A young boy is walking barefoot on a tiled floor. He is wearing a light-colored, short-sleeved button-down shirt and shorts. He is playing a harmonica with a wooden frame. In his left hand, he carries a large, empty, corrugated metal tin can. The background shows a dark wall with a window and a table with papers on it.

STREET CHILDREN IN SENEGAL

GYAN France
Réseau global
action jeunesse

GYAN FRANCE
presents

STREET CHILDREN IN SENEGAL
THEIR STORIES IN WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHS

PARIS 2005



GYAN France
Réseau global
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STREET CHILDREN IN SENEGAL

THEIR STORIES IN WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHS

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Dedicated to all those who advocate for West Africa's street children, laboring to protect their most fundamental rights

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PART I: INTRODUCTION

THE STREET CHILDREN AND AFRICAN DEVELOPMENT

- *Ousmane Ndiaye*

Africa's underdevelopment can be attributed to a host of causes. Some would point to exogenous factors, such as practices of the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, or the unjust policies of the world's hegemonic powers. I would like to focus on the highly relevant yet rarely considered endogenous factors. Specifically, I hope to bring to light one local practice plaguing Senegal and its neighboring countries: the dramatic, disastrous, disquieting, and shocking phenomenon of Africa's street children.

Who are these thousands of abandoned children and where do they come from? Where are their caretakers to be found while these children roam the streets? How can Senegal realize sustainable development when its children are denied basic rights, education, and health care, the pillars of any successful development strategy?

The children that any visitor to Senegal will quickly notice, commonly referred to as "talibés" in local dialects, are sent by

their families to live in the dwelling of a *marabout*, or a Muslim ascetic who is charged with giving these children a Koranic education. Families send their sons off to live with marabouts for a variety of reasons and under various pretexts. One of these involves a deep-rooted tradition whereby families send their sons to become introduced to the values and practices of the Muslim faith. The marabouts traditionally teach the talibés to read and write Arabic, to memorize the Koran, and to live a life in accordance with two of Islam's principal values: humility and endurance. The harsh conditions under which the children live leads to the development of a deep humility and an endurance that would overcome life's hardest tests.



The talibés are highly visible in Dakar, and can be recognized by the red cans they use to collect coins and other donations.

Other parents are simply unable to raise their children; financial difficulties and other burdens are too heavy. Sending their children to a marabout who claims to initiate the children to the

Muslim faith is a culturally acceptable alternative to abandoning or otherwise neglecting their children. Many West Africans consider the years spent with a marabout to be part of a respectable tradition and even a necessary phase in the development of an individual. Parents sending their children to a marabout would find acceptance and approval from the Senegalese; from the taxi driver to the student, the Senegalese respect what they consider a well-anchored tradition and important stage for the children.

In reality, however, the children are far from receiving an education or achieving any kind of general development. They live in deplorable conditions; they are runny-nosed, unkempt and spend more time barefoot in the streets under the blazing sun than studying the Koran or learning how to read or write. Sent by their marabouts, they wander the streets, approaching residents and tourists with open palms, begging for money, from dusk to dawn.

Today, the official report does not bode well: these children are far from literate and their health is in a constant state of fragility and risk. A perfect illustration is the ravaging effect of malaria each year within the Senegalese talibé populations.

Although children were once taught discipline and endurance, today, they are subjected to severe mistreatment and physical abuse. It is not uncommon to hear of cases of abuse of the talibés throughout the region. Radio France International reported the case of one young talibé tortured with blows of a thin leather strap by his marabout and shut in for seventy two hours with nothing to eat or drink. The marabout stated that he was teaching the student to become “humble.”¹ Such reports no longer shock the community; they are expected of the marabouts. Although such stories are tragic, they are common within the heart of the Daara system. What is even more disturbing is the prospect that much more abuse takes place every day than can ever be reported by the media.

¹ Demba Ndiaye, “Le Supplice d’un jeune talibé,” Radio France International, April 1, 2003.

