts became more frequent, and the parents encouraged their sons to endure the hardship brought on by *Corona*. Further, the *almudos* respected their *chernos* and understood their important role in keeping the religious studies ongoing through alms, even in a state of emergency. The *almudos* were also aware of how the alms were used for

food and healthcare. The continuity of begging was at times seen as the means by which the blessings of the *chernos* could be obtained. The quest for blessing by him and wish to become one themselves was evident in our data, and the pandemic put the realisation of such dreams at risk.

The *almudos* felt the heavy burden of the pandemic through a sharp decrease of income from begging, resulting in hunger. Begging is a multifaceted phenomenon that may symbolise exploitation, poverty, pity, dependency, shame, fear, revulsion, irony, charity, humility, asceticism, piety and power, and the relationship between the beggar and the benefactor is complex (7,13,34–41). Context is crucial. While people’s motives for giving alms vary, the judgement or respective beggar’s worthiness tends to be important (38,39). When child begging is on the agenda, the *chernos* underline piety and the learning of humility, the parents talk about meaningful suffering resulting in something positive, the *almudos* are concerned with their *chernos*’ blessing for the realisation of their dreams, and the child rights organisations see exploitation and child trafficking (16,34,42,43).

Banning begging is increasingly practised to curb human trafficking without success (15,42,44). There are also calls to stop giving alms to get children from the streets (8,37). Street children and beggars suffer when their food sources are blocked, as happened during the COVID-19 lockdown; simultaneously, they frequently resist “being caught” by police and social services (10,23). Growing up begging on the streets is not optimal for a child. In normal times, as well in times of crisis, the government and other involved parties need to seek long-term, sustainable solutions in collaboration with the *almudos*, their parents, the *chernos* and their communities. Inspired by the ten well-defined elements of a global child rights-based agenda for child health and wellbeing (45), searching for such solutions requires respectful social engagement with all involved stakeholders, and further research.

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Author's contribution:

HB took part in the conception and design of the study, acquisition, analysis, and interpretation of data, drafted the first version of the manuscript, revised it, approved the final version, and agrees to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

JE took part in the conception and design of the study, analysis, and interpretation of data, revised the work, approved the final version, and agrees to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

GG took part in the conception and design of the study, analysis, and interpretation of data, revised the work, approved the final version, and agrees to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

Any checklist and flow diagram for the appropriate reporting statement

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Patient consent form

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Appendix 1. Questions for Quranic schoolboys during Covid in Guinea-Bissau

Themes	Questions
General	<p>Can you tell me a little about yourself?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. When and where were you born? Other countries, in this case, when did you come to Guinea-Bissau? How long in Bissau?2. Are you a student of a specific <i>cherno</i>?3. If you are an <i>almudu</i>, in Bissau? Another place, which one? Senegal, rural countryside? Who do you study with and where? If not, who do you stay with?4. Where do you currently sleep and eat? Neighborhood? How many people sleep in the same bed? Children <18 years (n)? adults (n)
Knowlegde/ Experience	<p>Can you tell me a little bit about what you know about Covid 19?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. What is this?2. What impact might this have?3. Are you afraid of getting the disease? Why?4. How is it transmitted/how do people get this disease?5. Do you believe in the existence of Covid 19 in Guinea-Bissau? Yes or No, Why?6. Through which channels do you receive information about Covid 19?7. What is Covid's impact on your day-to-day activity?8. How can you beg now compared to before Covid-19?9. What is the impact of Covid-19 on your access to food?
Education	<p>Can you tell me a little bit about how you feel Covid 19 has impacted on your Quran school education?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Do you still attend Quran school classes run by your <i>cherno</i>?2. Do you meet with other <i>almudos</i> to study together? How are they doing?3. Do you have or lack any service or support from your <i>cherno</i> (or others) at this stage of the pandemic?4. What type of service or support would you like to have?
Family	<p>Can you tell me a little bit about how Covid 19 has influenced your life and that of your family?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Do you communicate with your family about Covid-19 and your personal situation?2. Has Covid 19 affected your family's daily life? Like?3. Has Covid 19 had any positive/negative impact on your life, explain!4. How is your family reacting to the illness?5. Do you and your family support physical distance (2 meters), if not, why?6. Have you noticed any psychological impact of the epidemic on your family members? Explain!7. Did anyone in your family need to go to a health center to get services but was not seen because of Covid-19?8. Has anyone in your family had Covid-19?9. Are there people under the age of 10 and those over 60 in your family who were the family's concern with Covid 19? Explain!

