

## PULAAKU IN ACTION: WORDS AT WORK IN WODAABE CLAN POLITICS



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**Using microscopic analysis, this article explores how notions of morality, identity, and social conduct were used in the negotiation of group relations among the pastoral Wodaabe of southeastern Niger. Two of their clans met in 2004 to discuss whether certain breaches of norms should lead to their fission or whether they should stay united under a pact of disregard for state law and authority. The latter option would preserve a domain of inter-clan affairs beneath notice and, hence, interference of state authorities. Analysis of a transcript of actual conversation between the participants of the clan meeting shows how the use of verbalized norms and values was constitutive of the social situation, the negotiation process, and its outcome. This episode of clan politics was related to the general political situation in Niger and the challenges it provided for Wodaabe pastoral life. (Wodaabe, Fulani, segmentary lineage, dispute and negotiation, verbal interaction, Niger)**

Many African nomadic societies, or substantial parts of their social systems, exhibit a two-party structure of political processes, with A opposing B, as established by Fortes and Evans-Pritchard's (1940) famous stateless society paradigm. The study of conflict and negotiation within this political constellation is of considerable theoretical interest since outcomes cannot simply be attributed to the intervention of the state as an over-ruling third party. Outcomes have to be explained by processes of communication and reciprocal adjusting through which the opposing parties learn their relative positions and strengths (Gulliver 1979). Of particular interest is when two opposing parties get beyond the point of checking out each other to agree upon a common course or institution which they accept, thus belying the "tragedy of the commons" theorem (Hardin 1968). Exactly how, why, and to what extent this is achieved needs to be addressed when the collective action problem in social groups is under scrutiny.

This article depicts how a group of pastoral Wodaabe (sing. Bodaado) worked on their inter-clan relations, which had become strained due to issues between members of two clans. These issues and the decision finally reached were ultimately, as will be argued below, related to changes in the broader political environment. It is through the detailed, in fact, word-by-word, analysis of the negotiation process that the conflict and its (temporary) solution elucidated the institutional regimes through which the Wodaabe achieve social integration beyond the lineage group (cf. Moore 1987 on "diagnostic events").

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An important feature of the negotiation process between the Wodaabe clans is the pervasive use of norms and values and particularly the notion of *pulaaku* as rhetoric resources. Speakers strategically employ that notion in order to prepare or advance their argument. I will therefore depart from the extensive ethnographic writing on various Fulani groups all over West Africa that treats the term *pulaaku* as descriptive of a number of supposedly objective items that would characterize a cultural unit and ethnic identity named Fulani.<sup>1</sup> These items include deeply rooted personality traits that distinguish the Fulani from other ethnic groups; moral standards, and social codes that guide an individual's conduct towards others and establish crucial social institutions and patterns of behavior through which Fulani express and signal ethnic identity with each other and ethnic separation from others.<sup>2</sup>

Rather than treating the term *pulaaku* as if referring to some social or cultural reality that exists detached from social practices where the term is actually used,<sup>3</sup> I take a pragmatist (Austin 1962; Searle 1995) and interactionist (Collins 1987, 1988) approach to concentrate on the social production of reality through the use of words and symbols in the context of concrete purposeful social interaction. It will thus be shown how the notion of *pulaaku* was put to use in Wodaabe political discourse, how its use shaped the course and outcome of a particular political event, and how it acquired meaning because of being used in a process of political interaction.

This research focus calls for a method that captures local notions of morality, identity, and social conduct in actual sequences of conversation where they are used by social actors and where they contribute, through that usage, to the production of social reality (Zimmerman and Boden 1991). I draw on situational analysis (Gluckman 1961; van Velsen 1967) and the microscopic study of conflict (Gulliver 1979) that is considered as a particularly apt tool for practice-oriented approaches in anthropology and sociology (Handelman 2006; Kapferer 2006) and that allows for a stance of "methodological situationalism" (Knorr-Cetina 1981), as opposed to individualism or holism. Special attention is paid to how the social situation is constituted and driven by verbal interaction, thus following ideas of ethnomethodology (Garfinkel 1967), conversation analysis (Sacks 1995), and the field of linguistic anthropology that is geared to the microscopic study of political processes (e.g., Brenneis and Myers 1984; Conley and O'Barr 1998; Duranti 1994; Goldman 1983; Hayden 1999).<sup>4</sup> Following background information relevant to the case, I present significant elements of the interaction during a Wodaabe clan meeting held in 2004, and conclude by discussing them within a broader empirical and conceptual context.<sup>5</sup>

## GENERAL CONTEXT

Wodaabe live in Niger, Nigeria, and Chad where they form a numerically small but prominent part of the Fulani world in ethnography and media coverage (Dupire 1996; Stenning 1959; Bonfiglioli 1988). They are herders of large Zebu cattle, and they exploit the Sahalian range to build up their herds in a thoroughly planned way (Schareika 2001, 2003a, 2003b).

The most important pastoral strategy is an extreme mobility of single, flexible, and independently deciding units of the family household and family herd (*wuro*). During the rainy season (June–September) these units may move every day, and even at night when considered necessary for the herd's well-being. These households dispose of no huts or tents and content themselves with minimal equipment. During the dry season, they camp at pastoral wells and use the surrounding pastures.