Such practices, besides the fact that they can leave no decent person indifferent, are endogenous factors blocking Senegal's development. Three key dimensions of development are affected by the talibé phenomenon: youth, health, and education. The youngest members of Senegal's society, who will drive our future, are denied basic health and education. How can a society become productive and compete in a rapidly developing world when its youngest members are unable to read and write—in any language? How can a society guarantee productivity and the ability to compete in a globalizing world when its people are denied basic health care, when youth are denied the opportunity to develop their skills, and when the government allows a practice that handicaps its future generation during its youngest, most vulnerable stage?

Human resources, the pivot of any viable and long-term development strategy, are highly affected by the talibé phenomenon. These children, our future, are hindered by a practice that teaches them to get through life by begging. To prepare citizens to serve society in an efficacious manner, it is necessary to protect them, educate them and train them from their youngest age to develop the values of responsible and conscientious citizens: to give him a trade, and teach him to honestly exchange his services for other goods. The talibé practice as it is found in Senegal today has nothing to do with the development of citizens able to integrate in modern societies. Whatever values existed in a distant past have been cut off in that past: the modern equivalent of Senegal's Koranic education is a corrupt version of a once respectable practice.

The responsibility for reforming and combating this terrible practice belongs first and foremost to the Senegalese State. Yet the State has shamefully shunned its principal responsibility: the protection of its most vulnerable citizens. The State must conform to the many human rights conventions it has signed; it must eradicate a phenomenon that has nothing to do with respecting children's rights. It is the duty of any just and efficacious State that claims to subscribe to modern notions of human rights to assure the security, liberty, and well-being of its

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citizens. Yet a State cannot guarantee its people's liberty when it has failed to protect and secure its children's most fundamental and inalienable right: their right to a decent life under conditions befitting human dignity.



The children of the poorest regions of Senegal and its neighboring countries, such as Mali, often find themselves entrusted to religious chiefs who claim to initiate them to Islamic culture and values.

PART II: THE TALIBÉS

If, at the origin of the tradition, the children begged to learn humility, discipline, and the values of an ascetic life—all fundamental values of the Islam—today, they beg to benefit the marabouts' personal accounts, creating what is locally referred to as *le marché de l'aumône* (“the market of alms”).² Visitors and inhabitants of West Africa's chief cities are constantly solicited by these children to give money that many of the children will never benefit from or even see once surrendered to the control of the marabout.



² “Les talibés de Dakar, tour à tour étudiants en religion et mendiants,” *AFP*, November 19, 2004.

The authorities have closed their eyes to a desperate situation. The talibés make up the grand majority of street children throughout Western Africa. In 1977, a census conducted by the Secretary of Human Services of Senegal found that 6,300 talibés between six and fourteen years old roamed the streets of Dakar, the capital of Senegal, begging for food, money and other donations.³ This figure has grown exponentially. The government of Dakar estimates that today, approximately 90,000 talibés, or 6% of the total population of Dakar, can be found on its streets.⁴ According to another study realized in collaboration with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) in 1991, approximately 100,000 talibés can be found on the streets of Dakar.⁵

These children are boys three to fourteen years of age, coming principally from the poorest regions of Senegal as well as from Senegal's neighboring countries, including Mali, Guinea, and the Gambia. Talibés that have not migrated from other regions of Senegal or from abroad represent only 3.11% of the talibés of Dakar.

³ UNICEF, *Analyse de la situation : la femme et l'enfant au Sénégal. DRAFTI* (Dakar: February 1991) 74.

⁴ Moustapha Mbodj, *La mendicité au Sénégal : problèmes et perspectives* (Dakar: Secretary of the Family, Social Action, and National Solidarity, UNICEF, 1998) 2.

⁵ "Les talibés de Dakar, tour à tour étudiants en religion et mendiants," *AFP*, November 19, 2004.

LODGING

With the condition of their shelter in such a precarious and uncertain state, the talibés can for all practical purposes be considered homeless. As one talibé has said, the Daara is an “unfinished shelter.”⁶ The talibés sleep on mats, one on top of the other. The fortunate few live in improvised huts, but these huts, often with no roof, do not protect them from the outside elements. Others sleep on the grounds of courtyards under the stars, but even in Senegal, the winter nights can become relatively cold. There are also those that sleep in provisionary shelters, garages, on the streets, or in construction sites where work has been suspended.

