

Abstract

Why do pastoral Fulɓe women insist that they “follow” their men? Why cannot a man have a household without a wife? Why should this concern development programs? My research in Tanout, Niger, has shown that resources, rights, and responsibilities in pastoralist households are gendered in negotiable partnerships between hearthholders and chief herders. Through a successful partnership, essential for the viability of household enterprises, wife, husband and children benefit from livestock and dairy production to maintain the household’s overall well-being. Programs that disregard these partnerships and household/herd integrity risk failure and harm to project participants.

Biography

Karen Greenough lived in Tanout, Niger, as a Peace Corps volunteer from 1985 to 1988. During the 1990s and subsequent years, she lived, travelled and worked with Tanout Woɗaaɓe Fulɓe families. She carried out dissertation research (2006-07) among the Katsinen-ko’en Fulɓe in central Niger. Her dissertation, titled *Strategic Flexibility: Household Ecologies of Fulɓe in Tanout, Niger*, addressed development and nomadic pastoralism. Full text of her dissertation can be accessed at: http://uknowledge.uky.edu/gradschool_diss/123/

Women, Men Children & Livestock: Partnerships and Gendered Negotiations in the Ful’be Household Livestock Enterprise

by

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CGIAR’s Challenge
Program for Water
and Food

**Working Paper
#301**

December 2012

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INTRODUCTION

[T]o make the notion palatable to the mainstream, 'empowerment' has been reduced ... to a simple act of transformation bestowed by a transfer of money and/or information (Cornwall et al. 2007a, 7).

In winter 2006, the Red Cross distributed cash, about \$240 each, to some pastoralist women in the department of Tanout, Niger.¹ A project facilitator told me that this cash was intended to increase household nutrition during the drought year. Only women received the aid due to a mandate from Niger's president, the facilitator said, but this condition was willingly accepted by the Red Cross (British Red Cross 2005). Because the local Red Cross could not deal with household mobility, they required that women gather and stay for about a month at pastoral centers without providing news of when the money would arrive. The women, with their husbands and youngest children, traveled up to 100km from home, on foot, by donkey, and by paying for public transportation. All centers were at least a half day's walk from markets where they could purchase food, and their virtual detention prevented them from pursuing normal income-generating activities. Their absence increased labor and financial burdens for those left at home, including their older children. When the facilitators finally distributed the money, they gave it to only one wife in cases of polygyny, posing the serious question of who would decide which wife would receive the money.

The different levels of Red Cross bureaus (international and local) and the consulting facilitators conveyed mixed goals through mixed messages. If program administrators had wanted to increase women's purchasing power, as stated on the website, then each hearthholder should have received money. Administrators either did not realize that to purchase grain with the cash, the women must give it to their husbands, or (more likely) they had too little authority to alter this condition of disbursement. If the program had wanted to increase household nutrition, then men, or women *and* men, should have been given money and encouraged to buy household grain and other food stuffs, or the Red Cross should have simply distributed grain. These problems illustrate some of the difficulties created when aid and development programs do not consider the (agro)pastoralist² household as a whole, including gendered positions within the household, the household/herd link, and household/herd mobility.

Development organizations and government agencies have so far had little success in working with pastoral communities in Tanout, primarily because they cannot cope with pastoralist mobility, an essential strategy in the environments in which most pastoralists live. Programs that wish to work with women also do not always understand how women are integrated into household, family, and community, how the household supports the wife/mother, and the necessity of livestock to household members' nutrition and income. Unfortunately, relatively little research, especially among pastoralist communities, examines the complexities of the

partnerships between men and women, and the advantages that such partnerships bring to household enterprises and rural communities. Projects with pastoralist communities, moreover, still tend to work either with women *or* men, and they often seem to desire, either implicitly or explicitly, to break up the household in order to achieve development goals. These goals may be compromised when project planners disregard the critical integration of the household: how household members of each gender and generation attempt to work together to achieve optimal subsistence in a very risky environment.

In order to create sustainable and sustaining programs for pastoralists, development or aid projects must account for and support three things: 1) the household as an integral whole, and the partnership between wife and husband that sustains the household; 2) the maintenance of the household/herd link that underpins the well-being of both livestock and household, including women's income and children's nutrition; and 3) household/herd mobility through which households keep livestock healthy and reproducing. In this paper, I describe and analyze Woḍaaḅe and Katsinen-ko'en household marital partnerships as a foundation for household/herd well-being. In the communities described in this paper, households consist of a man and his wife³ and their dependent children. Some households care for an elderly parent, one or two grandchildren, or foster children. I focus principally on the marital partnership as it is essential to the viability of the household. I use ethnographic examples to urge a balance of development programs' support of (agro)pastoral *households* with reasonable goals for women's empowerment based on the organization's own capabilities and knowledge of the gendered resources, rights and responsibilities in the communities with which they work.

Projects, Gender and Myths

Since volunteering with the Peace Corps in the 1980s, I have observed with some ambivalence Women in Development (WID) and Gender and Development (GAD) project policies. I welcomed a stronger focus on women's needs and gender equity, but I also saw projects in Tanout and elsewhere that took women away from their households and only added to their daily labor with little benefit to them or their families. Their husbands, meanwhile, still needed to figure out how to supplement often meager harvests to provide for their families. While bringing women more fully into development after years of misdirected projects (Ferguson 1994; Kabeer 1994, 5) continues to be an admirable goal, on-the-ground effects can mean that projects exclude men and neglect the complex ties among household members, family, and community, and the strengths that women contribute to and draw from these connections. While "gendered" projects attempt to redress bias against women, they still seem to concentrate too much on individual women, and only on women, disregarding their place within households except for limited evidence, now conventional wisdom, that economic assistance to women "results in better nutrition and health for the household as a whole" (O'Laughlin 2008, 23).