Although independence of small family households is the institutional basis for effective herding, due to the opportunistic and flexible consumption of temporally and spatially spread pasture resources (Behnke and Scoones 1993), many factors make higher levels of social integration desirable. Protection of animal property and the family members' lives, control of women as spouses and workforce, distribution of information on resource availability across the wider region, and successful occupation of a dry-season well are some of the needs that make co-operation and the political and physical force within more inclusive groups a decisive element of the nomads' existence. Among the Wodaabe, just as with most pastoral nomads, patrilineages and clans are the relevant organizational forms for this task (Dupire 1970).

In addition to non-state forms of social integration (that deal with many proceedings), the Wodaabe have been part of the colonial and later independent state since the coming of the French (in southeastern Niger in 1904). In this regard, they speak of themselves as subjects (*talaka'en*; cf. Fuglestad 1983:80), *administrés* in the technical language of Niger.

At the most local level of the state are the *groupement* for nomadic and the *canton* for sedentary rural groups. Each of these units is led by a so-called traditional leader (*chef traditionnel*), the *chef de groupement* and *chef de canton*, respectively, who command lower-level traditional leaders, the *chef de tribu* and *chef de village*, respectively. The political power of the traditional leaders within a *groupement* rests on ascribed state authority (e.g., collecting taxes) on the one hand, and on a generally accepted yet loose leadership role in lineage and clan affairs on the other. The social connection of traditional leaders to officials of the local state (*sous-préfet, préfet*) as well as to development agents by whom they are sought for all kinds of interventions is, of course, a further source of power. Fulfulde-speaking groups call their chefs de

groupement by local titles of authority: *laamiido* or *may* (the latter term being borrowed from the Kanuri language); and chefs de tribu, *ardo* (Kintz 1985).

Hence, the state has established its presence within pastoral communities through the institution of “traditional” leadership (Fuglestad 1983:72); however, it remains excluded from a great many daily economic and social activities within these communities (for example, births and acts of filiation that are not systematically registered). As for the Wodaabe, they have fairly limited power to mobilize the state in order to regulate daily affairs. They will not (exclusively) rely on state executive bodies when it comes to protecting their property (particularly the animals), securing their marriages, or gaining access to a public well. First, nomads from the bush are in many cases disdained, dealt with reluctantly, and obliged to finance operations (e.g., paying fuel for a police mission); second, the outcome of such operations is uncertain: either damage is not or only partially compensated (and then requiring a due share to the *laamiido*, who acts as a facilitator), or a conflict is arbitrarily evaluated in favor of the opposed party. The vastness and limited accessibility of the savanna drylands further hampers quick and efficient intervention by the under-equipped and understaffed executive bodies of the state.

All this means that Wodaabe highly value integration into groups more inclusive than the pastoral camp. The forms of integration they mostly seek are lineage and clan networks. Some remarks on these are necessary in order to understand the events during the clan meeting.

#### LINEAGE AND CLAN

The Wodaabe recognize groups of patrilineal and patrilineal kinsmen nested in a way that resembles the classic segmentary lineage model (Dupire 1970:303; Bonfiglioli 1988:48–49). In southeastern Niger, an individual Bodaado is identified as belonging to a family or *wuro* through his father; as a family member among patrilineal cousins (*bibbe baaba'en*) through his grandfather or great-grandfather; as a family member within a lineage (*taarde*) through an ancestor who is reported to be five generations away from present-day elders (as of 2005), but whose genealogical link to the living is not verified by collective memory of birth and marriage ceremonies; as a kinsman within a clan (*lenyol*) through an ancestor whose agnatic link to the lineage founder is generally assumed but not established by genealogical account.

Marguerite Dupire has shown that actual Wodaabe social groups do not simply result from manifestations of a patrilineal descent model, but from the practice of co-residence, joint migration, pastoral co-operation, intermarriage and political alliance building, and competition (Dupire 1970:221ff.). The

patrilineal descent model is used to organize relations between individuals and groups generated by these processes within an encompassing and coherently ordered framework. While pointing towards practical conditions of group formation, Dupire states, however, that the rationalizing use of the lineage model feeds back on social affairs at the local level (Dupire 1970:303):

C'est en voisinant et en s'intermariant qu'on devient agnats et c'est aussi parce qu'on est agnats qu'on voisine et qu'on s'intermarie (1970: 304).

Thus, within and between lower-level lineage segments, kin relations among its members are not simply rationalized *ex post facto*, so to speak, but also actively forged by the pervasive application of a principle of agnatic descent through day-to-day social practice. Two fields of such practice are prominent: first, the circulation among close agnates (brothers and close cousins) of new-born girls as wives for their sons (ideally patrilateral parallel cousin marriage); second, the ceremonial attribution (by killing a bull) of new-born babies as children to the spouses of their mothers. The Wodaabe conceptualize the bonds created by this latter process as *yiyâm* (blood).<sup>6</sup>

Kin relations between members of two lineage segments at the higher level, particularly clans, by contrast, do not emerge from social practices that are guided by a model of patrilineal descent. Thus, two Wodaabe men from two different clans do not establish social closeness by evoking a family tie between their mythical clan founders (from whom the clan names are derived). Although appearing somewhat strange at first sight, social bonds between members of two clans emerge from the fact that they mutually disrespect their claim to control the allocation of marriageable women within their lineage group (Dupire 1970:297). Young Wodaabe men try to seduce women from other clans and impose a marriage by theft (*te'egal*) upon the betrothal marriage (*koobgal*) that was originally arranged within the girls' immediate lineage groups when they were born. The young women in question appreciate their being "stolen" (in fact, this is the condition for a theft to happen). They escape from an arranged marriage with one of their cousins and start a married life with their self-chosen sweetheart.

