

THE CONCEPT OF *PULAAKU* MIRRORED IN FULFULDE PROVERBS OF THE GOMBE DIALECT

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Introduction

The paper gives a brief history of the Fulɓe people who are found all over West and Central Africa. Since no study of a people is complete without mentioning their language, the paper also gives a very brief account of Fulfulde, the language of the Fulɓe people.

However, the central focus of the paper is the concept of *pulaaku*, that unique attribute of the Fulɓe that serves as an unwritten code of conduct for all 'true' Fulɓe. *Pulaaku* is Fulɓe's guiding principle in their dealings with their fellow Fulɓe as well as with all other people.

Rather than talk about *pulaaku* in isolation, however, the paper tries to mirror it through Fulfulde proverbs. Coded or loaded messages called wise-sayings or proverbs are widely used in all languages. Fulfulde is particularly rich in this, which is why the paper explores this reservoir of knowledge in trying to portray the rich culture of the Fulɓe people. The corpus of proverbs from which the selected proverbs come, was compiled in and around Gombe with the help of Mallam Bappayo Bappa Yerima Djibril.

Since the Fulɓe are easily the most dispersed people in Africa, no single study can do real justice to all of them. This is why this study narrows its scope to cover just the Fulɓe of Gombe area of the northeastern of Nigeria.

The Fulɓe: A brief history

The area covered by the Benue-Gongola-Chad Basin has been rightly described as "a zone of ethnic and linguistic compression", owing to the convergence of various peoples into the area from times immemorial (JUNGRAITHMAYR & LEGER, 1993:165). A relatively recent migration into this region, however, took place in the eighteenth and the beginning of the last century (HOGBEN & KIRK-GREENE 1966:429f.). This was the period of Fulɓe incursion into the heart of the Hausaland and Borno. They subsequently spread to as far as Gombe and Yola and even further into the Cameroon (TEMPLE 1919/1965:398). This peaceful incursion was interrupted in 1804 when, under the leadership of Usman Āan Fodiyo, the Fulɓe of Sokoto revolted against the Chief of Gobir. A 'Jihad' was then declared by the Fulɓe

and their Muslim supporters, which succeeded in overthrowing the traditional overlords throughout the Hausaland and beyond. The 'Jihad' had very far-reaching consequences, which not only affected religious movements, but also political, economic and intellectual factors were involved. It also had a great impact on the linguistic situation and ethnic structures of the autochthonous people living there. The Fulçe themselves were perhaps the most affected. Whilst the 'Cattle Fulçe' had remained much as they were, the 'Town Fulçe' found themselves in positions of power and responsibility. Some of them became Emirs, District Chiefs, Village Heads and wealthy private individuals.

The importance of language to the culture of a people has compelled us to include the Fulfulde language in our study. This is in addition to paying a closer attention to their complex ways of life - their ethics, beliefs and cultural behaviour. It is believed that a ruling class is always highly regarded within a multiethnic and multicultural society. Consequently, the ethnic group, to which the ruling class belongs, is often imitated or even copied by the other groups out of respect and admiration.

The Fulçe and their language

The Fulçe, whose population can roughly be estimated at 10 to 15 million speakers (cf. GOTTSCHLIGG 1992:1) are found scattered over the whole of West and Central Africa up to the shores of the Red Sea. The original homeland of the Fulçe is believed to have been the middle Senegal River valley and the adjacent Futa Toro Savannah (ARMSTRONG 1978:9; MURDOCK 1959:413-414). From there in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries the Fulçe began their great migration towards the south and east, whereby today the fringes of their Diaspora lie in southern Mauritania, in the west to as far east as the Sudan (ARNOTT 1970:1). The classification of their language, Fulfulde, was a controversial subject. Many contradictory theories have been propounded, three of which can be summarised as follows (ABU-MANGA 1986:3).

- Fulfulde is a (pre-) Hamitic or Semito-Hamitic language, whose nominal class system developed under strong influences of (West-)African languages (MEINHOF 1911:18f., 1912:2, 14f.; MUKAROVSKY 1980:125f.).
- Fulfulde is a (Hamito-)Semitic language, which shares genetic origins with Arabic and Hebrew (ENGESTRÖM 1954:21).
- Fulfulde is a West African language, belonging to the West Atlantic group of the Niger-Kordofanian language family (GREENBERG 1963:28). This is the most recognised and popular classification.