Cornwall et al. (2007a, 7) remind us of two "discourse coalitions" around which gender and development activists coalesce: "households are the site of conflict as well as cooperation," and "women face the double burden of productive and reproductive work." Both generalizations must be qualified for every society by unpacking their meanings and implications for women and their families. One must keep in mind the cooperation half of the first statement: emphasis on conflict may have influenced a disregard for the household and led to a near demonization of

husbands. As for the second statement, structural elements of some societies—customary rules, institutions, ideologies—may, from an outside viewpoint, discriminate against women, yet when seen from the inside, they might actually decrease a wife’s production responsibilities, reducing her “double burden.” In such a case, especially in a risk-prone environment, cooperation between gender roles within the household becomes vital to the well-being of all its members.

In 2003, I conducted pre-dissertation research among Woḍaaḅe families with whom I had lived in the 1990s, staying in the rangeland with the family who has taken care of me and my livestock for the majority of sixteen years. One day, I noticed Deḡo⁴ beating his wife Mariama with his heavy herding staff in their camp up the hill (Greenough 2006, 150; see also Loftsdóttir 2008, 103-4). I have known the couple for several years and usually they live and work together amiably. They both also have hot tempers, but Deḡo’s outburst startled everyone, including a friend who pulled him away and calmed him down. Both the violence and the very public nature of the dispute made people in the neighboring camps uncomfortable; discussions between husband and wife should be kept private. Though women and men understand physical hardship and even violence as a part of life, losing one’s temper constitutes a loss of control contrary to Woḍaaḅe mores, and people who do so may find themselves ostracized, at least temporarily. Later, Mariama told me that Deḡo wanted some of her cash. He needed money to pay back an overdue loan.

This example will illustrate my argument that even when contentious moments disrupt marital relationships, a fundamental collaboration supports the essential partnership that raises children and keeps the herd viable. Instead of isolating the violence as a “problem”—something a women-only framing tends to do—an analytic approach of conjugal contract and performance allows one to see the bigger picture of relationships and negotiations. Although marital cooperation does not always prevent violence, truly understanding the broader dynamics allows us to recognize women as agents, rather than perpetual victims. Through such an understanding, and by including husbands as responsible agents in their own right, rather than reducing them to an “evil man” stereotype, programs will design more effective projects. We must look beyond the immediate event into the larger context of the relationship and household dynamics.

Cecile Jackson (2008) describes conjugal performance as the continual maneuvering between husband and wife over their separate and joint interests. The conjugal contract comprises the particular sociocultural rules enjoined upon spouses within a society. Conjugal performance is the practice of wives and husbands under those rules, even in noncompliance with the contract. Under conjugal contractual norms, Mariama’s money and livestock belong to her. She should be able give them to Deḡo, or not, as she wishes: her conjugal performance. Within the conjugal contract he inhabits the institutionalized role of *jawm wuro* (master of the household), but this status does not give him the right to simply take her personal property. With the responsibility to keep his children fed (conjugal contract, reinforced by Islamic ideology), he had taken out the loan to buy grain for his household. He might have persuaded Mariama to contribute her wealth for the good of her children—many wives loan livestock or cash to their husbands (conjugal performance)—and perhaps he tried, but he may have also broken too many past promises to recompense her for her assistance. Though the difficult environments of Sahelian Africa can trouble relationships between many husbands and wives, observations from my dissertation and other research indicate that the risks inherent in the very unpredictable ecology are best

confronted and managed with a strong partnership. The rights and responsibilities of spouses are interlinked into their different roles and statuses within this partnership.

Jackson would like to dispel the “myth” that “marriage is largely a mechanism of subordination” (2008, 105) and I concur, though like her, I would not generalize marriage in these patrilineal, patriarchal societies as equitable. Gender relations in pastoral households and families, however, prove more complex and dynamic than rapid assessment might reveal (Hodgson 2000, 4). Because they concentrated on women, Cornwall et al. (2007b; 2008) do not address a myth that proliferates in development circles: the stereotype of “irresponsible, degenerate husband and father.” This “evil man” myth has bases in real experience, but is it true of *all* men in *all* situations, as many projects imply? When Woḍaaḅe and Katsinen-ko’en men face projects and aid directed at their wives while ignoring them, they restate explanations that they have learned: donors think that women are more trustworthy; men will waste whatever they are given. A common pretext presumes that men will use aid or project money to marry another wife. The men accept these conditions either because they hope that assistance for their wives will help the whole household, or because they know that they can coax or coerce the aid from their wives. They also see no way of negotiating with the more powerful agency, a demeaning, depressing and frustrating position. This position, combined with a desire or need for assistance, may actually stimulate more aggression toward wives. This is a real possibility when a project implements an agenda of women’s empowerment without the consideration of men’s roles and responsibilities.

Methods, Place and People

Both Woḍaaḅe and Katsinen-ko’en belong to the Fulḅe people (English: *Fulani*; French: *Peul*), who comprise many different groups, spread across West and into Central and East Africa. The Woḍaaḅe reside throughout Niger and beyond, and the Katsinen-ko’en in southern Niger and northern Nigeria. The communities addressed in this paper live mostly within the department of Tanout (see Figure 1). Many mobile households of both groups often migrate outside Tanout: north in the rainy season and south (Woḍaaḅe) during the dry season.

