Defying Official Morality: the Example of Man's Quest for Woman among the Fulani.
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This essay, beginning, as it does, in medias res, and leaving many assertions undemonstrated, might suggest to the reader that it is a fragment of a larger work. This is indeed the case, though that larger work is as yet unwritten. The present attempt is a first approximation, based on a rather narrow selection of data, to the study of the problem of human freedom as it presents itself in daily life among the Fulani. According to generally accepted scientific standards, then, this essay is avowedly incomplete, and although it forms an aesthetic whole, many more data will have to be presented before I myself can feel that my conclusions are much more than tentative suggestions.

Strangely enough, I don’t know if I made any real enemies during my stay with the Fulani.1 There were a number of people whom I couldn’t stand, but I don’t know if there was anyone who couldn’t stand me. Should I have made enemies? I don’t think I make enemies easily, for I like a peaceful life with harmonious relations. In theory, of course, an anthropologist shouldn’t make enemies among the people he is studying, because he should try to get to know all segments of the society—but does making an enemy close off that part of society to which the enemy belongs? Not necessarily—perhaps

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1. My wife and I spent two years in Upper Volta; for about 19 months we stayed in the same village, a small pastoral community in the administrative cercle of Djibo. Djibo is the capital of a Fulani chiefdom located about 120 miles due north of Ouagadougou and not quite 40 miles south of the frontier with Mali. Whenever I use the expression “the Fulani,” I refer only to this group, never to the Fulani ethnic group as a whole.
hate is as valid a way of knowing as love. There is, however, the real danger—and this seems to happen occasionally with anthropologists—that if hate-relationships are formed they will eventually turn more than just that segment of society against the researcher. The anthropologist is an element in the society that can be relatively easily extruded. . .

I like to think of myself as a non-conformist. I like to think that I don’t care what “people” think of me. But to a certain extent my feeling of freedom not to conform in my own society is the result of a deliberate non-awareness on my part of social pressures: in other words, the people whose thoughts I don’t care about are people I don’t care about, whom I scarcely think of as people. And I live far enough away from most of the people I care about so that their influence on me, while important, is not continuously felt and is at best indirect.

Why, then, during my fieldwork among the Fulani, did I make such an effort to conform to their rules and customs? Did I go there secretly looking for something to conform to, an identity to mould myself to? I don’t think so, for had that been the case I wouldn’t have lasted very long. The basic reason I went to the Fulani was to try to find out what it was like to be a Fulani. Before going I did not in the least suppose that I would become one myself, but I did think that the more I adapted to their way of life, the more I conformed to the rules of their society, the truer impression (in the concrete sense of the term) I would have of what it was like to be a Fulani. I would feel acting on myself the same social forces and constraints that act on a Fulani, though presumably I would react to these forces with different feelings. Conformity, then, was closely bound up with the nature of my work as I perceived it.

As far as I can tell, however, not many anthropologists adopt such an approach. Without getting into a discussion of the merits of this method over another one, it is worth asking whether there are personal, psychological reasons that led me to use this method, for other methods, for me at least, were never serious alternatives. I would not be able to give a satisfactory answer to this question without a rather complete self-analysis, but this is not the place for such an undertaking. I can perhaps suggest, however, a few hints. I have always tolerated solitude relatively well; in fact I have often enjoyed being alone and I sometimes feel frustrated when I am prevented from it. On the other hand, if I am with people and yet feel out of touch with them, unable to communicate with them, I feel extremely uncomfortable, sometimes miserable. It is a feeling that is much more frequent in small groups or even with one person than in crowds. It is not despair at the impossibility of communication between human beings; it is a more immediate hurt of knowing that you are not recognized as
human by them, that you do not appear to them the way you feel to be within yourself. Together with the pain of non-recognition (which may be a sort of return of the infantile fear of abandonment) comes a horrible fear of trappedness. You are trapped in their image of you; your inability to communicate with them makes it impossible for you to break out of this image, and you feel helpless, if not paralyzed. It is this experience, I feel, that is part of the daily life of Black people in White American society, but that is another story... It is the dread of this experience that makes me fear travelling, and, in particular, makes me reluctant to travel in areas where I do not speak the language. Speaking the language, then, is not merely or even primarily, for me, a useful means of learning about another culture; however well I may think I understand "the others," I feel the foundations of my existence crumbling if they do not understand me. Understanding is really not very complicated; it is just a matter of listening rather than looking—an attitude requiring more effort than people are usually willing to expend on strangers.

Speaking the Fulani language, then, and conforming to their customs, were all part of my attempt to be recognizably human in a situation that was totally strange to the villagers whom we asked to be our hosts. But now I must contradict myself. Having said that I tried to conform, I must also say that from the very beginning I refused to conform in certain respects. The problem was, what to conform to? Over the nineteen months my wife and I lived with the people of our village it became clear that there was no such thing as Fulani behavior, but rather different comportments that were appropriate to different groups and even individuals in the society, and these comportments varied depending on whom one happened to be with at the time. But I was nobody in the society, I belonged to no group. I was, however, a Tuubaako ("European"), and it was to their vague notions of how Europeans behave that the Fulani expected me to conform. My refusal to conform to these notions—some of the villagers had never seen a Tuubaako and many had never seen one close up—confirmed one of their preconceptions inasmuch as the Tuubakooble (pl.), in their view, are not governed by ordinary laws and hence can do whatever they want. The idea of conforming to a set of rules, then, quickly revealed itself as making little sense. What really mattered, it became evident, was a sensitivity to the people I was living with that would disclose to me at any moment how they were feeling, and conformity then meant adjusting my behavior according to my resonance to these feelings. Gradually, of course, I formed an idea of Fulani good manners, but this proved to be more useful in dealing with people I didn't know well than with my fellow-villagers. There eventually came a time in my relations with my "together-
beings" when I could no longer plead ignorance, and when whatever I did was assumed to be done because I wanted to do it, and whatever I did not do was thought to be omitted not through oversight but because I actively didn’t want to do it.