The groom, by contrast, is generally upset and bears a severe grudge against his adversary. Stories circulate that detail the kinds of brutal violence a wife-stealer has to bear when caught during or after his coup. What the men are expected not to do, however, is to go to the police and thus draw the state authorities into their family affairs. This point is of greatest importance, as will become clear.

What begins as competition and hostility turns within one generation into a firm relationship. The sons of the stolen wife become members of her new husband's clan, but they are still related by a uterine bond to their mother's

clan, a highly valued relationship called *endam* (mother's milk). From these sons' perspectives, their mother's brother (*kaawu*) and his children, their cross-cousins (*dendiraabe*), are links into a clan of culturally similar but personally strange people. The values generally vested in these relations are the basis of trust upon which Wodaaabe from different clans can approach each other in order to communicate or collaborate.

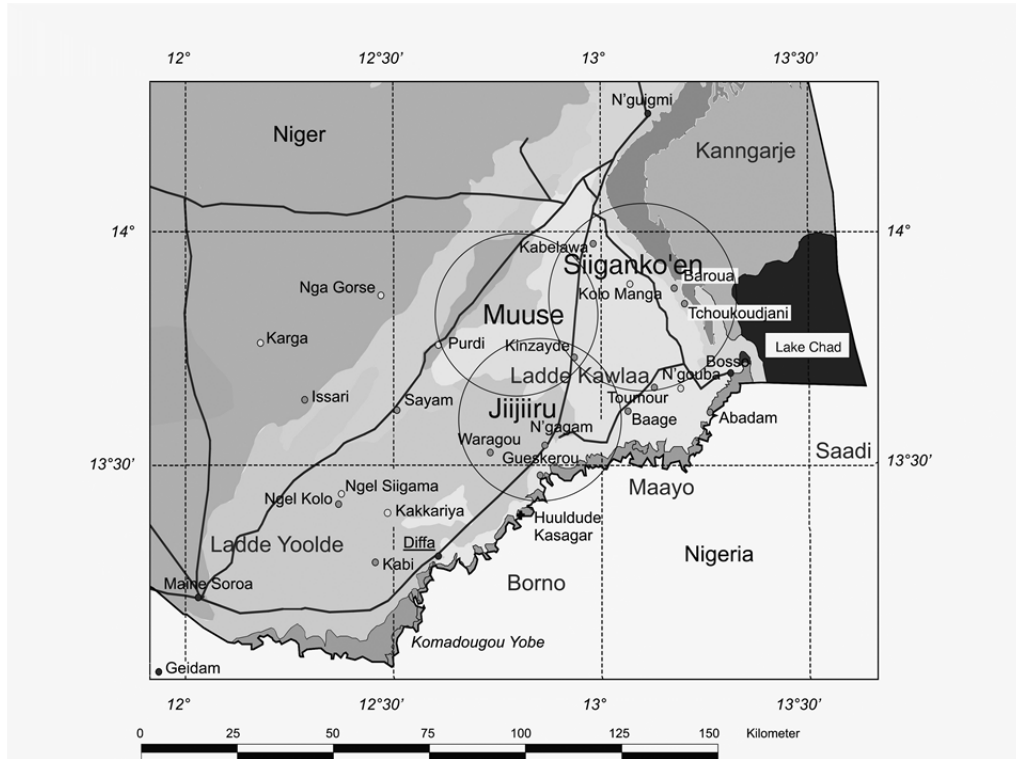
The basis for social interaction between members of different clans thus emerges from the hostile practice of wife stealing. Wife stealing in times of state law, however, is only possible because there is an agreement between clans, reached and maintained by their elders, that state authorities as well as traditional leadership be kept away from clan and family affairs. The great clan meeting (*saawora makka*) analyzed below was about this agreement and its social effects.

#### THE CLAN MEETING

On March 20, 2004, the elders of two Wodaaabe clans from the Diffa region in southeastern Niger assembled in the small and dusty village of Kinshayindi, 60 km southwest of N'guimi on Lake Chad (see Figure 1), in order to discuss some issues they had with each other and to see how, given the problems between them, they would institutionally frame their future relations. Laamiidò Bello, the chef de groupement, having most of the region's Wodaaabe under his rule, presided over the meeting since he, as he continually emphasized, had invited the clan members to the village of Kinshayindi, which served him as a base for his political work. Laamiidò Bello was a member of the Suudu Sukayel clan and of the major lineage of the Siiganko'en. The party that felt most offended was from the Muuse, another major lineage of the Suudu Sukayel. This party was represented by two elders, Wunndi and 'Bañol. The opposing party was the other clan present, the Jijjiiru, with their spokesman Kayaale (see Figure 2).