Their living quarters lack access to water and sanitation. When enough solid waste has accumulated, they gather it together in a great pile to be burned. Until then, it attracts bugs, roaches, and rats. As a result, these children are susceptible to a wide variety of risks associated with these deplorable living conditions: illness, pests, lice, and malaria are not uncommon.

⁶ “Les talibés de Dakar, tour à tour étudiants en religion et mendiants,” *AFP*, November 19, 2004.



The shelters are often overpopulated and do not meet minimum standards of hygiene.



The exterior of one Daara's shelter.



The interior of the same shelter.

HEALTH

The talibés' poor hygiene and lack of nutrition have caused countless different diseases, including malaria, fevers, itching, and cholera, among others. The children rarely, if ever, benefit from vaccinations and other preventative procedures.

In general, because their shelters are characterized by a lack of running water, some talibés will go weeks without bathing, especially during the cold seasons. Their poor hygiene exponentially increases their risks of developing infections whenever the children are cut or wounded.

The talibés are maintained in a constant state of disorder and disarray. Their clothes are old, torn, and tattered, and are rarely washed. Some talibés will try to wash their own clothes, but almost never with soap. They rarely wear shoes, and if they do, it is purely accidental. They walk throughout the city barefoot, under the constant risk of being cut by stray glass or debris. Perhaps to increase profits, the marabouts keep the talibés in a disheveled state: the more miserable the children appear to be, the more sympathetic donations they receive.

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As the talibés travel from home to home searching for food, they carry with them their *pots rouge* (“red cans”—generally, empty tomato cans) to collect contributions. By the end of each day, they will have collected scraps from a variety of foods. These leftovers are usually referred to as the *mélange repoussant*, or the “repulsive mix.” The absence of nutritious food in these growing children’s diets is yet another factor contributing to their precarious state of health.

The talibés lack access to health care and have no way to visit doctors or purchase medications. With the exception of a limited number of charities and associations founded to ameliorate their conditions of life, the talibés are alone and without aid. When ill, they are left in their sick, miserable state until nature completes its course.

The talibés are rarely given the opportunity to consult doctors and they lack basic access to medication.



This child, infected with malaria, is left prostrate among the refuse behind his home.



THEIR DAILY ROUTINES

The talibés devote an average of ten hours per day to their principal activity: begging on the city streets. The time spent on the streets is a direct cause of their illiteracy and general lack of education. According to research conducted by the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and *la Direction de l’action sociale* (DAS) in 1999, the talibés devote no more than thirty percent of their time towards memorizing the 604 pages of the Koran.⁷

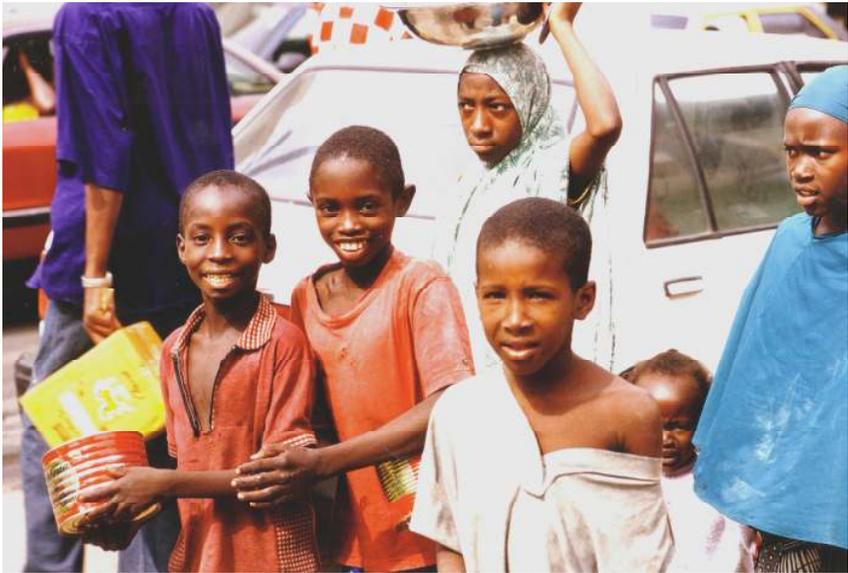
Children who fail to bring a fixed sum of money back to their marabout at the end of each day,⁸ as well as those who demonstrate a lack of discipline, are often subjected to terrible corporal punishment. The majority of talibés carry scars on their bodies, permanent reminders of punishments for their past acts and deeds.

