Cotlow Award Application 2011

Department of Anthropology
The George Washington University
Washington, DC 20052

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1. Personal Information

Applicant’s name: Carrie Benjamin

Degree sought: MA

Field of study/major/minor/concentration: Anthropology, International Development concentration

Expected date of graduation: December 2011

Faculty advisor(s) (who have served as your mentor or mentors for this proposal): David Gow and Ilana Feldman

2. Language Skills

Does the proposed project involve the use of a “field language”? YES

If yes, state what the language is and your degree of fluency in speaking, reading, and writing it: French, fluent in reading and writing, and nearly fluent speaking. 8+ years of study

3. Title of the Project and Abstract

Project Title: Talibés and Marabouts: Children’s Rights, Development, and Local Perspectives in Saint-Louis, Senegal

Abstract of the Project (provide a summary description of the project’s goals, location, methods, and relevance to anthropology) [80 word maximum]:

In order to meet the Millennium Development Goals (MDG), the government of Senegal has recently classified religious schools as providers of primary education. The goal of the project is to investigate the perceptions of the Koranic education system in Senegal from the standpoint of NGO staff, international volunteers, and Koranic instructors. Through extensive interviews, participant observation, and reviews of the existing literature, the project will contribute to the discourse on children’s rights and education relating to the anthropology of development. (80 words)
4. Description of the Project (describe your overall research goals, what the project is generally about, and where you will conduct the research and why) [250 word maximum]:

This project will explore the relationship between Daara Vision Senegal (DVS), a local humanitarian NGO in Saint-Louis, and the many Koranic schools that the organization assists. DVS works with young boys, known as talibés, who are sent by their families to study the Koran with a marabout, or teacher. DVS is run by four unpaid Senegalese staff members and several international volunteers who work with the talibés to teach them math, French literacy, and citizenship education. Moreover, DVS works on sanitation programs, constructing showers and toilets in the daaras or Koranic schools, and offering basic medical care.

Recently, President Wade has assimilated the daaras into the formal education sector, a move that has been attributed to international pressure for the country to meet the school enrollment objectives of the MDGs. By classifying the daaras as educational institutions, the percentage of children enrolled in the Senegalese education system has increased dramatically. This has also put pressure on NGOs to offer educational programs for the talibés. Working with DVS will offer insight into how one local NGO is struggling to provide services that the government has not, despite trouble with funding and conflicting donor objectives. Through participant observation as well as formal and informal interviews with marabouts, NGO staff, and volunteers, my research will assess the effectiveness of a humanitarian organization which aims to educate, socialize, and house the talibés. The project will go beyond the prevalent human rights discourse to analyze local perceptions of the daara system and the talibés. (249 words)

5. Significance of the Project to Anthropology (in this literature review describe how the proposed research relates to other anthropological research on the topic, and/or region as relevant; use American Anthropological Association style for works cited--no footnotes) [500 word maximum]:

Rather than focusing on elite discourse regarding the daara system of education and children’s rights, my project will focus on the operations of one local NGO and the relationship between the organization and the daaras, as well as the relationship with the neighbors who offer extra support to the talibés. This project will expand upon human rights discourse and the anthropology of development while connecting local perspectives to the system of Koranic education in Senegal.

Human rights

At the forefront of the battle for universal children’s rights is the right to free education, explicitly mentioned in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the UN International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (Lindahl 2006; Mbow 2007). Humanitarian organizations frame the daara system as a violation of children’s rights in that it denies the children access to formal schooling as well as forces them to beg for tuition or risk corporal punishment. Human rights advocates conceive education to be a path to enlightenment, but the system of Koranic education in Senegal more closely resembles a system of discipline meant to produce moral, religious individuals (Foucault
Local Perspectives

An apprenticeship with a marabout has long been seen as a rite of passage for young boys in Senegal (Perry 2004). It is, from a local perspective, a transformative phase meant to teach the talibés discipline and humility through begging and rigorous study. However, much of the human rights literature has ignored the local perspectives on the Koranic education system, focusing instead on outsider criticism. My project will analyze the intersection between human rights discourse and local attitudes, emphasizing the perspectives of the marabouts, DVS members, and neighbors who live and work in the area around DVS.

Anthropology of Development

External forces and development discourse have as much of an influence on NGO behavior as local experience (Ebrahim 2003). To understand how and why an NGO works it is necessary to look at the local situation as well as the external conception of the development “problem”. Ferguson (1994) has noted that development organizations try to avoid getting involved in politics, although by attempting to enact drastic social change they are inherently political. However, the marabouts wield an incredible amount of social and political power in Senegal, and for a local NGO to criticize the system, it would risk its political support and social acceptance in the city (Cruise O’Brien 1996). I will examine the relationship between DVS and the marabouts as a structured social arrangement in which the NGO benefits from avoiding the politicization of the daara system in Saint-Louis.

Through a close analysis of children’s rights discourse and the local conceptions of the talibés, my project will highlight how a local, grassroots NGO operates under international pressure to “modernize” Senegal. (485 words)

6. Methods (clearly outline or list your research questions; describe the data you will collect and how you will collect it; discuss your analytical methods; and show how the data will address the research questions) [300 word maximum]:

My research questions focus on the relationship between DVS and its partners, as well as between the NGO and its beneficiaries. The beneficiaries can be identified as the marabouts, the talibés, and the neighbors of DVS. I seek to understand:

- What motivates the unpaid staff and volunteers to get involved with DVS?
- How has donor funding affected NGO projects and planning?
- How do the marabouts perceive humanitarian assistance and daara modernization projects carried out by NGOs such as DVS?
- How do the community, the marabouts, and DVS regard the system of Koranic education?