I have lived and worked (including managing my own tiny hearthhold) among Tanout Woḍaaḅe since the mid-1990s, and have carried out two small development projects and ethnographic research with various communities and households. I conducted my dissertation research on household economies and livelihood strategies of the Katsinen-ko’en Fulḅe in central Niger, from May 2006 through October 2007. I interviewed 67 men and 59 women of 60 households in four different communities, and engaged in participation-observation and many conversations while I lived with Katsinen-ko’en families. I also spent time with my Woḍaaḅe family and friends, gathering data on mobility and household-herd demographics. This paper relies on that information, and on observations and other research made over my years of life in the area.

Both research populations self-identify as pastoralist, and include agropastoral and exclusively pastoral households. Households may shift between agropastoralism and pastoralism, depending primarily on their livestock wealth. The Woḍaaḅe are primarily exclusively pastoralist and very mobile. Most Katsinen-ko’en are agropastoralist, yet the great majority of the research households (at the northern limit of cultivation) are also mobile, though less so than the

Woḍaaḅe. In this area, most Fulḅe spread their households in camps or huts over the hills, singly or in small family groups. They live interspersed with similar mobile households of Tuareg and other Fulḅe (agro)pastoralists, and mostly north of Hausa, Dagara and Tuareg villages.

While Dego and Mariama's situation provides an extreme example of marital conflict by both Woḍaaḅe and Katsinen-ko'en standards, differences do exist between the two groups in terms of appropriate gender relations. In this paper I primarily highlight the similarities between these two groups, but every pastoral society, even if culturally similar, has different rules and norms. Woḍaaḅe men and women follow stricter cultural rules of separation than the Katsinen-ko'en: husband and wife interact only when necessary in public, and then usually only brusquely (Dupire 1962, 169). Katsinen-ko'en spouses also keep discussions over household decisions private, but are less restrained with men in other ways. To my Woḍaaḅe assistants' amazement, Katsinen-ko'en women sometimes gently scolded their husbands and often joked with them. However, Katsinen-ko'en women, in contrast to Woḍaaḅe societal norms, always crouch in respect when greeting men.

The women of both groups "follow the men who follow the cattle." But does this cultural notion mean that (agro)pastoral Fulḅe women are entirely subservient and without agency? And why does one find no independent female-headed households in either rural population? When I asked a chief's sister if Katsinen-ko'en women headed their own households as some village women do, she answered, no, "*min jepaayi*"—not that they *cannot* (*min mbawata*), but that they *would* not accept such a situation. Before evaluating the oppressiveness of cultural rules, one must analyze them from within the context of women's positions.

(Agro)pastoralist Household Ecology

I examine my communities through a theoretical lens of household ecology (Wilk 1997), combining environmental anthropology with household economy, though I lean more toward political ecology than Wilk, in order to examine the allocation of resources (labor, livestock, land) and the decisions over how such resources are deployed (Little 2003). Political ecology reminds us that the systems of economy, politics and ecology interlink and influence each other in different ways, depending on culture and geographic locale (Greenberg and Park 1994; Paulson et al. 2003). Thus, when researching pastoral household ecologies, one must consider the links among household and community, natural environment, market, and different levels of government, plus the household's internal political economy, including conjugal contracts and performances. Politics (the power to make and act upon decisions) and economics (resources and assets) merge within the household within both conjugal contracts and performances, and husband and wife organize and combine resources and decisions into strategies to cope with their natural environment. Each household member occupies a particular position, depending on gender and generation, within a flexible, interacting system of rights and obligations (Giddens 1979, 86), i.e., a framework of labor responsibilities, resource access and transfer, and decision-making agency and responsibility.

Livestock and Land Resources

All households in these (agro)pastoral populations raise livestock, if only a herd of goats. Any household that keeps more than a few cows must move in order to find pasture, even if they cultivate during the rainy season. All livestock is owned individually, but different individuals have different rights vested in each animal. For example, a borrower of livestock has milking rights to the female animals loaned to him/her, but may not sell the animals.⁵ A father has the right to sell his children's male livestock for the benefit of the household while the children live under his care. According to the most important rights under conjugal contract, a wife receives milking rights to her husband's livestock, and these rights extend to her dairy sales for personal income. Usually the husband/father possesses the most livestock in a household, but wives, through inheritance, loans and purchases, can acquire large herds, sometimes larger than those of their husbands.

In accordance with customary practices, land usufruct is based fundamentally on well ownership, not in titled ownership of acreage. Householders must negotiate with well-owners (a few father-son or brother partnerships in each community) for both herd and household water or for nearby field land. As in many other rural African societies, wives receive usufructuary right to land through their husbands, but, as I explain below, in these populations women customarily have less desire or need for direct access to land given their gendered resource rights and responsibilities.

Livelihoods and Strategies

Along with their cattle, both Woḍaaḅe and Katsinen-ko'en raise sheep and goats, plus keep donkeys and camels as working animals. Men sell livestock to buy grain, other food, and household necessities. Wives in both groups milk household ruminants and produce dairy products for meals and sale. They sometimes sell their own livestock to contribute food, clothing, utensils, and furnishings to their hearthholds.

Whereas most Woḍaaḅe view cultivation as a strategy of desperation, most Katsinen-ko'en households balance themselves between agriculture and pastoralism. Only household heads and their sons work in household fields, sowing millet, sorghum, beans and sorrel. Katsinen-ko'en wives, sons, or even unmarried daughters might cultivate small plots, the harvests of which they sell for personal income. Men sell rare surplus grain from household fields to supplement household incomes. Only a small number of Woḍaaḅe men (and only men) cultivate. Only one of four or five Katsinen-ko'en harvests provides enough grain for the whole year; in other years, harvested grain lasts for an average of three to five months. Woḍaaḅe harvests rarely provide grain for an entire year. Thus, even most cultivators depend on livestock sales for household grain.