⁷ Abdou Faye, “Des marabouts d’écoles coraniques font leurs élèves des enfants de la rue,” *Inter Press News Service Agency*.

⁸ Usually within the range of 250 – 300 CFA francs, or .50 €.

The typical day of the talibés begins at 5:00 in the morning, when they awake and are taught the Koran. In the urban areas, Koranic education tends to take place in the courts of homes and verandas, in garages, on pavements, or under trees. Most Daaras near Dakar do not have fixed localities, and when they do, they are characterized by their minimum provisions and temporary natures.

By 8:00, the talibés are sent off to the streets, where they search for their breakfast, with empty tin cans to solicit food, money and other donations. From 14:00 to 16:00, they return to their Daara, where they continue to study the Koran. At 16:00, they return to the streets to beg until the sun sets.



Child-mendicants solicit passers-by for coins and food.

Sometimes, passersby contribute rice, sugar, or soap into the talibés' cans. Islamic tradition encourages the believers to provide food and other provisions to the most unfortunate members of society. This tradition is linked to the belief that giving alms makes amends for the believers' sins. Most often, the non-monetary objects placed in the tin cans, such as soap or rice, are

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white, because of the association between this color and purity. When children have failed to collect the monetary amount set by their marabout, they may be able to sell objects that they collected in order to reach the quota before returning home.



Many children admit that if they do not bring back the amount of money demanded by their marabout, they are beaten. Modou Sall, a disciple of a marabout in a Dakar suburb, affirmed that his marabout demands at least 200 CFA francs per day. When the talibés fail to bring back the required amount, the marabout deprives them of food or beats them.⁹ Souleymane Anne, founder of the association Action Enfance Développement (“Action for the Development of Children”), has also commented that talibés who do not bring back 300 or 500 francs per day endure “corporal punishment.”¹⁰

⁹ Abdou Faye, “Des marabouts d’écoles coraniques font leurs élèves des enfants de la rue,” *Inter Press News Service Agency*.

¹⁰ Marie Julie Gagnon, “Les talibés au Sénégal,” *Journal la Presse*, May 19, 2004.

The State lacks a political strategy towards the talibé problem and has taken no concrete steps to protect the young children. Many Senegalese and foreigners have therefore taken their own initiative. Most often, this means sharing some coins with a talibé, or, when a group of children are present, giving a one hundred franc bill to one of them and instructing him to share with his companions of misfortune. For other concerned citizens, it means inviting a talibé or a group of talibés over for a meal, or giving a talibé clothing, medicine, or blankets. Some associations have gone as far as inviting the children over for a meal each day, or teaching them to read or write. However, the marabouts often protest such efforts, because they tend to undermine their control over the talibés.

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THEIR STORIES IN WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHS



The talibés' "pots rouges," or red cans, have become their emblem. The children carry the cans with them everywhere they go in order to collect coins, rice, sugar, and other donations.



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There is nothing but fifty CFA francs in the can of this talibé. But he can sell the sugar he collected in order to collect the 350 CFA francs that he must bring back to his marabout.



Despite their difficult life conditions, the talibés are no different from other children; they possess the same thirst for life of other children.



