

Notes and Documents

Sergio Baldi

Università degli Studi di Napoli "L'Orientale"

Hommage au Professeur Andreae Zaborski* (Kraków) Fulfulde proverbs

The Fulani are one of the largest migratory people in the Savannah belt of West, Central and even East Africa. Their area of extension reaches from the Senegambia region via Mali, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, Chad and the Republic of Sudan up to the Red Sea. They are not a unique entity in these regions, but rather an agglomeration of communities and dialects. Recent data puts their number at around 15 million. Their basic economic activity is cattle breeding and the keeping of livestock such as goats and sheep. However not all Fulani follow a nomadic way life (*Fulani jeji*). There is the so called town Fulani (*Fulani gida*), who are mainly traders, traditional judges and imams. As learned men they had a great influence on empires like Mali and Songhay as well as the emirates of Northern Nigeria and Cameroon. This was especially so under the caliphate of Usman dan Fodio in Sokoto, where their influence was not only local, but extended up to the Middle Belt of Nigeria. The influence was extremely important, especially in the spread of Islam. Despite their contacts with so many cultures during their historical migrations, they have preserved a unique Fulani feature, known as *Pulaku*. It is moral guide or code of conduct on how a real Fulani has to behave. The values within this concept range from the definition of shame, to how one has to behave as an upright human being including how one has to treat his cattle.

* I would like to thank Professor Tomasz Polanski for his invitation to this volume dedicated to the memory of Andreae Zaborski. I am very much indebted to my friend and colleague, Rudolf Leger, who was so kind make available his Fulfulde material, which was collected in the framework of the "Sonderforschungsbereich 268 'Westafrikanische Savanne'" and translated with his collaborator Malam Bappayo Bappah Yerima Djibri from Gombe, Nigeria.

Their language is classified as Atlantic within the Niger-Congo phylum. Related to their language, called Fulfulde or Poular (in West Africa), are Wolof and Serer. Typologically Fulfulde is a class language of suffix type, which has according to the various dialects 25 to 35 noun classes. It also has an important consonant permutation, meaning that certain consonants have to undergo a change according to their articulatory position. This says that, the consonants f, s, h, v/w, r and y may change at the beginning of a word into their counterparts' p, c, k, g/b, d and g. The language also possesses a suffix conjugation and a special feature, which is the *genera verbi*. This says that Fulfulde has an active, middle and passive voice. The main syntactical order is SVO, i.e. subject, verb and object.

In talking about proverbs, it can be stated that Africa is rich in oral tradition which contains most of its proverbs. This also holds for the Fulani people. One of the most widely and commonly used form of oral art is proverbs, which may be considered a foundation of social and cultural wisdom. Therefore proverbs which are transmitted from generation to generation can be considered a part of everyday speech. One of the basic domains of Fulfulde proverbs is the animal kingdom. In the following, I have chosen a few proverbs which underline the particular use of domestic as well as wild animals as subjects. This choice was not done purposely to focus on one feature, but rather to demonstrate the richness of their cultural world view, especially their highly developed language.

The first proverb, which can easily be understood, is the following:

Nde nyiiwa yabti nde ngeelo "The feet of elephant tread on that of camel".

The explanation is that, a big animal like an elephant, on walking over the foot prints of a smaller animal, like a camel, will cancel them. In a sophisticated way it can be stated that "More important things overshadow lesser things".

The next proverb: *Biki nyaale sey geroode daneetje* can be translated as "The feast of a white heron must be with white chickens". The interpretation of the proverb is that a heron is a bird which cannot be compared to a chicken. This proverb is ironical in comparing the hen to the heron. It says that a white hen might resemble a heron, but they belong to different worlds. The deep meaning and sense of it says that "Everybody has to go according to his status".

As regards the next proverb, we are confronted with a different situation. The proverb is: *Kuti yarataa ndiyam mo sawru*. The translation says that "A dog does not drink the water of one who holds a stick". It can be interpreted as, "Do not attempt what is beyond your capacity", or that the ill-behaved will not fool about where they are not welcome.