Both men and women engage in income-generating activities outside the (agro)pastoral enterprise. Woḍaaḅe women repair calabash bowls, dress hair, and pound grain in nearby villages for payment in kind or in cash. Some women sell traditional medicines and charms in Nigeria. Katsinen-ko'en women thresh grain for community households. All of these activities, plus dairy sales, permit women some financial independence. A few young, unmarried men of

both populations herd livestock for wealthier pastoralists. Katsinen-ko'en men might engage in field labor for villagers, or trade in cattle and camels. Young men migrate to southern cities for wage labor. Unlike village husbands, who leave their households when they migrate for wage-labor, sometimes for years, Wodaabe men take their wives and children with them. Social mores discourage married Katsinen-ko'en men from leaving their households for long periods of time.

Managing Risk: Moving household and herd together

Both pastures and fields depend upon very unpredictable rainfall in one annual, two- to three-month season that may begin as early as May or as late as August. Except during the rainy season and for a few months after, there is no surface water. Rainy season storms vary erratically in quantity and intensity of rainfall. Grass and grain grow at different rates and with different qualities in patchy microclimates, or do not grow at all. (Agro)pastoralists use household/herd mobility as their most important strategy to deal with both risks and advantages brought about in this unpredictable ecology (Schareika 2001; Thébaud 2002; Bollig 2006). They may also divide their herd temporarily between different parts of the household to take advantage of different ecological opportunities.

Some mobile households in Niger (though none in the research area) have settled to put their children into a few schools established by NGOs or the government. With no mobile schools available, a few Wodaabe communities in Tanout département have attempted to establish sedentary schools near their northern, pastoral centers. With little other subsistence available, the households must either keep livestock near the centers, risking land degradation and livestock's malnutrition, or rely on food aid. Certain development organizations and even some local pastoralist associations endorse a policy of dividing the household, in which "elders" would remain settled with schoolchildren while "young men" herd the livestock in the rangeland. Such a policy seems a reasonable compromise until one considers the household divisions of labor, responsibility, and knowledge, and the intricate integration of the household with their livestock. Katsinen-ko'en and other Fulbe do divide their families and herds, however a young man who takes the household herd almost always migrates in the company of an older, experienced man—a householder with children (see e.g. Thébaud 2002). Turner's research (1999) suggests that both herds and rangelands are not as well managed when young men herd without their elders' guidance.

When livestock leave a pastoral household, household members will experience a decrease in nutrition, not only because they lack milk, but also because less livestock reduces their sales and purchasing capabilities. Women lose income when they have little or no dairy products to sell. Several studies have shown that, though a complex issue, pastoralist households' settlement generally leads to decreased nutrition for children (Fratkin and Roth 2005; Pedersen and Benjaminsen 2008). Katsinen-ko'en households, with their customary balance of livelihoods, and their geographic location within the cultivation zone, manage sedentarization as part of their agropastoral system. The few settled Katsinen-ko'en families of my research communities, whose mobile sons and brothers (householders with children) herd their livestock in the rangeland, have alternative sources of income. For more mobile pastoralists with more northerly areas of migration and less access to other income strategies, removing herd from household for more than a brief interval jeopardizes household members' wealth and health.

The (Agro)pastoral Household Enterprise Partnership

In the (agro)pastoral household enterprise, wives, husbands, and children collaborate and contend within a flexible framework of resource transfers, decisions and strategies. As children grow and parents age through the lifecycle of the household, their positions shift within the framework, which also adjusts to compensate in a household with too few sons or daughters. Woven through this framework are gendered ideologies found in Islamic patriarchy, with associated institutions of patriliney, patrilocality, and polygyny. These not only ascribe higher social status to men, but also usually effect the transfer of more wealth to them. They influence the conjugal contract and specific cultural constraints that generally separate women from non-related men and dissuade women from negotiating in the livestock and grain markets. The Woḍaaḅe share a unique ethos of *pulaaku*⁶ that enjoins formality between spouses and strict fortitude for both men and women toward hardship that can include herd loss and human starvation. Women's fortitude incorporates a determined nonchalance, including toward beatings, which may appear as detachment from husband and children. Woḍaaḅe customary practices (non-Islamic) include relatively easy "divorce" through women's own initiative, though she must leave her children with their father. In both populations, kin insist less forcefully than those in other societies that a woman remain in her marriage, and usually take her side in an abusive relationship. Katsinen-ko'en wives obtain divorces by leaving and staying with kin until their husbands agree to the divorce.

Specific to the conjugal contract, the same ideologies that give men higher social status also confer on them absolute responsibility for the household's welfare. This responsibility makes some constraints against women appear more like advantages from the perspective of a woman's *suudu* (hearthhold). For example, though a woman has less access to land, she also need not spend time and labor working in the fields; and because it is her husband's responsibility to negotiate for well water, she need not spend her resources for this, either.

Gender and Generation: Resource Transfers

Fulḅe children, especially sons, receive livestock from their fathers and mothers through pre-mortem inheritance (Dupire 1970, 111; de Bruijn and van Dijk 1995, 320; Moritz 2003, 326-7), and aunts and uncles loan animals to both nephews and nieces. Children's herds grow from the descendents of their first animals. As a young woman's herd grows she may sell goats and sheep to buy a heifer; one young interviewee sold some of her chickens to buy a goat. The most important material endowment from parents to a daughter is her *suudu*: the tent mats and poles (if she marries into a mobile household), bed, and household utensils that create her material hearthhold. Brides also receive endowments from affines. Katsinen-ko'en grooms give their brides gifts of clothing and personal items, and Woḍaaḅe brides receive a heifer and/or an ox from their grooms' families. Once established in her own *suudu*, a bride receives the most important transfer from her husband—crucial to their conjugal contract—her rights to milking livestock. As her marriage matures and she grows to trust her husband, she will move her personal livestock from her father's household into his care, again fundamental to their conjugal contract.