Participant observation
I will spend the majority of my time observing the interactions among DVS staff, volunteers, marabouts, and the talibés. I will observe the social dynamics and structures that shape formal interactions between the NGO and the daaras. Furthermore, I shall spend time outside of the DVS site to observe how the neighbors interact with the talibés during their daily begging for food and money. I have already made arrangements with the president and founder of DVS to carry out my research and observe the organization (see attachment).

Interviews

I will conduct extensive interviews with the staff, international volunteers, marabouts, and local people who support DVS. I will conduct two rounds of interviews with the DVS staff in order to reexamine and seek clarification on any questions I have after finishing my fieldwork. I will record all interviews after receiving the informant’s consent to use audio equipment. If they decline to have the interviews recorded, I will take notes throughout our meeting. Upon my return, I will use the Discourse Lab to transcribe my interviews and code them in order to best analyze the data (Bernard 2005). I will also code my field notes in order to identify themes that address my research questions. (298 words)

7. Research Ethics (describe how you will ensure that your research project is conducted in accordance with anthropology guidelines and the guidelines of your particular field within anthropology, and in the case of “Human Subjects Research,” according to the criteria of GW’s Institutional Review Board. For the former, consult the Web site of the American Anthropological Association (http://www.aaanet.org). For the latter, discuss requirements with your faculty mentor and/or with Professor Barbara Miller, the IRB rep in the Anthropology Department. Most student projects involving living humans fit in the IRB category of “excluded” meaning that IRB forms do not need to be submitted, if they follow AAA ethical guidelines in terms of informed consent and avoidance of harm to participants, do not involve medical topics and do not identify particular individuals. In some instances, IRB approval does need to be sought, usually in the “expedited” category.” Information on these categories is also available at http://www.gwumc.edu/research/human/aboutus/html) [150 word maximum]:

I have reviewed the AAA code of ethics and GW’s IRB guidelines and will abide by all regulations to ensure the protection of my informants. I have already made my research intentions clear with DVS, and will explain my project to all my informants prior to their participation. I will obtain oral informed consent from all individuals before interviewing them, including consent to use audio recording equipment. Identities of my informants will be kept confidential unless they specifically request recognition. Moreover, I will make my research findings available to the organizations and individuals who participate in my project so that they can benefit from the study.

Because this research project poses no risk or harm to the participants, it falls under the IRB’s “excluded research” category. All necessary measures will be taken to protect the identity of participants in my notes as well as any publications. (146 words)
8. Research Product (discuss how you will use and present your findings including, for example, a presentation at a professional meeting, a film, a museum exhibit, a publishable paper, a thesis) [150 words maximum]:

I intend to present my research at the 2011 Cotlow Award Conference, summarizing my findings through a PowerPoint presentation. I will also enroll in an independent study course in the fall to write a paper for publication in an academic journal.

In order to give back to the community, I plan to spend half of my participant observation hours volunteering directly with the organization as they work on refurbishing the local daaras. Furthermore, I will make my research accessible to DVS for use on their webpage and in future organizational publications. I have been working as a volunteer translator for DVS since June 2010, translating their French language documents to English so that they may reach a larger international audience. I will continue this assistance after my research, including helping DVS create an English version of their website and seek donor funding from English-speaking aid organizations. (146 words)

9. Timetable (briefly describe the schedule of your research activities week-by-week or as appropriate):

Week 1: Arrive in Dakar, transfer to Saint-Louis to make initial contact with informants, set up interviews, and acclimate to the surroundings.

Week 2: 20 hours participant observation, initial interviews with DVS staff (4 total). Begin rapport with marabouts.

Weeks 3-4: Schedule and conduct interviews with DVS volunteers. 20 hours participant observation. Contact marabouts regarding observation at the daaras.

Week 5: Schedule and conduct interviews with marabouts, as well as minimum 10 hours participant observation at the daaras (not with DVS).

Week 6-7: Interviews with locals who are involved with the care of the talibés.

Week 8: Conduct second interviews with DVS staff and volunteers. Return to DC.

10. Budget Amount and Projected Expenditures

Total Amount Requested: $ 1,800

Projected Expenditures (list the expenditure categories for your project, for example, transportation--international, domestic, local; room and board; and research supplies). Funds from a Cotlow award cannot be used for tuition, academic fees, or for purchasing equipments such as a laptop or camera [awards range from a few hundred dollars to $1800]

Round trip airfare from DC to Dakar: $1,500
Roundtrip bus from Dakar to Saint-Louis: $20
Room and board (approx $7/day including meals): $280 (I will cover additional housing costs)

Transportation around Saint-Louis, to and from the DVS site and informant’s houses, antimalarial drugs, vaccinations, mosquito netting, and gifts of fruit for my informants during interviews, as well as any additional expenses do to unforeseen events and drops in currency will be paid for with my personal funds.

11. Staff (if others are to participate in the project as researchers or research assistants, please give their name and qualifications): N/A

12. Outside Financial Support (list any other sources of funding for the project, either obtained or applied for, with amounts and restrictions): N/A

13. References Cited/Select Bibliography (list the sources you have cited in the proposal and/or used as background research. Use the style defined by the American Anthropological Association [see http://aaanet.org]; list a minimum of 10 sources cited to a maximum of one page; more than 10 references are expected in proposals submitted by MA and PhD students).

Bernard, H. Russell. 2005 Research Methods in Anthropology: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches. Walnut Creek: Alta Mira Press.

14. **Permits** (demonstrate that you have, or are seeking, any necessary permits such as a research permit, a research visa, an antiquities permit, letter of welcome from an institution, etc. Attach copies to this proposal).

No visa is required for stays in Senegal less than 90 days.