

Thomas Bierschenk

The Ethnicisation of Fulani Society in the Borgou Province of Benin by the Ethnologist*

Martine Guichard's essay deals with the Fulani in the Benin part of the Borgou region. Apart from a brief mention by Lombard (1965) in his monograph of Borgou, the only other publication hitherto published in French on this group was a four-page article by the same author.¹ Martine Guichard, the author of the article referred to in the title, is interested in the "ethnicisation" or codification of the ethnic identity of the Fulani in Benin which, she claims, is being carried out by a small group of Fulani intellectuals who work in the public service. Her line of argument appears to go back to ideas first developed by Frederik Barth (1969), and subsequently adopted by J.-L. Amselle and E. M'Bokolo (1985) and others.² This approach is based on the idea that ethnic identities are a "product" of social interaction and that reference to one (or more) groups of "others" is always part of the "production process". Ethnic identities are, therefore, born within social relations; they do not, however, exist independently of these relations as an "essentialist" interpretation of ethnicity would assume.³

Whilst sharing Guichard's general approach, for theoretical and empirical reasons I see her application of the theory to the case of the Fulani in Benin as extremely problematic. In short, I feel that she is drawing the wrong conclusion—*i.e.* that clever politicians can simply "produce" a desired form of ethnic identity and force it on a particular group—from a basically correct premise—*i.e.* that ethnic identities are always socially constructed. In doing this she fails to give due emphasis to the central fact that social identities are always rooted in concrete historical experiences and social practice, and that they relate

* Comments on Martine GUICHARD, "'L'ethnicisation' de la société peule du Borgou (Bénin)", *Cahiers d'Études africaines*, 117, XXX (1), 1990: 17-44. I would like to thank both Carola Lentz for her detailed commentary on earlier versions of this text, and Susan Cox for translating it.

1. LOMBARD 1957. For publications in English, see BIRSCHENK 1988, 1993; BIRSCHENK & FORSTER 1991; DE HAAN, VAN DRIEL & KRUIHOF 1990. In German, BIRSCHENK 1989, 1992; BIRSCHENK & FORSTER 1987; BOESEN 1989; SCHNEIDER 1989; WELTE 1989.
2. Cf. also AMSELLE 1987, CHAUVEAU & DOZON 1987.
3. For a brief but comprehensive comparison of "formalist" and "essentialist" concepts of ethnicity, see LENTZ 1988.

to a symbolism which creates an identity and which is subject to constant negotiation within the social groups concerned. In addition, I would dispute that the categories of “state”, “town Fulani” and “bush Fulani” created by Guichard do justice to the multiple social identities, flexibility of social borders and multiple layers of discourse which characterise society in the area of North Benin discussed in this essay. Guichard tends to blatantly polarise the groups involved into aggressors (Fulani intellectuals) and victims (bush Fulani). On this basis, the critique of populism in the social sciences recently developed in this journal by J.-P. Olivier de Sardan (1990) could be applied to this analysis. Equally dissatisfying in end effect is Guichard’s treatment of “Fulani culture” which, in the form she presents it, can—in my opinion—only be seen as her own construction.

Before going into each of these criticisms individually, for the sake of clarity I would like to say that I was a member of the group of researchers from the Freie Universität Berlin, from which Martine Guichard’s work originates. Guichard quotes some of the findings of this group. Her argumentation can be summarised as follows:

- It is possible to identify three distinct groups of social actors in the society of North Benin. This distinction is made on the basis of their divergent interests and strategies. The three groups are: “the bush Fulani” (Fulɔe laɔɔe), “the town Fulani” (Fulɔe siire) and “the state”.
- The relationships between both the state and the town Fulani, and the town Fulani and the bush Fulani are analysed in terms of aggressor/victim mechanisms. “The state uses” (p. 40) the town Fulani with the intention of “capturing” (p. 41) and “manipulating” (p. 38) them. The aim of the state in this is to impose its “projets étatiques de développement”, which involve for example the settlement of nomadic herdsmen, and to assert its domination over the bush Fulani. The aim of the town Fulani in cooperating with the state is to promote their own social advancement (p. 18), if not to commit what the author describes as outright predation (p. 40).
- In their “course au pouvoir et à la richesse” (p. 17), the town Fulani invented an ethnic discourse by means of which they created a “Fulanity” (*pulaaku*) or “Fulani culture” which is completely removed from the rural context (p. 33). This unauthentic “Fulanity” has little to do with authentic Fulani culture for which the author employs a series of synonyms: “la culture peule” (p. 41); “l’âme peule” (p. 29, possibly used ironically here); “l’idéologie peule” (pp. 30, 37); “ces qualités dites typiquement peules” (p. 30); “un comportement peul” (p. 30); “le code pastoral” (p. 39). These qualities—all written with the definite article—are only to be found among bush Fulani and are not shared by the town Fulani.
- The bush Fulani do not want to be “captured” and do their best to preserve their authentic Fulani culture. They are, however, “pris au piège de leur code pastoral” and especially by one of the basic constituents of this code, *senteene* (“shame”, pp. 38 and 39). This *senteene*, or sense of shame, prevents them from actively defending their own interests. Whether this attempt to capture the bush Fulani is successful remains open: the tone of the essay would indicate that it is a success, however the closing sentence (p. 40) refers to its failure without supplying any further explanation.

What are the objections to be levelled at such argumentation? My critique of these arguments is summarised in the following five points.

1. The Anthropomorphisation of the Benin State

Let us first consider Guichard's view of "the State" which she accuses of perpetrating a direct and blatant strategy in relation to the Fulani. The different examples and accounts given in the text would, however, indicate that what we actually have here is a situation where various actors within the state apparatus are pursuing a wide range of goals. Three examples can be found to illustrate this point: *a)* Whilst the representatives of the Benin state try to acquire wealth at the expense of the Fulani in a manner reminiscent of raids by precolonial warriors (*wasangari*) (p. 21), the "lutte contre la corruption" is identified as one of the "grandes lignes du marxisme-léninisme béninois" (p. 32). *b)* Whilst the state, for reasons which the author does not see fit to explain, is trying to create "un stéréotype du peul" which eliminates the differences between the Fulani and their former slaves (*gando*) (p. 23), it is at the same time trying to enforce an "idéel marxiste antiraciste" (p. 41) which seeks to deny the existence of different ethnic identities. *c)* The state livestock project mentioned on page 20 (funded by the European Development Fund), cited by Guichard as an example of state strategy vis-à-vis the Fulani, has failed to attain any of the goals it has set itself (particularly the "sédentarisation" of Fulani herdsman). These examples would raise basic doubts about the use of official (state or project) documentation as proof of the existence of social or political practices, as Guichard—and Godin (1986) whom she extensively quotes—does. Guichard fails to distinguish here between official state rhetoric and the interaction of social groups within the state apparatus. What is anthropomorphized and subsumed under the concept of "state" here is, therefore, a highly complex and contradictory reality.

2. The Dichotomisation of Social Groups

Guichard's reification of sociological categories simply does not do justice to the complexities of the intermediary nature of the role played by the town Fulani. The latter are *per definitionem* officials (and therefore part of "the State"). If one were to take Guichard's pronouncements literally, all she is actually saying is that the state is using part of itself to pursue certain strategies (*i.e.* to capture the Fulani). At the same time the Fulani who work in the public service are integrated into the group of the bush Fulani to a much greater extent than the author admits. Of the members of the "comité fulfulde" there is no one who does not have direct patrilineal (*baabiraabe*), matrilineal (*kawiraabe*) or marital (*esiraabe*) relations to people who Guichard would define as bush Fulani. Usually, those she defines as "town Fulani" are individual members of family groups, whose other members are mainly "bush Fulani". These familial relationships are not only continually renewed through marriage—as mentioned by the author—but also through reciprocal visits and different forms of economic exchange. For example, if a member of the town Fulani needs someone to look after his cattle he can offer preferential access to state services in exchange . . .