Though most rural Fulbe societies divide labor by gender and age, institutional rules insist strictly only on a few tasks. In general, Katsinen-ko'en and Woɗaaɗe women work within the suudu, milking cattle and goats (sometimes sheep), and preparing all dairy products and meals. They care for, discipline, and educate the children: girls until they have been given to their husbands, and boys until seven to nine years old when they come under the purview of their fathers. Men generally work outside the suudu, on livestock herding and watering. Cultivating men prepare, sow, weed and harvest the fields. When necessary, women and girls help with the livestock, and boys pound grain for their mothers. Men never cook household meals or prepare dairy products, but women never clean wells and water only their donkeys. During migrations, a wife is responsible for moving her suudu and her husband for moving the livestock. He will help her lift heavy loads onto the donkeys, and his daughter may help drive the herd.

As women age and leave tasks to their daughters and daughters-in-law, they have more time for craftwork and income-generating activities. As a man gives his work to his sons, he too gains more time for other activities. Most importantly, though, after years of herding experience and acquiring specialized knowledge of natural resources, an elder man becomes a scout or *garso*. He finds the best pastures, decides household movements and migrations, and negotiates access to wells—which his sons clean in exchange for water. The criticality of the herd to pastoral household well-being and long-term security prioritizes the *garso* as responsible for its care. This idea is extended symbolically into the agropastoral households as the husband/father's responsibility for household fields and harvests, as well as livestock.

Gender Relations and the Conjugal Contract

[R]elations between [Woɗaaɗe] spouses seem to be the application of a code of respective obligations and rights (Dupire 1962, 169).

The day after Mariama's beating, the households moved camp a short distance to new pasture. While I helped her pack, Dego left the livestock to come rig his wife's gear. He and I lifted the paired, rolled mats and poles onto the donkeys' backs. He far exceeded Woɗaaɗe norm by helping Mariama collect her calabashes and cooking pots and tie them to the donkeys' loads. Only when he had secured all of the gear, and his wife had mounted with her youngest child in her lap, did Dego return to the livestock. Though almost silent throughout the process, only contrition over yesterday's beating and concern for his wife would have prompted him to help Mariama in this unconventional manner. Some weeks later, when I asked Mariama how everything was going, she laughed a bit and told me that, of course, she had forgiven her husband. She needed him; he herded her sheep for her. This response, while it offers no long-term resolution to their problem, points out the complexities of conjugal contracts (the husband's responsibility for livestock care) and conjugal performances (Mariama's willingness to endure her husband's occasional aggression). She has threatened to leave him, and one day she may do so, following examples of other women who return to their families and send male relatives to fetch their livestock. The reasons for Dego's aggression are just as complicated, including the stress of providing for his large family with very limited means, and depression.

Fulbe men are responsible for household food provision, and their wives for hearthhold food preparation. These conjugal rules supply glue to the household framework. I have often heard

Woðaaþe elders remark about an irresponsible young man, “Oh, he’ll settle down when he begins to have children. He’ll have to.” He has to because he must provide for his children and their mother. Contrary to the “evil man” myth, most men *want* to provide for their children, agonize when they have too little to feed them, and dread the day that they will have nothing.

While men do sometimes disregard their responsibilities, it can lead to social disapproval. For example, very few men act like Aisha’s husband, who did not return home with his family from dry season pastures two years earlier. I met Aisha while she was doing her best to cultivate the household field, her husband’s production responsibility. She told me that she now lived near her brother. Though they heard that Aisha’s husband was working somewhere in a village, his parents were ashamed of him for selling all his livestock and abandoning his wife and children. Other men spoke of him disparagingly, as a rare example of an irresponsible husband and father.

Among Fulþe and other pastoralists, a woman might maintain her hearthhold temporarily within her father’s or brother’s household, but she cannot—does not want to—sustain a *wuro* (household) by herself without its male head, her husband. A wife gains not only the long-term food security provided by her husband, but also her husband’s labor. The husband must provide grain for his family through livestock sales, cultivation, or some other form of income generation. To that end, he cares for the household livestock, his own and those of his children and wife, and negotiates for access to land resources, especially wells and water for both livestock and household. Besides grain and the livestock from which she obtains milk, the husband provides his wife with children, who will contribute their own labor to her hearthhold, and one day care for her in old age. An (agro)pastoralist woman who loses her husband to death or divorce may still have her *suudu*, but she must join a *wuro* headed by a man who will take responsibility for food provision, livestock care, and personal protection: the production side of the production/reproduction burden. As in Aisha’s case, living with a brother (who supports his own household) will not provide the security that a responsible husband gives. Aisha harvested no grain from the household field, and without her husband’s livestock or other income, her hearthhold would become a burden on her brother.

On the other hand, a man without a wife also has no *wuro* (Loftsdóttir 2008, 61; Riesman 1998 [1974], 31; Hodgson 2001, 35). When a man marries, he gains not only a wife and the children that she bears him, but also access to her *suudu*, the space a wife creates where she cares for her children and husband.⁷ Without a wife, a man literally has no home. He may command a sort of half-home if he has a daughter or daughter-in-law to cook his meals; without such dependants, a divorced or widowed man must depend on other women (and their husbands) to care for his children until he can marry again. I met a few older, single Katsinen-ko’*en* men who lived with adult children, and one who lived in a friend’s household, helping the elderly man and his wife with daily chores and marketing. One Woðaaþe elder lived for years on the edge of his married sister’s *suudu*. A very few men, entirely outside the norm, live nowhere, eating with various kin and sleeping *e ladde* (in the “bush”).

