

# The Fulbe/Fulani: Who They Are

*The Fulbe/Fulani are a proud people, distinctive in their way of life, and strategic for seeing the gospel spread across Africa.*

by David J. Phillips

The Fulbe, or Fulani, are the largest nomadic pastoral people group in the world. The word Fulani, which is derived from Hausa, is the usual name given them in English. In French, they are called Peul. In the Sudan, the Arabs call them Fellah.

The Fulbe people is so large and scattered across West Africa that their attitudes and sense of identity vary considerably from place to place. The Fulbe have an estimated population of between 6 and 14 million, but this could be much higher if all the settled groups were included. They are of mixed Caucasian and Negroid origin, and so lighter skinned than their neighbors. Their physical differences, when joined with their pastoralism, their cultural concept of *pulaaku* and their adherence to Islam, have helped them maintain their distinctiveness. They are thought to have initially migrated to northern and eastern Senegal and to have spread out from there in the 10th century, looking for pasture for their large herds.

Normally the Fulbe identify themselves with their local lineages which also have a territorial connotation. Within the lineages they belong to migratory groups, which are led by an *ardo* or “guide.” They treat their cattle like an extended family rather than just an economic asset. Traditionally they have viewed agriculture as fit for slaves, but they trade in hides, meat, and dairy products in return for agricultural produce. They are both despised and feared by others, especially by the farmers who complain of damage to crops by the Fulani cattle.

The Fulbe were converted to Islam early in the 14th century and are proud to have spread Islam in northern Nigeria and other parts of West Africa by the jihad movement in the 19th century. While the majority of Fulbe continued in nomadic pastoralism, some called Torodbé settled as Islamic scholars and teachers in the courts of pagan or nominal Muslim leaders. The court scholars helped pave the way for migrant Fulbe later to move south into these areas for pasture. Their influence became so great the Fulani had an empire in northern Nigeria and Cameroon in the early 19th century which gave them greater self-respect and autonomy.

The Fulbe consider their culture superior to that of others. Central to their life is their code of behavior called *pulaaku*, which enables them to maintain their identity across boundaries and changes of life style. *Pulaaku* has been described as “Fulani-

ness” or pastoral chivalry. Ideally it includes being fluent in both their language and their oral traditions. The Pullo or Fulbe male sees himself as having a priestly role. He must maintain the triangular relationships of interdependence among him-

self, his wife, and his cattle. Cattle give a man milk and prestige. In return he gives them pasture, water, and protection.

The wife contributes food preparation, dairy production, and fertility. *Pulaaku* implies one can manage one’s herd well. Therefore the man must have skill as a herder, but additionally have wisdom and character so as to fulfill his responsibility. *Pulaaku* is taught first by the mother, then by the father, the *ardo*, and also the *mando laawol pulaaku*, a leader of the man’s clan.

The Pullo is trained to be stoic, never to show his feelings, even to appear to outsiders to be introverted, and to have a deep emotional attachment to cattle. He maintains respect by keeping a distance from others. *Pulaaku* involves important virtues such as *munyal*, dignity and manly self sufficiency in the face of adversity; *senteende* which is



modesty and respect for others, even for enemies; and *hakkiilo*, forethought, prudence in managing his personal affairs, and giving hospitality. To be a true Fulbe, an *O waawi Fulfulde* means not only to speak the language, but also to know how to live as a Fulbe. It means that one is a better person if he is self-sufficient and relies on few personal possessions or comforts.

The J'Afaraabe, Jullube, Yallalbe, and Uro-Ngia are clans of Fulbe in the Massina (Macina) region of southern Mali, estimated variously at between 600,000 and 1,000,000. Ten thousand Mauritanian Fulbe have moved into Mali and have received refugee status. Estimates of the number of Fulbe are affected by the fact that the Fulbe *wuro* or residential community includes more than Fulbe. The Fulbe live among many other peoples, including thousands of Bella, Moors, Tuareg, Bozo, Songhai, and Dogon. Each *wuro* is under the leadership of a *jooro* who negotiates the use of the pastures with his opposite numbers. The *wuro* may have 30,000 head of cattle, so reciprocal renting of pasture between the

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*wuros* is often necessary during the dry season from May to July. In the semipermanent villages, they have one or two families of a craftsman caste, probably Lawbe, working in leather, gold, and silver. There are also ex-slaves called *maccube*, who nowadays have to be paid to do menial work, such as cultivation, sweeping, and carrying.

The Niger River floods in the period August to December. In order to avoid the mud and flies, during August to October the Fulbe migrate northwestwards into the Sahel to the south of Néma in Mauritania, a distance of over 300 kilometers. They return to the Niger flood plain near J'Afarabé as the water abates in November, and then in May they gradually move eastwards using the pasture until July and so start the cycle again. Although the Fulbe claim that milk is their mainstay diet, in practice they eat a porridge of millet, and trade milk and butter to their farming neighbors.

The Fulbe are practitioners of folk Islam. They have an animistic worldview filled with much superstition and magic. Many of the men can read Fulfulde in the Arabic script, but only the better educated can understand Arabic.

As part of the 10/40 Window, the Fulani are a key people in the Sahel. The Christian Reformed World Missions and WEC International are working together among them in the Massina area, north of the Niger River, in Mali. The WEC team with the CRWM travels to the cattle camps of the nomads in the north of the country and accompanies them as they migrate with their cattle seeking new pasture.

RSMT (Red Sea Mission Team), United World Mission, and CMA (Christian and Missionary Alliance) are working in other parts of Mali. Dogon Christians also are evangelizing the Fulani. Refugees from Mauritania are being contacted by New Opportunities. There about 60 believers. A 30 minute gospel broadcast is made each week in Fulfulde. SIL (Summer Institute of Linguistics) has a Computer Assisted Dialect Adaptation program to facilitate translation into several Fulfulde dialects. The Fulbe Bible for Nigeria was completed in 1984. New Testament translations are in progress in Benin, Burkina Faso, Guinea, Mali, Niger, and Senegal.

For further information, contact WEC International, Bulstrode, Oxford Road, Gerrards Cross, Bucks SL9 8SZ, England.

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