One of the most admired animals among the Fulani is *lelwa*, meaning gazelle. If a young Fulani man wants to make a compliment to a young lady he may say *A mari yitere lelwa* "You have the eyes of a gazelle". This expression shows how the hold that animal in high esteem. It is also expressed in the following proverb: *Lelwa diwataa biyumvlada*. The translation is "A gazelle

cannot jump and leave its young one to crawl". The deeper sense, however, means that one has to behave as one is taught. In short we can translate it in our way as: Like mother like child.

A similar proverb also pointing to the relation of what is not possible is *Jiga duule eso mbabba*. The translation says "Vulture of sky is the in-law of a donkey". The meaning is that two things which oppose each other cannot be put together. It was translated by the informant as: "Oil and water cannot mix" and he added "A hopeless and useless person can never stay together".

The next proverb shown here is: *Manti ba mbabba wii nga kuti bingaawa*, which means: "the roar like a donkey that asked a dog for a dance". The meaning of it is that the dog cannot dance to the music of the donkey, since it does not understand the specific music of a donkey. Finally it was explained as "Don't attempt the impossible".

A further proverb referring to a strange behaviour is: *Mo semtataa dono kuti*, which means "An immodest person inherits the dog". The deeper sense of it is: "An immodest person behaves the way he wants". It should be added that the image of a dog in the Fulani culture is that of an inferior animal. Its interpretation could be that, one who lacks humility, or an arrogant person will receive no reward. Therefore ending up with something of little value like the dog.

Mawndu sukkoto umsa is another proverb translated as "A lion shuts its anus before it roars". This means "One must seek the support of others in any serious work". It should be added, that the word for lion is not supposed to be mentioned directly, since it is a taboo, but rather euphemized. Here *mawndu* literarily means "the big one".

The following proverb deals with *puccu*, i.e. horse. It reads as follows: *Puccu go'o e fellere doggudu ngu mari*. The translation is that "Every horse has a galloping ground". The meaning is that everyone, be they small or big, be they useful or useless have "A niche in the world". It also says that "One who races alone wins the race".

A very common proverb – not only among the Fulani, but also found all over Africa – is *To a don nder ndiyam taa hudu gilangeeru*, meaning "You should not abuse a crocodile while in the water". It is clearly understood that in a difficult situation one should not worsen it. A further sense by our informant was given as "Don't rejoice till you are out of the woods".

The following proverb too, not restricted to the Fulani society alone is: *Gerogal yaabata biyumngam ngal yidaa ngel*. It says in its translation that "The hen does not tread on its chicks out of hatred". This means "A mother scolds her child out of love".

The last one cited here may be *Waandu e mari daande habba e keeshi*. The meaning of this proverb is "The monkey has a neck but it is tied at the waist". This also means that, to be on the safe side one should not tie a monkey at the neck, but rather around its waist, so that it cannot escape. The deeper

sense however is that one should pay respect and not take things on a light shoulder. The explanation of the informant was given as “For respect one uses a pseudonym”.

Conclusion: Considering the proverbs cited above, with their translation and additional explanation, we may have demonstrated a bit of the richness, not only of the Fulani language, but also of their culture. The proverbs dealing with animals may give the reader a bit of an insight on how they are considered in this culture. It should be stated that some of the proverbs may not be solely limited to the culture of the Fulani, but can be found elsewhere in Africa. These proverbs are further proof of the richness of the oral arts in the Africa.

References

- Baldi, Sergio and Rudolf Leger. 2015. “Gender in Fulfulde Proverbs”, paper presented at International Linguistic World Congress at Kyoto.
- Whitting, Charles E.J. 1940. *Hausa and Fulani proverbs*. Lagos: Government Printer, 192 p. [Reprint 1967. Farnborough: Gregg International].