Gender and Generation: Responsibilities and Decisions

Turner (2000, 1016) notes that the same Islamic tenet that confers on the male householder the primary responsibility for feeding and clothing his family also reinforces patriarchy. In addition,

the pastoralist family patriarch commands decision-making because of his role as garso, however symbolic in cultivating families. Islamic ideology, the importance of livestock to Fulbe culture and livelihoods, and the modified role of the household head as grain provider are incorporated into both conjugal contract and performance, giving the patriarch not only responsibility over livestock and field, but also the right to make decisions regarding these assets and long-term household sustenance. Through livestock, the pastoralist household fulfills its immediate objectives (food and household security) and ultimate goals (children's well-being and lineage continuity). The husband makes decisions about the well-being of the livestock from which his wife derives daily sustenance for her hearthhold.

Maama and the other women discussed among themselves how they didn't want to migrate to the lineage well. They would rather move closer to the villages, and find work threshing grain and repairing calabashes. Maama said she was afraid, though, that her husband wouldn't agree at all. (*Field Notes (FN): October 10, 2007*)

In this instance, the livestock's pasture needs, and the necessity to keep them away from village fields, trumped the women's desire for income. However, wives' important roles as milkers, food preparers, and child bearers and carers often gives them input in household decisions, especially as they mature and gain more experience. Depending on her age and wealth, a wife makes decisions over the use and sale of dairy products; all work in her hearthhold, including how much and what kind of food to prepare; sales and purchases of her livestock; purchases of hearthhold furnishings and utensils; and loans and gifts among her social network contacts, including men. Though her husband (or brother or father) sells her livestock for her and buys household grain, she conducts the rest of her marketing, and contributes to household expenses as much as she feels necessary and right. Wives have little overt influence on their husbands' mobility decisions, but men value (discreetly) women's knowledge of the cows' nutrition from the milk they obtain (Thébaud 2002, 78-9).

I asked Abdu about the Katsinen-ko'en households' impending return north. The livestock, I commented, are skinny. Abdu's brother agreed, and suggested they ask the women how much milk the cows are giving here. (*FN, March 5, 2007*)

I have often heard Woɗaaɓe women complain that a particular pasture gives too little milk. The men seem to ignore them, but often start looking for new pasture.

Women's positions within pastoral households and communities prove more complex than a simple narrative of male dominance and female subordination. In a new marriage, the ideologically derived agency that a husband usually possesses over his young wife is constrained by the still unstable union. If his wife feels mistreated, she may leave, temporarily or forever. Elderly fathers turn over both family responsibilities and livestock to their sons; their wives, on the other hand, usually younger than they and possessing their own maturity and experience, gain decision-making authority. They often still own livestock, actively market dairy products, and influence their sons' decisions. Each household is different, however: some husbands and wives (and co-wives) work together more compatibly, and more effectively face risks.

“Who helped you return to exclusive pastoralism after the 1984 drought?” I asked Daneri. “My wife,” he answered emphatically. He could not have survived without her help earning money to buy new livestock. (*FN, May 19, 2006*)

In a disagreement, the husband might coerce his wife into compliance, or acquiesce to her wishes, depending on the balance of resources that she and he command and bring into the bargaining (Sen 1990; Hart 1992). A wife who can increase her contributions to household assets, through her labor, dairy sales, livestock ownership, or other income sources, and proves the worth of her insight and prudence, will gain more decision-making agency. When a husband respects his wife’s knowledge, insight and contributions, she becomes a more equal partner in household decisions. Tellingly, interviews and conversations in research households with older couples evinced subtle shifts toward a balance in power between husband and wife over decision-making.

Development Considerations

When development or aid agencies enter into an assistance situation, ideally they will know as much as possible about the society and culture involved (Seddon 1993). In order to understand beneficiaries’ positions, the agency should understand the interconnected systems of society, ecology, and the gendered framework of resources and responsibilities. Cornwall et al. (2008) illustrate with several examples the dangers of basing policy on inadequate research that produces partial or biased conclusions.

The pastoralist household enterprise risks rupture without cooperative sharing and exchange of gendered labor and other resources that, through conjugal contracts, supports strategies of sustainability. Aisha’s case illustrates such a rupture, as Mariama’s shows potential rupture. Considering the balance of responsibilities, rights and resources that maintain a household’s equilibrium within an uncertain environment, one may infer that the partnership sustaining this balance will be best able to manage environmental risks. This partnership, under constraints of customary rules and ideology, encourages wife and husband to collaborate over those strategies, each within his and her own position in the resource and responsibility framework.

Households cooperate only as well as the various personalities matched within them, and numerous external frustrations wear on the endurance of even the most patient. Fatigue, anxieties, and psychological traumas add to burdens incurred by ecological unpredictability and compound rifts in household stability. After the death of his son, Deگو suffered for years from depression, which he attempted to treat with both traditional and Koranic remedies. Fulbe, like other peoples residing just south of and within the Sahara, live on the edge of sustainability. Each rainy season might allow households to increase their livestock wealth and household welfare, but more often weak, patchy rains thrust households into dilemmas that offer only poor options from which one must choose the least detrimental. Should one take herd and household away from the fields and risk missing the optimal planting time, or stay near the fields and risk losing livestock to hunger? Should one head far south in a famine year and risk livestock loss to water fees, fines, and theft, or stay and again risk hunger? Does one keep a young heifer, or sell her to buy fodder for cows with calves, and then sell the calves to buy more fodder for their mothers?