Whilst this would indicate the diffuse nature of the borders between the lives of the town and the bush Fulani (and thus highlight the questionable value of these categories), the use of the dichotomous categories Fulbe siire and Fulbe ladde central to Guichard's analysis would seem to support the fact that in Benin the Fulani themselves perceive a strong cultural and social distance between the

two groups. However, these two terms are not—as Guichard would have us believe—to be found in common usage all over Borgou province. Their use is limited to the Nikki area as indicated by the source Guichard quotes (Maifarh 1989). In this area, however, the term “Fulbe ladde” is only used pejoratively (by the Fulbe siire!). Thus, the use of these terms by the Fulani themselves would indicate that these are not emic categories the social groups in question use to define themselves, but concepts which the author has introduced or at least generalised for the entire Borgou region.

The author uses a stratagem here which I will come back to in my examination of her treatment of “Fulani culture”. In certain key places in her work she does not quote local sources but instead uses anthropological texts on the Fulani based on different ethnographic areas. The distinction between town Fulani and bush Fulani is frequently made in these texts.⁴ The introduction of these two concepts into the context of North Benin, however, over-emphasises the “dichotomous” (p. 29) nature of the relationship between the Fulani herdsmen (who refer to themselves simply as “Fulbe”) and “intellectuels Peul”, the name by which this group also most commonly refers to itself. It is interesting to note that the author also admits in a footnote (p. 29, fn. 36) that the concept “Fulbe siire” as she uses it, is not based on a geographic distinction (her “town Fulani” therefore do not live in towns!), but is used in a wider sense, and indicates that those it describes have had a modern school education.

3. Mixed Motives and the Unintended Consequences of Social Behaviour

Guichard’s charge that the relationship between the state and the town Fulani on one hand, and the bush Fulani on the other can be described in terms of an aggressor/victim relationship would also strike me as problematic. The arguments she uses in her discussion of this point confuse two different levels of analysis: the motives of social actors and the unintentional consequences of their behaviour. I would agree with her that the disengagement of the state was a major contributory factor in the development of the Fulani ethnic movement in the late 1980s (cf. Bierschenk 1989). The mid-seventies in Benin were characterised by the attempt of the Kérékou regime to establish the domination and bureaucratic logic of the central state in rural areas by eliminating local power structures (Allan 1989, Elwert 1983). In the early 1980s it emerged that this attempt had failed; the representatives of central state had succeeded in obtaining a position of importance in the local political arenas, but they were quite simply incapable of imposing their bureaucratic logic on the actors in the rural areas. Thus, it was not a case of local “pratiques clientélistes qui s’inscrivent dans le registre bureaucratique du pouvoir” (p. 18). On the contrary, bureaucratic logic was adapted at local level to fit in with local patronage practices! The self-proclaimed disengagement of the state of the late 1980s, which was adopted not least as a result of external pressure from international donor organisations (in particular the World Bank), represented an admission of the failure of “étatiste” development strategy.

This withdrawal of the state from civil society gave new actors access to local political arenas. These actors included the “intellectuels peul” who offered their

4. See, for example, DOGNIN 1975, as quoted by the author.

services to the Fulani herdsmen as alternative patrons. The main aim of their ethnicist discourse was to convince Fulani herdsmen that they—the Fulani intellectuals—were more legitimate and efficient patrons than those (the political representatives of the farmers, the police, mayors, etc.) the Fulani had hitherto turned to. Thus, to this extent the ethno-political organisation of the Fulani as conceived by the Fulani intellectuals fitted the logic of clientelism (and in doing so supported this logic!) that is characteristic of the local (and other) political arenas in Benin. At the same time, the discourse of the town Fulani, who are by definition state officials, also introduced concepts of “development” such as compulsory school attendance, the devaluation of the nomadic way of life, etc. With justification, Guichard identifies and exposes the integrative aspects of this discourse. However, to conclude from this that the state deliberately used the town Fulani to indirectly achieve in the 1980s what it had failed to do in the 1970s, *i.e.* to directly manipulate the Fulani, seems too farfetched and in no place does the author provide adequate evidence to support this.