Appendix 1. Questions for Quranic schoolboys during Covid in Guinea-Bissau

Neighbourhood	<p>Can you tell me a little bit about if/how Covid 19 has influenced your neighborhood where you go begging or during your daily activity?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Have you noticed any changes in your neighborhood? Explain! 2. In your opinion, do people follow the physical distance rule of 2 meters? Yes or No, Why? 3. What is the hardest thing to do in these times of restricted movement? 4. How do you see violence now compared to moments before the restrictions? In the family? In the streets? Between neighbors? Between beggars/<i>almudos</i>? Another violence? 5. Do people go to the health center when they are sick? If not, why? 6. Has anyone in your neighborhood/colleague <i>almudu</i> been infected with Covid-19? If so, please explain! 7. What was the reaction of neighbours to hearing about this disease?
Friends	<p>Can you tell me a little bit about your feelings in times of Covid 19? How has this influenced your social life?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Have your activities in your free time/work/daily activities changed? Like? 2. What do you do during the day? Has Covid-19 changed the pace of your daily activity, how? 3. What would you like to do but was affected by Covid 19?
Internet	<p>Can you tell me a little bit if Covid 19 has influenced the way you use the Internet or social media?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Do you have a phone? What type? 2. Do you have internet access? Like? Cost? What are you used to using on the internet? 3. In your opinion, what was the role played by the internet in the fight against Covid 19?
Future	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Can you tell me a little bit if Covid 19 will have any influence on your future prospects? If yes, how? If not, why? 2. After Covid-19, do you want to continue begging? If yes, why? If not, what do you want to do? What is your life's dream?

Manuscript: *The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the life of Bissau-Guinean Quranic schoolboys during a state of emergency: A qualitative study*

COREC guidelines

Domain 1: Research team and reflexivity

Personal characteristics

1. Interviewer/facilitator	Which author/s conducted the interview or focus group?	Hamadou Boiro (HB)
2. Credentials	What were the researcher's credentials? E.g. PhD, MD	HB is a senior researcher at the Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisa (INEP), Bissau, Guinea-Bissau. He has an MA degree (1999) and DEA (2000) in social anthropology from Université Cheikh Anta Diop, Dakar, Senegal; since 2016 he is a PhD student in anthropology at the University of Iceland.
3. Occupation	What was their occupation at the time of the study?	Anthropologist, working with risk communication and community engagement for WHO and the National COVID-19 High Commissioner in Guinea-Bissau.
4. Gender	Was the researcher male or female?	Male
5. Experience and training	What experience or training did the researcher have?	HB has extensive experience in the collection and analysis of data in Senegal, The Gambia, and Guinea-Bissau. For WHO, he worked as a social scientist in the Ebola epidemics in West Africa in 2015 and the Democratic Republic of Congo 2018–2020, and in the COVID-19 pandemic response in Guinea-Bissau.

Relationship with participants

6. Relationship established	Was a relationship established prior to study commencement?	Initially, leaders of the main Islamic association in Guinea-Bissau were contacted and informed about the research. With their approval, individual <i>chernos</i> were approached; according to tradition, the parents have entrusted their son to a <i>cherno</i> who becomes their <i>de facto</i> guardian. Verbal permission to conduct the study was
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		thus given by the <i>cherno</i> of each participant. No prior relationship was with study participants. They were identified in Bissau and Gabú, either on the streets or in their respective <i>dudal</i> .
7. Participant knowledge of the interviewer	What did the participants know about the researcher? e.g. personal goals, reasons for doing the research	The interviewer HB has been conducting research on <i>dudal</i> and <i>almudos</i> for more than a decade, and has gained the trust of the <i>chernos</i> . Before taking the interviews, with permission of the <i>chernos</i> , the participants were given information on the research, and about the researcher (HB) who would conduct the interview.
8. Interviewer characteristics	What characteristics were reported about the interviewer/facilitator? e.g. bias, assumptions, reasons and interests in the research topic	HB is experienced in working with <i>almudos</i> and <i>chernos</i> in Guinea-Bissau. After short presentation of HB and his former engagement with <i>almudos</i> and <i>chernos</i> , the participants were informed that the researcher was interested to know more about their knowledge about Covid and the daily experience of the pandemic. The interviews were anonymous and recorded with participant's permission; if expressing reluctance for recording, written notes were taken. Observations with focus on adherence to preventive measures against Covid, were made when HB met the boys in the street and at their <i>dudal</i> .