An aid or development program creates a relatively new situation that, without attention to detail, may cause more frustrations and hazards for the households involved. Development programs often, with reason, perceive rural wives as disadvantaged with respect to their husbands, but in accordance with the “evil man” myth also seem to view them as more compliant with project demands. In either scenario, they may solicit them for projects with little consideration of their connections to household and family. Ultimately, if women choose to retain their pastoral livelihoods, the best way to assist them would be in a way that supports their hearthholds, including their husbands, and by protecting the integrity of the household/herd. Projects that exclude men (or women), or that break up the household/herd (even unintentionally), threaten harm to women, their children, and men. Some projects that would assist women by contravening customary practices may increase anxiety over household disintegration. A common fear among Woḍaaḅe men concerns women’s reputed stoic detachment: that their wives will leave them and their children (Loftsdóttir 2008, 111). Katsinen-ko’en families fear the instability of new marriages and strongly discourage young wives (in their late teens and early twenties) from going to market. Projects that do not understand these fears may compound them and risk failure or even reprisal against women if they exclude men from project planning and implementation. Gender-wise development should include both women *and* men in ways that strengthen their capacities within household and family, thus enriching household members, communities, and projects.

In the 1990s, when I first began to work with the Woḍaaḅe (before studying anthropology), I helped to design and facilitate a project that trained paraveterinarians. The men did not want to include women in the training because Woḍaaḅe men customarily care for sick and injured livestock, and they thought that women could not manage large animals. The work did not always require handling large animals, however, and in hindsight if I had insisted on including women, those women could have developed an alternative income source. A program in one of my dissertation research communities that targeted women exclusively enrolled a few sedentary women in a literacy project. Although this community’s men did not seem to resent the women-only projects, there also seemed no reason not to include the men in at least the literacy project. In fact, the literacy teacher taught a few men on his and their own initiative.

Livestock loans or donations—a common project intervention—are appropriate for pastoral women given their customary rights to personal livestock. Development agents should understand the differences between the ways in which village and pastoralist livestock are raised, however. Whereas a village woman cares for a goat or sheep in her compound, a pastoralist woman’s livestock joins the household herd managed by her husband. The donor organization must take into consideration the potential transfer of not only responsibility, but also decision-making agency, from wife to husband, and the complex of individual rights and responsibilities for livestock that enter a pastoralist herd. Involving men in the project would help gain their support and help the household enterprise as a whole.

In collaboration with communities, development and government agencies should develop mobile elementary schools that can educate *all* pastoral children without removing them from their households or forcing the breakup of the household/herd. Women and children’s health and nutrition projects must include men, who make most food purchases, accompany their wives, sisters and daughters to hospitals, and generally have access to more money to pay for travel,

medicines, and related costs. One should also remember men's health, including mental health easily impaired by the various stresses and traumas of life on the edge of survival.

Conclusion

Women follow their men who follow the cows because the cows provide sustenance and men are responsible for the care of those cows. Cows and other livestock, through the collaboration of women and men, feed the children who are the future of family and lineage. Development programs both bring and insist upon change, but sometimes this change is inappropriate for the project community, a result perhaps of unclear or unsuitable program goals. Ultimately, empowering pastoral women to make them equals with men—at least from a Western perspective—would mean assisting them to own large herds and wells, to gain a garso's knowledge, and to lead migrations. Besides adding to women's productive burden, this would require alterations of ideologies and institutional rules far beyond the capabilities of development programs.

Men's and women's relationships, economic and social, including conjugal contracts and performances, must be unpacked and analyzed within their cultural contexts before deciding what steps to take to support the house and hearthhold and thus empower women. Some program goals for transforming women's conditions are simply too large, especially if the program has too little financial resources, comprehension, and time for that transformation. Meanwhile, men are often generalized as “bad” for women or “risky” to projects before a project begins, without understanding men's and women's positions within the particular culture, or the consequences of women-only development. Inappropriate goals can threaten households and communities with unintended consequences, increasing women's work loads, decreasing her income, or increasing conflict within the household.

The feminist mandate is not trading oppression for isolation, providing women with resources so they can make it on their own, but redressing inequality within co-operative gender relations through reconstruction of the division of labour. This can only be a disruptive and broad political process that cuts across households and communities (O'Laughlin 2008, 40).