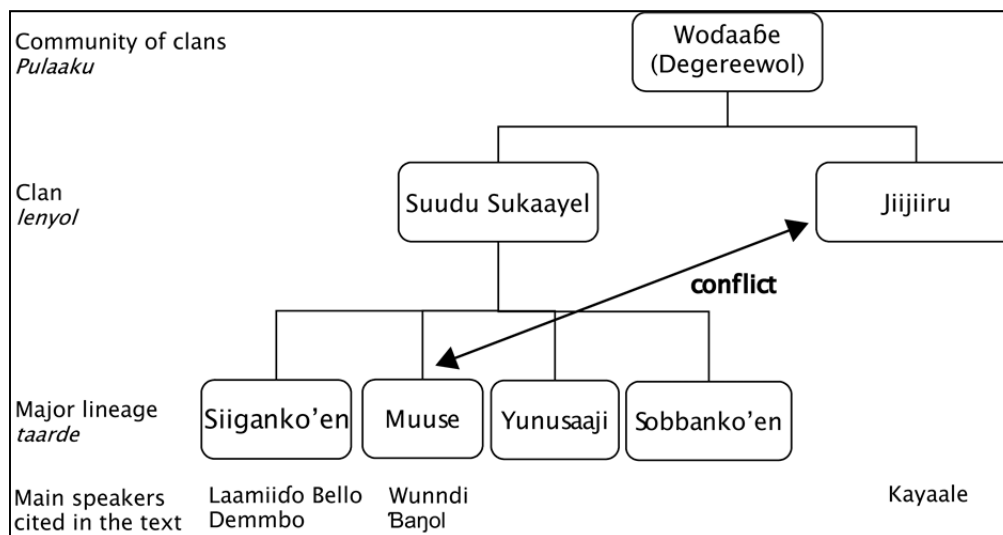
Relations between the Muuse and the Jijjiiru<sup>7</sup> have been strained since they moved into the region and occupied neighboring dry-season pastures, with the well and market of Kinshayindi serving as an important point of contact. One of the many bones of contention discussed during the meeting was that the Jijjiiru had approached a Muuse camp with the police in order to pick up a girl that they claimed for themselves. Another issue was several

Figure 1  
Study Area in Southeastern Niger and Special Relation  
between Conflicting Lineages



cases of wife stealing against a Muuse chef de tribu, although such action against traditional leaders had been ruled out. A further sore for the Muuse was that the Jiijiiru had continued to mock them because a group of young Muuse dancers had cowardly run away from a Jiijiiru lineage feast (*worso*) for fear of being beaten. This happened about 40 years ago but the derision *Muuse nyaari* (“the Muuse ran away”) remained a source of pain to the Muuse and amusement to the Jiijiiru. In view of these and other insults and gibes, the elders of both clans used the meeting to negotiate what their relations should be in the future and what that would mean to their lives in a politically changing world. (In providing the details of this meeting, lack of space requires omitting much of the two hours of tense discussion. The full transcript, and its analysis, is found in Schareika 2007).

Figure 2  
Conflict Structure and Main Spokesmen



### NEGOTIATING THE PARADIGM OF NEGOTIATION

Right from the outset, the concept of *pulaaku* entered and structured the verbal exchanges of the meeting by its being used as a paradigm of negotiation. Comaroff and Roberts (1981:85) convincingly show that the interpretative framework within which a conflict is debated is crucial for the course the negotiations take. Such a paradigm determines the social value that pieces of information or statements can obtain and suggests a range of alternative outcomes.

An early speaker has a better chance to establish such a paradigm whereas speakers who follow may find themselves entangled in the preceding lines of argument. Hence, Wunndi from the Muuse, who spoke directly after the opening talk of Laamiido Bello, used that position to present a number of the above-mentioned reproaches against the Jijjiiru and then to frame these reproaches with the following:



Wunndi: The track of pulaaku has been deviated from but when the track of pulaaku has been deviated from, what remains about which we can consult each other? This is what I am asking you. Why should we consult each other when the track of pulaaku has been deviated from and turned over?

Wunndi thus established the concept of pulaaku—the social, moral, and behavioral code for Fulbe and particularly Wodaabe community life—as the frame of reference to evaluate the Jijjiiru attacks against the Muuse. According to Wunndi, the Jijjiiru had given up these elementary values of communal life and had left the “track” of pulaaku.

Wunndi conceptualized pulaaku as a kind of political philosophy for Wodaabe communal life in order to confront the Jijjiiru with an apparent paradox. He presented pulaaku as the virtue of reserve (*semtudum*) of every Bodaado that allowed the living together of many free and independent herders (i.e., people minimally harassed by state authorities, neighbors, and each other). But as the track of pulaaku had been abandoned, the basis for negotiation and agreement between the clans was broken. In other words, the clan’s permanent quarrel had destroyed the ground upon which they could continue arguing. What remained other than to stop talking with each other and have the clans fission? As will become clear later, a definite fission would have entailed that others would judge disputes between the clans, resulting in the loss of Wodaabe political independence.

It is noteworthy how Wunndi rhetorically tied his fellows to his argument by demanding them to ask what he would say. Here is one example:

Wunndi: The track of pulaaku has been deviated from. Ask me for that deviation!

Demmbo: We ask you.

When Wunndi introduced his interpretative framework of abandoned pulaaku, he chose one of the two images that are frequently used to evoke the concept. The first of these is the image of the track of cattle (*laawol pulaaku*); the second is the “rope” (*boggol pulaaku*, *daangol pulaaku*; *daangol* is the rope by which calves are tethered). Lakoff and Johnson (1980) have called images that seize and direct the ways a subject is thought about “metaphors we live by.” Wunndi opted for the image of the track of cattle in order to evoke three ideas. First, the path leading to a well is figuratively the temporal and social path through which values travel from generation to generation. These values comprise cattle and the rules for how humans should live with cattle and with each other. Second, the track of cattle offers the logical positions of on-track and off-track. Third, a track implies the idea of a fork, with the Muuse going one way and the Jijjiiru the other.