THE MARABOUTS

Moussa Fall, an educator working with *Claire Enfance* and helping children who are in difficult situations, has criticized the talibé practice in Senegal because anyone can declare himself to be a marabout and begin operating a Daara. There are no documents or formal registrations required in order to open up a Koranic school. In Senegal, the government is unable to regulate and control the practices of the marabouts, who many authorities fear have greater power than they do. Because of the religiosity of the Senegalese, the marabouts are highly influential throughout the country. The marabouts' power and authority is known by all: many will follow the marabouts' instructions and vote for the political candidates that the marabouts endorse. Politicians are thus unable to hold the marabouts accountable for their practices. Few politicians are willing to take the political risks necessary to reform the Daaras and provide justice for the talibés.¹¹

¹¹ Marie Julie Gagnon, "Les talibés au Sénégal," *Journal la Presse*, May 19, 2004.



A Koranic school near Dakar.

The marabouts give a wide variety of justifications for their practices. They claim that the education that they give the children prepares the children to overcome all of life's difficulties; the children's suffering prepares them for what lies ahead through developing strength and endurance. They argue that to combat the talibé tradition would be to deprive the country of a well-established and beneficial Islamic practice.

Finally, many justify their practice of sending the children to the streets to solicit food and money. They claim that it is the only way that the marabouts are able to maintain all of the children confided to them. Many claim that the parents forget about the children the moment that they join the Daara, and the marabouts are given no material or financial aid. The marabouts therefore have no choice but to send the children to the streets to search for a meal and to collect money that will allow the marabout to provide for himself.¹²

¹² Abdou Faye, "Des marabouts d'écoles coraniques font leurs élèves des enfants de la rue," *Inter Press News Service Agency*.



This hut serves as a classroom where these Senegalese talibés study the Koran.

PART III: CONCLUSION

APPROACHING THE TALIBÉ PHENOMENON

- *Aurélie Frex*

What is the proper response to a phenomenon that is hurting Senegal's children? How can the lives of the talibés be ameliorated? How can they be guaranteed a better future without disrupting local traditions? How can the abuse of young talibés be put to an end?

SUBVENTIONS AND PUBLIC AID

Amadou Makhtar Mbow, the former Director-General of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), declared that the talibé phenomenon could be solved if the authorities assumed their responsibility and broke down society's wall of indifference. He finds the talibé phenomenon to be "scandalous."¹³

In 1977, the Senegalese government considered granting the Koranic schools a legal status similar to that of private schools. Such a move would significantly ameliorate the talibés' educational

¹³ Abdou Faye, "Des marabouts d'écoles coraniques font leurs élèves des enfants de la rue," *Inter Press News Service Agency*.

conditions. Steps were taken to pressure Koranic schools to stop sending children to beg on the streets, and to create public funds to provide for the children's needs directly. However, fearful of the marabouts' use of these funds for their own personal use, the public authorities abandoned this idea before it was brought to fruition.¹⁴

PRIVILEGING LOCAL ACTION AND DIRECT INTERVENTION

On the local level, GYAN France is associated with the G1000, an association that brings together fifteen Senegalese and some French women to aid children at a Daara near Dakar. Partnership with a group in direct contact with the marabout allows for supervision of the distribution of supplies and contact with the children, contact which otherwise is very difficult to establish.

The G1000 demonstrates the efficacy and value of local action to effect positive change. The women of the G1000 work to improve the talibés' quality of life at all levels. They intervene within the medical sphere, providing medicine to children and assuring access to doctors, thanks to the group's contact with local health centers. The group also has developed partnerships with young doctors who have volunteered their services to the children, providing free surgeries to the children. The G1000 provides children with mosquito nets, the most viable protection against malaria-carrying mosquitoes. The organization also provides the children with a daily breakfast and fresh, potable water each day.

PERMANENT NEGOTIATIONS WITH THE MARABOUTS

Negotiations are often difficult to establish with the marabouts, especially when raising issues regarding the children's well being, hygiene, or health.

One of the leaders of the G1000 recounted an episode in which she asked a marabout if his talibés could come over to have a bath

¹⁴ Abdou Faye, "Des marabouts d'écoles coraniques."

from time to time. The marabout sternly refused, and offered the pretext that the children were just as well off bathing in the open sea. The leader suspected that his real motive was to keep the children looking dirty: the more miserable the children look, the more money they are likely to collect.