4. The Bush Fulani as Prisoners of their Culture

That in offering their patronage the Fulani intellectuals were also pursuing quite selfish motives is beyond question. As has been illustrated over and over again in political anthropological literature (see Boissevain 1974), brokers usually charge a fee for their services. In my opinion the far more interesting question arising here (which would indicate whether a system of mutual benefit has been replaced by one of outright “prédation”) would be whether the Fulani herdsmen see the “fees” charged by the Fulani intellectuals as justified, and whether they are prepared to pay these “fees” in exchange for services they expect from their brokers. The author could have asked the herdsmen about this. In this context, the question also arises as to whether the Fulani herdsmen are even aware of the strategies of the other groups (state and town Fulani), whether for example, they regard the Fulani intellectuals as part of their own group (and not as arriviste family members), and what strategies they themselves pursue. As Guichard demonstrates, the Fulani herdsmen often find themselves in highly antagonistic situations vis-à-vis the non-Fulani farmers and the state. They desperately need the help of intermediaries in these conflicts. Could this be one of the reasons they participated in impressive numbers—and in the absence of ostensible external pressure to do so—in a linguistic-political seminar organised by the Fulani intellectuals in December 1987? Guichard sees this as mere “adhésion par manipulation” and not as real “participation active” (pp. 38-39). According to the author “la pertinence de la *senteene* pèse de tout son poids” on the bush Fulani: they felt morally obliged to follow the call of the Fulani intellectuals, and would not have dared to express criticism in any form. But then the author does not choose to explain why in the case of the seminar they did not simply show the passive resistance that they showed in relation to the question of school attendance which was also promoted by the intellectuals (p. 39). The bush Fulani simply cannot escape the “prison house of culture”.⁵

5. I am referring here to the title of an essay by A. S. CAGLAR on Turks in Germany (1990) where the author applies the same criticism to “culturalist” argumentation.

Thus, “*senteene*”, “*pulaaku*” and in the wider sense “Fulani culture” emerge as the key concepts in this entire analysis. For Guichard these factors determine the behaviour of the bush Fulani. Instead, however, of tackling the fascinating and difficult task of explaining to the reader, for example, what “*senteene*” means in a local pastoral North Benin context, and instead of using explanations from local sources, quoting from interviews and analyzing cases in which the Fulani herdsmen from North Benin describe the concept of *senteene* as a motivating force, the author again refers to anthropological literature on the Fulani. To transpose explanations of *senteene* and *pulaaku* which were formulated for other geographic, social and historical situations into a North Benin setting, implies that something which can be described as “Fulani culture” (or “Fulani Cultural Archetypes” to misquote the title of the essay by Daniele Kintz [1985] which Guichard quotes) exists independent of time, place and social circumstances. This in turn renders individual empirical research of local “culture” superfluous.

5. The Creation of an “Authentic” Fulani Culture

In other words, Guichard is doing exactly what she accuses the Fulani intellectuals of doing: “[Elle surestime] nettement l’ethnologie des ‘Blancs’ au détriment de la littérature orale” (p. 34). Or, to put it another way: in her efforts to defend the authentic bush-Fulani culture against “manipulation” by the Fulani intellectuals, she herself creates a “Fulanity” which either largely ignores empirical evidence, or in cases where it contradicts her argument—as in the participation of seven hundred Fulani in the Fulfulde seminar—simply misinterprets it. Above all, Guichard creates this authentic ethnicity without consulting the Fulani herdsmen. If the aim was to bring this critique to a polemic level, one could speak of Guichard’s struggle against the Fulani intellectuals for the Fulani soul, a struggle in which the Fulani themselves remain largely silent. As Olivier de Sardan (1990) has shown, this “speaking on behalf of others”, especially for “the weak”, “those who have been deprived of their rights”, “the underprivileged”, is a widespread form of argumentation in the social sciences, which he defines as “ideological populism”. As he points out, it is possible for this kind of ideological populism to dispense of “methodological populism”, or a precise description of social practices and representations of the “people” in question.