Thus, Wunndi chose an image of pulaaku that lent itself to a threat of fission. By his questions and answers, the elders present had been drawn into

the framework of *pulaaku* whether they wanted to or not. But the next speaker, Demmbo from the Siiganko'en, entered into competition for interpretational power and modified Wunndi's framework in a small but decisive way. He raised the theme of *pulaaku* but switched to the image of the rope by saying "the rope of *pulaaku* has become thin." This shift of images from track to rope allowed Demmbo to use Wunndi's *pulaaku* paradigm, but in a completely different way. He said that even when this tie between the clans had become thin (*ngol famdi*) and was about to unravel (*ngol yidi fiirtugo*), the Wodaabe had to make all efforts to prevent this and to transmit it to their descendants; it must not undo. Wunndi threw in the remark that the rope was already cut (*ngol tay*), but Demmbo retorted that they would tie it together again (*en dooroto ngol*); that was their duty.

In that skirmish, both speakers, Wunndi and Demmbo, struggled to fit the metaphoric language associated with the notion of *pulaaku* to their particular political bent. Wunndi chose the image of the track of cattle to rhetorically prepare the threat of separating the clans. Demmbo did not let Wunndi have his way, and interrupted him to bind him to his own game, the appeal to *pulaaku*. But Wunndi demanded adherence to *pulaaku* as a prerequisite for co-operation between the clans, while Demmbo emphasized the need to maintain *pulaaku*. The Wodaabe had been given the rope of *pulaaku* by their ancestors and were thereby obliged to pass it to their children. Demmbo, thus, gave the clan meeting the room for maneuvers completely different from Wunndi's. For Demmbo, the clans were obliged to live together, whether they wished to or not, in order to keep with *pulaaku*. When Wunndi tried to fit Demmbo's image of the thin rope to his goals by saying it was cut, Demmbo placed his decisive counterattack: the duty of the assembled Wodaabe was to retie the rope of *pulaaku*. This image subsequently gained wide acceptance and was applied even in semantically questionable statements such as this one of Laamiido Bello:

Now we have tied our brotherhood of milk [i.e., relations between clans] together again, there is no more dispute to talk about, I ask the community of clans for the sake of *pulaaku* and *fulfulde* to refrain from throwing up old stories. Even when it tears up, the [rope] of *pulaaku*, I assemble that so that we tie it together again.

#### LINEAGE, LAW, OR RETALIATION

Some speakers at the meeting made the notion of *pulaaku* virtually into a constructivist theory of community building in order to plead for the absolute necessity of keeping the clans together. According to this theory, the Fulbe (i.e., here Wodaabe) clan community, *Pulaaku* (note the capitalization, which indicates the term's meaning of "community of Fulbe/Wodaabe") emerges

when humans master conflicts by sticking to the personal virtue of pulaaku, which is self-control, reserve, and the ability to endure duress instead of seeking confrontation. Laamiidō Bello illustrated this elementary Wodaabe philosophy by relating an incident between a Jijjiiru boy and a Muuse man:

Community of Fulbe [Pulaaku], wherever you hear the word of pulaaku, does that mean that one seizes a person in order to give him a dressing-down? When Bammoowo [from the Muuse] slapped your son's face, Ardo Kaado [from the Jijjiiru], [and] you kept him away from retaliating the blow, did not Bammoowo feel ashamed? Didn't he do as one does when feeling ashamed? You see, this is pulaaku, only this. When you hear "they mock at us, they do this or that against us, let's take them to court," then there is not a grain of pulaaku in that, or am I not telling the truth? When the bad talk makes enemies of you, then give it up. This is pulaaku. You understand?

Laamiidō Bello puts shameful reserve as a behavioral expression of pulaaku and as an alternative to violent retaliation or legal action. To forego retaliation is by itself a form of punishment. By demonstrating the virtue of reserve to the culprit and not retaliating for his assault, the person is severely embarrassed and must feel suspended from the Pulaaku community. After all, it was he who lost his reserve and did not come up to pulaaku lofty moral standards.

Even more importantly, Laamiidō Bello cited pulaaku and the capacity for reserve as an alternative political order for a lineage-based pastoral society such as the Wodaabe. This order overcomes endless retaliation (and a system of feud known from many pastoral societies), but preserves freedom and self-control of the lineage by excluding state authorities from its affairs. Using state authorities would constitute the "way of law" (*dooka*) as an alternative to the cattle track of pulaaku. The separation of the clans, as many elders argued, would install the way of law as their costly future mode of interaction.

The pulaaku model of community life allows the Wodaabe to settle many of their disputes by mutual agreement, which maintains political sovereignty and saves their property from being eroded through police action. With the *dooka* model, the Wodaabe give the state the power to control their inter-clan relations. This removes their sovereignty to act as they like and puts pressure on their property (i.e., cattle), since state authorities adjudicate to a great extent by imposing fines.

During the meeting, Wunndi and Bañol cited a few cases that depicted the Jijjiiru as already using state authorities in their disputes with the Muuse and thus no longer acting according to the pulaaku model. To the Muuse this was a nuisance since the Jijjiiru had taken many of their wives lately and thus gained by the pulaaku model on which wife stealing is based. Presented below is one of the cases of Jijjiiru use of state authority discussed during the meeting.

## JIIJIIRU INVADING A MUUSE CAMP

Bañol from the Muuse reported in obvious outrage that a group of Jijjiiru men had been assisted by police forces to enter a Muuse camp and seize a girl that they claimed to be theirs. The background to this was the following story.