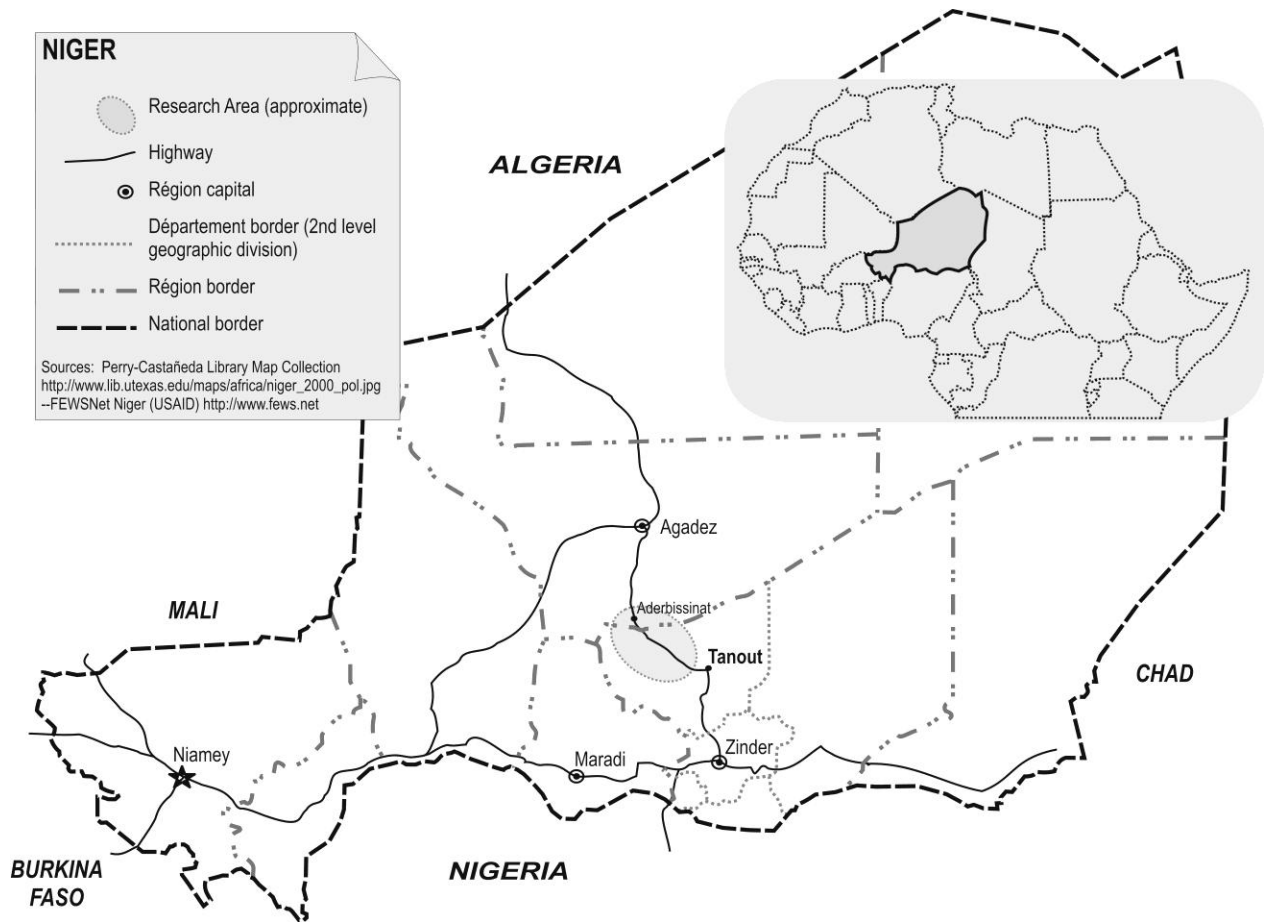
Before one takes up such a disruptive reconstruction, one must first understand the mechanisms and politics of the cooperative gender relations and divisions of labor involved: what is the conjugal contract, and how do conjugal performances work? Could consequences of a particular project actually harm women and their households rather than helping them? What does it mean to empower women in a pastoral society, and how can this empowerment serve women's goals rather than those of the development organization? In this paper I have described how answers to these questions matter for increasing women's—and household—well-being.

Empowering women and redressing unequal gender power relations constitute worthy goals, but development agents must not forget that those women link actively into working households, families, and communities, and possess their own resources and strategies. Development agents who ignore these complexities rather than working with them may stretch the flexibility of

household coping strategies beyond breaking point. Before they plunge into any assistance or gender equity project, they should first examine the strengths and resources that women use already to better their own, their children's, and their husbands' well-being, what gender equity means to women themselves, and how they already strategize to address it. Programs must work past the "evil man" myth to include husbands in projects that combine gender equity components with household integrity. Projects that reinforce households' livelihoods and capacities to care for children should be in a better position to challenge at least some discriminatory practices. They should remember that most men want to provide for their children; that Dego's behavior was based in his frustrated attempts to provide for his household, compounded by his depression. They probably will not gain women the right to decide migrations or market cattle, but with the trust and assistance of men, they may help decrease domestic violence. In the risky environments where pastoralist households live and work, the development agent should help to strengthen household integrity, maintain the household/herd link, and learn to deal with the household/herd mobility that gives women and their families the resilience to manage those risks.

FIGURES

Figure 1:
Map of Niger, including Research Area



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Grants from the National Science Foundation, the Social Science Research Council, and the University of Kentucky's Graduate School financed the author's dissertation research. The author thanks the many people in Niger who always provide invaluable help, as well as her advisor, Dr. Peter D. Little, her committee members, several anonymous grant reviewers, and Dr. Matthew D. Turner, who reviewed the proposal for IRB approval (#05-0803-P4S). Peter Little and anonymous reviewers also provided very helpful comments on this paper. A version of this paper was presented at the Philadelphia conference of the American Anthropology Association (2009).

NOTES

¹In an impromptu study, I interviewed two Red Cross project facilitators and pastoralists from about seven communities. I participated in camp life while women and men spent weeks at the centers, and observed a registration at a center.

²I refer to both pastoral and agropastoral households, as well as households representing the flexible transitions between the two livelihood strategies.

³ While polygynous marriages exist, they are the minority. Relationships between co-wives differ depending upon the women's and their husband's personalities, age and wealth differences, and whether or not the parents arranged the marriages. Comparisons between the Woḍaaḍe and Katsinen-ko'en also indicate a cultural influence on co-wife relationships. These multiple variables of the triadic co-wives/husband dynamic preclude consideration in this paper. Each wife is responsible for her own hearthhold, and in household economic terms at least, her husband regards her and her children independently from her co-wife's hearthhold. Therefore I bracket the co-wife relationship in order to examine the more fundamental partnership between wife and husband.

⁴All names have been changed.

⁵A young female is loaned to a recipient who obtains two or three offspring born while s/he cares for the animal. The mother animal is then returned to her owner.

⁶The ethos of *pulaaku* (Way of the Fulḍe), is called *mboḍangaaku* among Woḍaaḍe.

⁷In a sedentary household, the husband builds and owns the hut, but it is empty without his wife's *suudu* furnishings.

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