An even more complex question than that of its classification concerns the different dialects of Fulfulde, whose distinctive features have only been partially described (cf. LEGER 1998:323f.) Based on ARNOTT (1970:3) and GOTTSCHLIGG (1992:50), six main dialect areas can be distinguished:

1. Futa Tooro (Senegal), 2. Futa Jaloo (Guinea), 3. Maasina (Mali), 4. Sokoto and Western Niger, 5. 'Central' (northern Nigeria and eastern Niger) and 6. Adamaawa. Nevertheless ARNOTT (cf. 1970) admits that dialectal borders overlap and agrees that: „The demarcation of dialects is inevitably an arbitrary process, especially in view of the mobility of the nomadic Fulani“. In addition, we have to take into account the mutual borrowing between Fulfulde and its neighbouring languages, as well as the multilingualism of the majority of Fulçe. This also plays an important role when studying Fulfulde dialects.

The concept of *pulaaku*

„*Pulaaku* is an abstract noun formed from the root 'ful-' from which are other terms (like): Pullo, Fulçe (a Fulani, Fulanis), Fulfulde (the language, Fula), and pulaade (to act like a Fulani) are also derived.“ (RIESMAN 1977:127). *pulaaku* therefore means „the qualities appropriate to a Fulani“ (cf. RIESMAN 1977:127). Abu Manga (not published) describes *pulaaku* with all its ideals as „the cornerstone of the Fulani culture“ and cites a proverb in which dignity, one of the highest aspects of *pulaaku*, is illustrated: NeÑÑaaku Ñum nebbam to rufi çoftataako“ ('Dignity is like oil, once split it cannot be redeemed').

However, by far the most comprehensive definition of *pulaaku* is given in VEREECKE (1986:98) „*Pulaaku* specifies the actual rules or guidelines for appropriate behaviour and presentation of self, as well as a series of virtues and personal attributes, which may be viewed as rewards for behaving like a Pullo.“ In other words, *pulaaku* 'is a Fulbe-exclusive marker.'

Although the concept of *pulaaku* is a universal one, common to all Fulçe wherever they may be, the extent of its use by the Fulçe varies from one dialectal area to another or, indeed, from one person to another, depending on his exposure, or lack of it, to non-Fulçe values and influences.

As a matter of fact, some aspects of *pulaaku* have proved to be inimical to social interaction. For example, a Pullo would rather remain hungry than partake freely in food and drinks at a party. More serious still is when the fear of losing one's *pulaaku* stops a Pullo from sending his children to school to acquire Western education. This has tended to make the Fulçe very conservative in their general worldview.

There are many different aspects of *pulaaku*. If a person displays any of them he will be regarded as a Pullo or be likened to one. VEREECKE (1986: 98), for instance, reports that up to 15 components of *pulaaku* were identified in a study they undertook. Naturally, these components vary considerably in their occurrence and applicability. This is to say that it is rare, if not impossible, for any one individual Pullo to display all of them.

However, for the purpose of this paper, only five of the most prominent components of *pulaaku* will be discussed. Each of them will be illustrated by two or more appropriate Fulfulde proverbs. This is followed by a brief explanation of each of the proverbs.

Some of the Fulfulde proverbs that mirror *pulaaku*

Collins English Dictionary defines a proverb as „a short memorable, and often highly condensed saying, embodying, especially with bold imagery, some commonplace facts of experience’. Every language has its own proverbs that are peculiar to it, and Fulfulde is no exception. For the purpose of this study, a careful selection of those Fulfulde proverbs that best exemplify the concept of *pulaaku* has been made.

Semteende

This is by far the most important component of *pulaaku*. It is also the most easily noticed; but not so easy to define. Its literal meaning is ‘shamefulness’. However, such terms as ‘being reserved’ or ‘shy’ will be less pejorative. It is expected of a true Pullo to display this characteristic. Among the proverbs that best depict *semteende* are the following:

a. *Torii heçii maa noye hakko toroo heçaayi?*

(To be granted one’s request is shameful enough, let alone when the request is turned down.)

To the Pullo, it is very degrading to beg or request for something from someone. It is much more honourable for him to suppress such an urge no matter how pressing it might be. This is one of the attributes that may be harmful to the Pullo since it makes him keep to himself in a socially undesirable isolation. The most positive aspect of the concept of ‘*semteendé*’ is that it teaches humility and self-denial. A Pullo who displays it will never be boastful and selfish.

b. *To honnduko nyaamii gite boo semta.*

(If the mouth has eaten, then the mouth must feel ashamed (expresses only gratitude).)