Originally a certain Gaagare from the Muuse had taken a wife from the Jijjiiru; this wife brought her daughter sired by her former Jijjiiru husband. When this girl had grown to marriageable age, the Jijjiiru feared that instead of returning for the marriage with her Jijjiiru cousin that had been arranged when she was a baby, she could be "stolen" by a Muuse youngster, as she was living among the Muuse. Kayaale, who was trying to establish himself as a Laamiidō by use of a title bought from state authorities in Nigeria, took the opportunity to act as a champion of Jijjiiru interests. In the company of four Jijjiiru men (who had once stolen wives from the Muuse and therefore were unacceptable mediators to them), Kayaale went to the camp of Gaagare to take the girl away. When rejected, he returned "by car" (meaning with policemen) to seize the girl, who was crying in desperation.

In the course of his speech, Bañol declared that he sympathized with the Jijjiiru and that he was prepared to return the girl. But the method of her retrieval was in his view a rude breach of Wodaabe manners. By involving police (state authority, and at the same time strangers) in inter-clan affairs, Kayaale had violated Wodaabe family and the authority of Wodaabe political institutions. According to Bañol, elders from both clans should have settled the dispute.

Having established these reproaches, Bañol listed the consequences to be drawn from this and other incidents. He said the Jijjiiru lacked due respect for the Muuse and considered themselves superior to all others. Therefore, Bañol stated, one should declare dissolution of marriage by theft between Jijjiiru and Suudu Sukaayel. Its meaning, according to Bañol, was that it established good relations between uncles and nephews from different clans so that they could visit each other and have a good time. But when this kind of marriage brought quarrels between them, it should be forbidden. In the future, the Wodaabe would then have to handle marriages as the other (more Islamic) Fulbe groups do; that is, any act of wife stealing between the two clans would entail legal action and, consequently, the imposition of a fine (paid with cattle wealth) against the wife-taker. One would therefore have to wait for a woman from the other clan to be repudiated by her former husband before marrying her. As a consequence, the Wodaabe would eventually adopt the social and moral manners of the neighboring Fulani groups and become equal to them. Demmbo and other elders from both clans immediately rejected Bañol's proposal as unacceptable.

Thus, Bañol implicitly contrasted the agreement between clans that allowed for marriage by theft with state law, and appreciated the emergence of social relations from that former practice. Annuling the consensus between the clans that marriage by theft is allowed meant that the Wodaabe would hand over political control to state authorities and thus lose handling their family and clan life in a self-determined way according to the values of pulaaku. State authorities would then take charge. Bañol argued that since the Jijjiiru had already made use of state authorities in inter-clan affairs, they practically had established that new order for the Wodaabe. Therefore, the Muuse and, by implication, the entire clan of the Suudu Sukayel were now obliged to follow that logic whether they wished to or not.

#### PULAAKU AS SANCTION

Notwithstanding the grudge many Suudu Sukayel held against the Jijjiiru, the majority, including Laamiido Bello, wanted to retain clan community and the practice of wife stealing. However, this meant that their second intention, to have the Jijjiiru punished, might not be realized. The difficulty for the Suudu Sukayel and Laamiido Bello to exercise the power of punishing the Jijjiiru lay in three closely related circumstances: first, the two-party political structure of a segmentary lineage society; second, the competitive sphere of traditional rule; and third, the fact that the notion of pulaaku can be drawn to a politics of inclusion as well as exclusion.

To explicate these points requires a summary of the analysis presented above. In their contributions, speakers expressed a clear understanding of how certain notions and practices serve as institutions to regulate and thus enable community life. Marriage by theft is, of course, a threat to each married man, just as it is a source of gain for each capable seducer of women. However, the effect of this practice is that uterine connections between clans are made. It is through these connections that the Wodaabe are socially integrated at the highest level of lineage life, which is the community of clans. It is through this community that the social universe is enlarged for each single Bodaado, thus providing opportunities for him to seek prosperity. By contrast, giving up marriage by theft, which is based on mutual agreement between clans to exclude state authorities from marriage disputes, would open Wodaabe family life to these third parties. State intervention in marital conflicts would then entail losses of property with cattle being taken by judges as fines.

The mutual agreement to exclude third parties is by itself founded on the notion of pulaaku and its behavioral corollaries (reserve, in particular). By analytically following the verbal negotiation process, pulaaku no longer appears as the name for a culture-typical habitus of people who happen to be

socialized as Fulani. It rather is a concept that people rhetorically work with to produce and justify political claims against others. Here, *pulaaku* had been put as the logical alternative to third-party (i.e., state) rule: *pulaaku* was presented as a collection of individual virtues that produce the behavior from which Pulaaku, the community of Wodaabe, can emerge. The speakers of the meeting insisted that the institutions of social intercourse derived from the notion of *pulaaku* were the only means to prosperity (*risku*) the Wodaabe had at their disposal. Abandoning *pulaaku*-based inter-clan relations would mean loss to all.

However, the Muuse elders Wunndi and Bañol equally used the notion of *pulaaku* to argue for a separation of the clans. This contrasting use of the *pulaaku* concept is explained by the fact that it can serve as a symbolic tool for the creation of unity through exclusion. The notion of *pulaaku* is drawn into a dialectic where the included is created by the excluded and vice versa; but this by no means determines who is included or excluded.