Domain 2: study design*Theoretical framework*

9. Methodological orientation and Theory	What methodological orientation was stated to underpin the study? e.g. grounded theory, discourse analysis, ethnography, phenomenology, content analysis	The study is part of a larger ethnographic study, ongoing since 2009, about the Bissau-Guinean <i>almudos</i> in Senegal, The Gambia, and Guinea-Bissau. This study applied content analysis of semi-structured and open-ended interviews. The interview guide was adapted in the Fula language for better comprehension of the participants, and how to communicate the questions in a local context.
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Participant selection

10. Sampling	How were participants selected? e.g. purposive, convenience, consecutive, snowball	Purposive sampling.
11. Method of approach	How were participants approached? e.g. face-to-face, telephone, mail, email	Face-to-face
12. Sample size	How many participants were in the study?	14 boys, aged 12-16 years
13. Non-participation	How many people refused to participate or dropped out? Reasons?	None of those invited declined to participate.

Setting

14. Setting of data collection	Where was the data collected? e.g. home, clinic, workplace	The data was collected in the capital Bissau, and the regional centre Gabú in the boys <i>dudal</i> . Participants in the study did not mix or have contacts within the group. Interviews and observations were made at the <i>dudal</i> but also when the boys were identified in the street.
15. Presence of non-participants	Was anyone else present besides the participants and researchers?	Only the researcher and the participant were present during the interviews
16. Description of sample	What are the important characteristics of the sample? e.g. demographic data, date	Children, boys, aged 12-16 years. All from Guinea-Bissau, except one came from Guinea (Conakry).

Data collection

17. Interview guide	Were questions, prompts, guides	The interview guide (both in English and Portuguese) was adapted by the researchers
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	provided by the authors? Was it pilot tested?	to the local situation. There was no formal pilot of the interview guide.
18. Repeat interviews	Were repeat interviews carried out? If yes, how many?	No.
19. Audio/visual recording	Did the research use audio or visual recording to collect the data?	Audio-recording.
20. Field notes	Were field notes made during and/or after the interview or focus group?	Field notes were kept by the researcher to help in the work, for planning, analysis of interview notes, etc..
21. Duration	What was the duration of the interviews or focus group?	20-45 minutes for each interview
22. Data saturation	Was data saturation discussed?	During implementation, similar information gradually emerged from participants.
23. Transcripts returned	Were transcripts returned to participants for comment and/or correction?	No.

Domain 3: analysis and findings

Data analysis

24. Number of data coders	How many data coders coded the data?	HB was the only data coder.
25. Description of the coding tree	Did authors provide a description of the coding tree?	No.
26. Derivation of themes	Were themes identified in advance or derived from the data?	The interview guide was set up with the following themes, each with several sub-questions: general, background, education, family, neighbourhood, friends, internet and future. See supplementary material. The themes and sub-questions guided the data collection and the interview. During

		the coding of the data, themes emerged and were continuously developed.
27. Software	What software, if applicable, was used to manage the data?	Microsoft Word and Atlas.ti
28. Participant checking	Did participants provide feedback on the findings?	No.

Reporting

29. Quotations presented	Were participant quotations presented to illustrate the themes / findings? Was each quotation identified? e.g. participant number	Yes, but without participant number.
30. Data and findings consistent	Was there consistency between the data presented and the findings?	Yes
31. Clarity of major themes	Were major themes clearly presented in the findings?	Yes
32. Clarity of minor themes	Is there a description of diverse cases or discussion of minor themes?	Description of both diverse cases and discussion of minor themes.