Another subject of great importance, which is often debated with the marabouts, is the alphabetization of the talibés. These children, who memorize the Koran without truly understanding Arabic, often do not know how to read or write any language, including their native Wolof. In order to integrate within society later on in life, learning to read and write is an indispensable skill, yet few marabouts are willing to discuss this matter.

Even if it causes an occasional grimace, it is possible to convince the marabouts that the children need to learn a trade, such as construction or mechanics, before leaving the Daara. Permitting the children to learn a technical profession gives them the chance to prevent their lives from slipping past them on the streets of Dakar.

THE GREAT DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE MARABOUTS

All of the Senegalese recognize that there are good marabouts and bad marabouts. The latter fail to provide the talibés with decent education and neglect to protect them from disease and other injuries. The treatment of the children will at times verge on abuse. If the mistreatment of talibés is ever to be fixed, regulation of some sort on the marabouts is indispensable.

ASSURING THE FUTURE OF THESE CHILDREN

What does the future hold for children hailing from Mali, the Gambia, or from Senegal's poorest regions, whose parents left them to be raised by a marabout of Dakar? If some students at the l'Université de Dakar admit that they were once talibés, they are the exceptions: most talibés are unable to go on to higher education. It is necessary to work towards providing these children the opportunity to attain an education and a vocation.

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To reach that goal, it is necessary to reinforce local actions in partnership with all interested agencies and parties, in order to improve this desperate situation. Leaders who can at the same time preserve local traditions yet speak out with moral clarity are greatly needed to arouse people's consciences.

ABOUT GYAN FRANCE

GYAN FRANCE (Global Youth Action Network) is a non-governmental organization that acts as an incubator of global partnerships among youth organizations.

OUR VISION: GYAN France believes that civil society is an integral part of democratic culture. An active civil society is necessary to achieve both participatory government and sustainable development. GYAN France thus supports civil society in all its forms—but with an emphasis on building one of society's most valuable assets—youth.

GYAN France endorses and sponsors programs aimed at increasing youth participation in government decision making as well as in service. GYAN supports youth service through internationally coordinating Global Youth Service Day and coordinating various other opportunities on the international level for youth engagement, such as the Youth Participation Initiative. We believe that young leaders who will take a role in government tomorrow should be raised in a culture of service today.

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GYAN France also promotes projects to encourage youth to engage in critical thought about the major policy and political questions of today, and to express their opinions through a wide variety of publications, fora, and round tables hosted by GYAN. Throughout all of these programs, our core goal is the realization of youth's full potential to contribute to society as civic actors.

OUR MISSION: to facilitate youth participation and intergenerational partnerships in global decision-making; to support collaboration among diverse youth organizations; and to provide tools, resources, and recognition for positive youth action.



OUR PROJECT

GOALS

We are working with local partners in order to aid a community of approximately sixty talibés in Dakar, Senegal.

We have established several partnerships with various African civic organizations, including the G1000, a Senegalese NGO, and the UNESCO Educational Resource Centers.

We hope to ameliorate the living conditions of the talibés through mobilizing youth and other members of civil society to bring these children sustainable aid.

CAMPAIGNS

Awareness Raising

Expositions of photography, university conferences, discussions with local non-governmental organizations and agencies, and media outreach and diffusion of our actions through the radio, magazines, and newspapers.

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Health

Fundraising campaign to purchase mosquito nets to donate to children for the prevention of malaria.

Education

Collection of French textbooks in the sciences and humanities to aid volunteers in education and to donate to the UNESCO Educational Resource Centers.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

JOHN M. BALONZE has been national coordinator of GYAN France since 2004. He was a volunteer of the CRE-UNESCO in Senegal in 2004, where he was taken aback by the talibé phenomenon. Having studied legal reform as a Fulbright Scholar and international relations at Columbia University, he has a strong interest in international economic and social development.

IANINA BARANOVITCH completed her studies in journalism at the University of Moscow. Today, she is completing a Masters at *l'Institut d'Etudes Politiques de Paris* in marketing and communication. Ianina led an awareness raising campaign on the living conditions of the street children through organizing photographic expositions and conferences throughout Paris.

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