Therefore, exploiting the notion of *pulaaku* for political ends is a tightrope act. On the one hand, it can be used as the institutional umbrella that makes cohabitation in a community of otherwise independent herders possible (in contrast to constant retaliation or state intervention). On the other hand, it allows for a differentiation between those who follow the *pulaaku* way and those who either lack it (the ethnic others) or have betrayed it. The “traitors,” however, can be laid down flexibly just as it appears politically opportune. During the meeting, those pleading for the unity of the Wodaabe clans (the Suudu Sukayel and Jijjiiru) opposed themselves discursively to the Fulbe Ndoowi'en as ethnic others; those who were for separation called the Jijjiiru deviationists. Each of the opposed sides was charged with having betrayed and lost the *pulaaku*.

This dialectic is complicated by a further one. The *pulaaku* notion is used to unite a group by praising the common values of *pulaaku* as the decisive group trait and pointing, in moral indignation, to excluded groups that purportedly do not stick to these values (whether ethnic others or a neighboring family). This is complemented by the latent threat against each member to be himself (at least temporarily) excluded from the group when declared at fault with its core values. Ostracism is the sanctioning force the Wodaabe use when state authorities are considered inadequate or harmful. The collectivity unites against the culprit by excluding him from social intercourse, particularly by not speaking to him. The Wodaabe say they “put the daangol *pulaaku* in place;” the culprit thus experiences the *pulaaku* values he or she betrayed materialize as the Pulaaku community shuns him or her. After a period of painful banishment, the person is offered the chance to come back into the group by symbolically submitting to the values of *pulaaku* by bowing

down before the group's elders and uttering the words *mi tuubi* (I ask forgiveness) and by ceremonially feeding the community of Pulaaku with millet and milk, thus bringing the members together with food.

This sanctioning device does not work when the punishing and punished groups are numerically equal and politically and economically independent of each other, as in the case of the two clans depicted here. The Suudu Sukayel were deprived of the sanctioning device that the pulaaku model allowed, as sanctioning meant separating, but separating was against their political ambitions. The elders of the Suudu Sukayel therefore were restricted to their weakest option and presented it as a pulaaku-inspired virtue: evoking the threat of separation but finally offering the Jijjiiru remission combined with a renewed threat to act harsher in cases of repeated failure.

#### THE WIDER POLITICAL PREDICAMENT

There is still the question of why the pulaaku notion gained predominance in the clan negotiations and why it was finally pushed into an interpretational perspective that served conciliation. I assume the concern for unity of Wodaabe clans was animated by a concern for group strength, which had gained importance in a situation of shrinking pastoral space and political decentralization in Niger. With the establishment of rural communities in the Diffa region in 2003, Wodaabe herders feared being denied access to pasture and wells. They talked about neighboring nomads gaining political force based on ethnic unity, more authoritarian rule by their chiefs' families, literacy, and access to state authorities. According to them, ethnic-based strength would translate into unanimous votes for candidates to the newly created local councils and the mayor and his staff, and that such candidates granted favors along ethnic lines. Most Wodaabe elders saw that they were lacking the political capacity to unite for a common candidate's success and would be pushed aside by other pastoral groups, particularly the Fulbe Ndoowi'en. I believe that the meeting's agreement to preserve the inter-clan relations under the Pulaaku umbrella was inspired by the larger political objective to ethnically integrate and thus strengthen the Wodaabe so that they could better compete with other ethnic groups of the region, particularly their neighbors, the Fulbe Ndoowi'en.<sup>8</sup>

In addition, the chiefs of the nomad administrative groupements, such as Laamiido Bello, have limited means of keeping subjects under their command. Their power over an administré ends as soon as it chooses to follow another chef de groupement. This had been the case with a number of Jijjiiru families who had defected to a neighboring chef de groupement. Thus, there was not only a paralyzing balance of forces in the lineage sphere of Wodaabe

society (Suudu Sukayel versus Jijjiiru), but also in the region's sphere of so-called traditional rule. Laamiido Bello could not act on the Jijjiiru in his capacity as a traditional ruler and judge because the Jijjiiru were under the rule of another chef de groupement or would react by defecting, thereby further cutting Laamiido Bello's power base. That he played the pulaaku card hints at Laamiido Bello's weakness vis-a-vis the Jijjiiru. Referring to the pulaaku values allowed him to get away from the field of traditional rule where he could not put the Jijjiiru under pressure. Politically using the notion of pulaaku seems to be a sophisticated means of enacting a form of clearly limited power; namely, building team strength against an opposing team in order to absorb it or find a balance with it (Barth 1959).

Of great importance to the current situation of Sahalian nomads is the fact that this political logic does not change in the face of newly imposed political institutions such as democratically elected local councils. It rather turns the democracy element of modern state rule into the democracy element of clan societies, which has nothing to do with the former but is the balancing of factional power up to the level of ethnic groups (Lewis 1961). Thus, the installation of local councils in nomadic areas does not trigger the formation of citizens but an intensified effort of leaders to build family, lineage, and ethnic loyalty to secure votes.

From a leader's point of view, such a balance of forces or inclusion by exclusion approach is risky because it manifests opposition as soon as the opportunity arises. The devaluation of the colonial heritage of state-based traditional rule that comes along with decentralization and that forms part of the participatory project philosophy of development is exactly such an opportunity. It encourages the politically ambitious such as Kayaale to collect followers and become a gatekeeper and broker (cf. Bierschenk, et al. 2000) between these and the next development organization or NGO to bring project resources.