This proverb advises people who receive favours from someone that they should show deference as a sign of gratitude. It is absolutely necessary for one to openly display his pleasure and gratitude in return for favours and kindness received.

c. *Koo moye dura ãi yeeso muuãum.*

(Let everyone take care of what is in front of him.)

This proverb is saying that one should mind one's business and not to poke one's nose into other people's business. Most people do not take it kindly when they are given unsolicited advice. This is why a Pullo, in order to avoid being told off, tries to mind his own business.

Munyal

This can be interpreted to mean patience, tolerance or perseverance. It is expected of a Pullo to display this quality. Some of the proverbs that best depict Munyal include the following:

a. No ndiyam luggiri fuu woodi njaareendi

(No matter how deep a body of water is, there is fine sand at the bottom.)

The proverb teaches us that whatever difficulty we may face, there will be relief in the end, if only we persevere. It is expected of a Pullo to display a high degree of perseverance. He must not always expect quick results or easy solutions to problems. It was reported that once a Pullo came across a group of people surrounding a dead body near a river. By way of commiserating with the people, he asked what the cause of the death was. He was drowned in the river because he did not know how to swim. That was the reply. Why didn't he go round the river? So asked the Pullo. How long do you think that would take? replied the people. How long will it take him to lie here? Said the Pullo. This short anecdote testifies not only to the Pullo's witticism but also to his tremendous capacity for perseverance.

b. Goonga hiiãay hiddeko ko jaçee.

(The truth will become old before people accept it.)

The proverb is warning us not to expect people to readily accept the truth. It takes them a long time before they realise what it is. So, be prepared to give them time! The need for patience is therefore of paramount importance.

c. Uumaaka çurii mbolwaaka.

(What is groaned about surpasses what is spoken about.)

When seemingly healthy people groan, it is a sign that they are carrying the burden of what worries them. In other words, there is more than meets the eyes, as it were. This also means that complaining and grumbling about an issue does not always help matters.

Enãam

The meaning of this aspect of *pulaaku* is being kind and affectionate, especially to one's own relations or kindred. The proverbs that depict *enãam* include:

a. *Ko meemi kine fuu meemii gite.*

(Whatever affects the nose, affects the eyes also.)

This proverb teaches us that whatever affects one's family members or close friends also affects one. So, one rejoices with them when they are happy and commiserates with them when they are sad. In short, it teaches us to be humane, compassionate and to have flow-feeling.

b. *Koão ãum ndiyam ndoggoojam.*

(A visitor is like run-off water.)

This proverb is calling on us to be kind to our guests because they are as transient as the run-off water. It is therefore advisable to be much as nice to them as possible while they are still with us.

Ngorgu

The literal meaning of *ngorgu* is 'manliness'. It also means bravery. The proverbs that depict *ngorgu* include the following:

a. *Giãão çokkon colli doole yaaça gi'e.*

(He who goes after birds' nests must be prepared to tread on thorns.)

The proverb makes it clear that one has to labour first before one enjoys the fruits of one's labour. In other words, 'duty first before pleasure', as the saying goes.

b. *Sollaare teppere çurii nde pooçe.*

(The dust on the heels is better than the one on the buttocks.)

This proverb is saying that when you are on your feet it is the heels that become dusty; but if you are sitting down, it is the buttocks that become dusty. The message, therefore, is one must not be lazy, but be up and doing.

Neããaaku

The meaning of *neããaaku* is dignity or self-respect. The proverbs that best depict this aspect of *pulaaku* include:

a. Nyaami haaraayi, çiiiri haaray na?

(If after eating, one is not full, will licking the bowl make one full?)

This proverb admonishes against doing something that is beneath one's dignity. According to Fulçe custom, grown ups and children do not normally eat from the same bowl. The grown ups must not eat all the food in their bowl; they must leave something for the children. This is referred to as *çiirol* or 'licking'.

b. Ndikka toraaki e wujjuki.

(It is better to beg than to steal.)

To a Pullo, begging is too lowering. However, if a choice is to be made, naturally, begging is far more honourable and, needless to say, legal.

Conclusion

A paper as short as this cannot do full justice to the concept *pulaaku*, no matter how much one tries to condense it. Neither can justice be done to Fulfulde proverbs for exactly the same reason. The corpus of Fulfulde proverbs is such that volumes could be written out of it, if that were the intention. However, it is our sincere belief that, if nothing else, the paper has succeeded in whetting the appetite of those interested in Fulçe studies generally, and in *pulaaku* and Fulçe proverbs, in particular.

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