The criticism of the content of this article is, also, by implication a methodological critique: Guichard is not exactly liberal in her use of primary sources. The misunderstandings this may lead to can briefly be illustrated, for example, by her presentation of the story of the Fulani chieftaincies in Borgou (pp. 34, 35 and fn. 46). Nowhere in her analysis does Guichard make clear that she is telling a specific version of this story which was clearly adapted to suit individual interests, namely those of the former “chef supérieur peul” of Kandi. For quite obvious reasons, in the interview Guichard quotes (Bierschenk 1989, Annex 10 and 11), the paramount chief of Kandi plays down the significance of his older and for a long time politically more powerful competitor, the paramount chief of Parakou.⁶

6. For the history of the Fulani chieftaincies in North Benin, see BIERSCHENK 1993 (fthcg).

An Alternative Interpretation: The Ambiguity of the Symbols of Community

An academic critique of this kind is, perhaps, not exactly the place to propose an alternative analysis of the Fulani ethnicisation movement in North Benin. To conclude, I would, however, like to briefly outline the form which an alternative interpretation could take.⁷ Like all communities, the community of the Fulani herdsmen is primarily based on shared social practices. These practices do not, however, constitute a community *per se*: this requires the symbolic “processing” of these practices. Communities are, therefore, always “imagined” (Anderson 1983); they are symbolically constructed (Cohen 1985). In the case of the Fulani in North Benin, a community is constructed through reference to shared symbolic domains. This does not, however, mean that all members of a given community associate the same meaning with these symbols. On the contrary, the efficacy of symbols for the constitution of community lies in their ambiguity, in the possibility that different members of the community can attach a different significance to these symbols. Symbols are, therefore, mere vehicles of meaning (and, therefore, of culture). In other words, they collect and reinforce meanings. Their function consists in lending an appearance of similarity to a highly diverse reality. To use Victor Turner’s terminology, symbols are “multi-referential” and “multi-vocal”: different people can use the same symbol or take part in the same ritual and give it a different significance (Turner 1969).

This does not necessarily mean, as many proponents of symbolic anthropology seem to think, that all social actors have the same access to symbolic domains. Symbolic domains are important political resources and the ability to manipulate, or—to use a less negative concept—“arrange” them is part of the classical repertory of political strategies. Thus, as with all other types of political resources, the capacity to manipulate symbols is unequally distributed. Symbols and rituals do not represent community in a socially undifferentiated sense. Instead, they represent interpretations of social situations proposed by certain actors in their strategies to attain power; these actors can also be identified as “symbolic entrepreneurs”. Rituals represent an attempt to establish the general acceptance of specific definitions of social reality.

No elite, however, possesses limitless powers to change symbolic domains and create communities. The limits here consist mainly in the necessity to root symbols in both the historical and contemporary experience and practices of the actors concerned. The possibilities for manipulation by the elite are above all restricted by the power to act and the discursive awareness of the other actors who are not merely the victims of the strategies, but are active and conscious participants in the process of negotiating social and ethnic identities.⁸