Thus, the Wodaabe found themselves in a delicate situation. In the main, they wished to stay united without institutional innovation under the umbrella of Pulaaku, the community of clans, in order to meet the challenge of ethnic competition for pastoral resources that followed from decentralization. But decentralization also brought stakes around which clan and lineage segments would form disloyal groups in order to gain profitable domains previously left to the chef de groupement as the only authorized mediator between the state and the nomadic groups on its territory. The social institution of pulaaku, although used as a means of social integration and sanctioning misbehavior, was at the same time the very source of freedom that enables groups to fission.



## CONCLUSION

Studying notions of morality, identity, and proper social conduct in action means studying them in concrete and ethnographically well-documented situations of social interaction where their use by speakers constitutes the social situation and its aftermath. Thus, *pulaaku* here is not analyzed as an emic description of some already existing reality that anthropologists can adopt in their speaking about this supposed reality. It is rather understood as a notion that the Wodaabe employ in order to create social reality.

Close analysis of a dispute between two Wodaabe clans in southeastern Niger reveals that the political use of the *pulaaku* notion is by no means connected to a political process of ethnic demarcation or identity formation, as much of the literature on the subject could easily infer (e.g., Riesman 1977:116; Burnham 1996:53). Rather, it is connected to a political process where Wodaabe clan elders discuss how social order within the clan might be maintained and its political autonomy secured in a world where internal dispute can easily expose two opponents to a third player (i.e., the state).

In the course of the debate, the speakers identify three institutional frameworks that they apply in dealing with internal disputes. The first is like Hobbes's "condition of war," where each individual is free to retaliate with force when attacked. The second is based on recourse to state authority, but not like Hobbes's Leviathan where the superior power of a ruler brings order and peace at the cost of individual autonomy. Rather, the speakers suggest that in their political environment of allegedly corrupt and selfish state authorities there can be no neat distinction between the condition of war and of state rule, as in Hobbes's political theory. Individuals fight each other by denouncing each other to state authorities, who in turn operate by imposing fines that are paid by giving or selling cattle from the family herd. Thus, the Wodaabe regard state authorities not as guarantors of peace and order but as a weapon in a socially and economically destructive condition of war where corrupt policemen or judges are used to best one's opponent. In fact, this costly strategy is found in a number of Fulani societies (e.g., Turner 2006 for Fulani in Mali and Moritz 2006 for "the politics of permanent conflict" between Fulani and other ethnic groups in northern Cameroon).

In the course of their assembly, the Wodaabe elders recognized that their clans were just about to enter a condition of war executed through state authorities that would bring severe losses to their families and disrupt the social order of clan life. They therefore tried to restore through discussion what they considered a third framework for dealing with internal disputes. It consists of an omnipresent potential of community disapproval, indignation, moral attack (much of which is executed through gossip), and ostracism

guided by the notion of *pulaaku* as an effective means of social control and as an alternative to the reciprocal aggression of two opposing parties. Instead of taking action, each individual *Bodaado* should step back from his opponent (as in the example of *Bammoowo's* slap), to be patient (*wada munyal*), and to succumb to the superior power which resides in the collective action of the *Pulaaku* community against a culprit. Unlike Hobbes's solution to overcome the condition of war, the community is here not unified by a ruler or an assembly of men but by each community's commitment to the idea of that very community.

This commitment is not simply a kind of internalized attitude or habitus which could be called *pulaaku*. The cases of fighting or denouncement mentioned during the debate and on other occasions speak to the contrary. This commitment must be continually reinvigorated by talk that makes use of and gives value and content to *pulaaku* as an implied third party (cf. Barkun 1968:106) and as the organizing principle of ordered community life.

## NOTES

1. Dupire 1981; Stenning 1959:55–60; Eguchi and Victor 1993; VerEecke 1999; for a review of the literature, see Breedveld and de Bruijn 1996.
2. Marguerite Dupire translated *pulaaku* as “la manière de se comporter en Peul” (Dupire 1981:169). The virtues seen as prerequisite to behaving as a Fulani are self-control (*munyal*), foresight (*hakkilo*), bravery (*cuusal*), and reserve (*semente*). See also Stenning 1959:55.
3. This corresponds to Housley's and Fitzgerald's observation that “whilst the notion of norms is a central feature of modern sociological theorizing, the everyday practice or invocation of norms as an everyday part of social life, or ‘norms-in-action,’ are less so” (Housley and Fitzgerald 2009:346).
4. Glenn and Susskind (2010) have recently called for such an approach in the study of negotiation.
5. Giving context information means abstracting from the social processes that constitute what is being informed to an extremely high degree. While I argue for a detailed ethnographic account of these processes as a basis of anthropological analysis, I have to draw interpretation from a very large set of contextual information. For a processual analysis of parts of this ethnographic context, see Schareika 2010.
6. For an analysis of lineage group building as practice, see Schareika 2010; a comprehensive account of *Wodaabe* marriage and filiation is found in Dupire 1996, 1970.
7. When sticking closely to the ideal model of segmentary opposition, one might consider this relation asymmetrical, but these were the terms the protagonists used when speaking of the conflict.
8. VerEecke (1993:145–46) notes the same calculus with a Nigerian Fulani chief who deplored the fact that no Fulani was elected as a Local Government Chairman and appealed to ethnic unity as a remedy against such results.

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