7. For a more detailed analysis, see BIERSCHEK 1990.

8. I refer here to GIDDENS’S notion of agency (1984).

Fulani Intellectuals as “Symbolic Entrepreneurs” and Cultural Interpreters

From this perspective, it is possible to interpret the political organisation of the Fulani on an ethnic basis, as initiated by Fulani intellectuals in North Benin, as a fusion of “traditional” and modern” symbolic domains.⁹ The Fulfulde seminars which have been held on a regular basis since 1987 recall the initiation rituals of chiefs in Borgou on the one hand, and the political mobilisation meetings organised by the revolutionary Benin state on the other. The Fulani intellectuals take their legitimation from their very ability to use different cultural repertoires in their mobilisation of the Fulani. Their strength lies in the possibility to interpret between two worlds, in each of which they have, so to speak, one leg planted. On the one hand, they make very clear political demands on the Benin state in their defence of the interests of the Fulani herdsmen—against the background of the land-use conflicts with non-Fulani farmers and the venality of state officials. On the other hand, the discourse they address to the Fulani tends to be more moralistic in nature with demands to avoid alcohol and drugs and not to eat in public. It also aims at integrating the Fulani herdsmen into modern Benin society, calling on them to send their children to school and to join literacy programmes. The concept of “discours mimétique” (p. 18 *sq.*) or the “pseudo-radicalness” of which Guichard accuses the Fulani intellectuals completely fails to identify the interpretative, “go-between” nature of this role.

Martine Guichard has clearly shown the extent to which the ethnic discourse of the Fulani intellectuals has played a major role in transforming the “essence” of Fulani culture, the *laawol Fulfulde*, into an ideology. The central concepts of this ethnic discourse—*senteene* and *laawol Fulfulde*—should firstly be seen in their symbolic (“community building”) function, instead of trying, as Martine Guichard and other authors do, to define *laawol Fulfulde* or *senteene* in isolation from a specific context. In fact, it is the multi-referential and ambiguous nature of these concepts that makes them such useful tools in political strategies like those of the Fulani intellectuals. For this reason, in Borgou—where the Fulani are in a socially marginal position—a concept like *senteene* can be used to explain why the Fulani keep out of the political arena, whereas in Northern Nigeria, where the Fulani constitute a politically hegemonic group, this concept is used to describe a quality expected of political leaders (Kirk-Greene 1986).

The fact that symbols have several meanings, and that these meanings can be manipulated by social actors according to different contexts and interests, should not, however, lead to the interpretation of all social relations being reduced to an instrumental level. In their relation to the Fulani herdsmen, the Fulani intellectuals are not—as Martine Guichard claims—mere mouthpieces of the Benin state, nor are the Fulani herdsmen passive recipients of their message. A conspiracy theory of this kind undermines the reflexive abilities and awareness of which, as Anthony Giddens (1984) stresses, all social actors are capable. Useful in this context is the separation of *front stage* and *backstage* discourse as defined

9. In this context, the concept “traditional” is, however, misleading in so far as “la chefferie peule dite traditionnelle” is actually an invention of the colonial powers and therefore represents a modern if “older” institution, cf. BIERSCHENK 1993.

by Goffmann (1959, 1974), *i.e.* the possibility that façades of community and consensus are erected at front stage level, which are at the same time being dismantled through the commentaries made backstage (see also Murphy 1990, Scott 1991). It emerged from the conversations held at the Kandi seminar in 1987 that at least some of the bush Fulani fully supported the part of the discourse of the Fulani intellectuals which concerned their conflicts with the non-Fulani farmers and the Benin state. At the same time they listened quietly but completely ignored the moralising discourse on alcohol and drug consumption and saw it as the price to be paid for the brokerage services provided by the Fulani intellectuals. To interpret the political and symbolic strategies pursued by the Fulani intellectuals as mere “domestication of the Fulani soul”¹⁰ would be to deny the capacity of the Fulani for any independent action. Like all similar conspiracy theories, such an approach implies a highly questionable concept of true and false consciousness, and of authenticity and non-authenticity.

The claim of the Fulani intellectuals to be legitimate interpreters of the interests of the Fulani herdsmen can only be validated in that the problems of their clientele are largely dealt with. The familial ties of the Fulani intellectuals within rural Fulani society firmly root their discourse in a specific social reality, and in the historical experience of the Fulani in North Benin. Ultimately, within its plasticity the arrangement of symbols used to construct a community must do justice to this social and historical reality. The role of the Fulani intellectuals can, thus, perhaps be compared to that of a radio station which receives signals from two directions and combines these signals to develop one programme which it then broadcasts again in the two different directions. Different messages are received and then distilled or diluted according to an individual register.

*Freie Universität Berlin,
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10. Hans Bosse, of the University of Frankfurt, used this expression in a discussion of an earlier presentation of this line of argument..

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