One question I was asked quite often, particularly by younger people, was, why didn’t I go after their women, and why didn’t I take another wife? No matter what I answered, they continued to hold that it was because I didn’t like them, was not attracted by them. Another idea was that it was because my wife was stronger than me, but it was probably suggested more as a way of teasing me than as a serious answer to the question. The Fulani are polygynous, but everyone is agreed that it is wrong to sleep with another man’s wife. Yet every woman older than about fourteen is somebody’s wife unless she is a widow or a divorcee. Women, also, are not supposed to commit adultery.

In the evenings after sundown my wife and I would sit out in front of our hut in the village while I made Arabic tea on the hot coals of a wood fire. The young men would gather around—but never the women, except when I played some of the recordings I had made among them on the tape-recorder—and we would all drink the tea, passing the warm shot-glasses, sticky with the sugar of spilt tea. When the tea was finished, a group of the young men would often get up and begin to move away together, looking like long-legged night-birds in their black, flapping tunics.

— Hey, where are you going? I would ask.
— We’re going to look for women, they would reply with a laugh.

About half of them were married, about half were not, and the women they were going after were invariably married or at least betrothed. As a general rule, however, they never went looking for women among the wives of their close neighbors and relatives, such as their fathers, brothers and children. So while young men from neighboring hamlets were stealing into our village, our young men were hunting about elsewhere; there was always a risk, of course, for you could never be sure that the husband wasn’t there, perhaps lying in wait for you with his friends. People sometimes turned up next morning rather badly battered, and quite a few young men got punctures and gashes in their feet and legs from thorns as they made quick getaways into the bush.

Postponing for another occasion a discussion of the woman’s socio-economic status in Fulani society, we will find it helpful to consider briefly Man’s view of Woman. Woman, however, cannot be

1. wondiibe: won- “be”, -d- “with”, -ii- “in a state of”, -be “humans”, hence “together-beings”.
considered without regarding her as beautiful. The more beautiful a woman is the closer she may be said to come to an essential quality of womanhood. Of course, not all women are beautiful, but nearly every one is felt to have, or to have had, beauty in some measure in her life-time. Thus our discussion here is not valid for all women in Fulani society at any given moment, but it is valid for nearly all of them at some time in their lives. Though men's attitudes change as they grow older, other qualities desired in women (e.g. being a good mother for the children) never entirely supplant—and sometimes not at all—the desire for beauty. As long as a woman is beautiful she is the object of men's desire. And what men desire they seek to obtain. But the fact of having a woman—in marriage or in any other way—does not automatically prevent her from being desired by others; it just makes obtaining her more difficult.

I hope it is clear that I am not speaking of sexual desire. There is of course a sexual component in this desire, but in listening to Fulani men talk about women it is clear that the feelings are more romantic, in a certain sense; the desire is mingled with a kind of awe in many cases, and to have a beautiful woman is in fact one of the highest goods that the society has to offer—perhaps it is the Good itself. This being the case, however, there is a strong, but not explicitly stated, feeling that women, like all good things in life, should be shared rather than enjoyed by just one person. This attitude, I think, explains in part the normal development of a Fulani marriage. For as much as a year or more, the newly wed couple do not have a house of their own and do not publicly behave in any way that would indicate there was something between them. A man, of course, has rights over his wife, but these rights are at the same time begrudged by society. Jealousy, for instance, is a common and well-understood emotion, but a person who is jealous about his wife is regarded by his comrades as somewhat asocial and may end up by isolating himself from them.

Beautiful women have songs made up about them. These songs are almost impossible to translate because they consist largely of the names and nicknames of people and places. For the Fulani, when a name is mentioned it calls the person (or place) to mind much more vividly than we are used to in our culture. In fact, they say it makes

1. Bob Dylan, among others, uses the names of real people in his songs, but to humorous or symbolic effect, as when he juxtaposes President Kennedy and Brigitte Bardot, Anita Ekberg and Sophia Loren ("I shall be free"). A better sense of what it is like can be gotten from reading Rupert Brooke's poem "The Great Lover", yet even in this poem the experiences summoned to mind lack the intimately shared specificity of Fulani songs. Here is a relevant excerpt from that work:

"These I have loved:
[...]

"
them feel that the person is right there with them. Here, however, is part of a song that is more descriptive than most Fulani songs:

Late autumn over-cast
raindrops are sprinkling
splotch-necked cows are coming to drink
let us sing of Umaru’s daughter.

You brought your herd to the pond one day
when we were at Hammadi Sagidi
making music (and little sweat-beads were
[on Nyodel’s face]
let us sing of Umaru’s daughter.

Gusts of wind in the dusk
lightning at night
make us remember the season of rains
let us sing of Umaru’s daughter.

[. . .]

Even the pang of the humming
of herdboys on a trek
does not equal that when we talk
and we sing of Umaru’s daughter.

Another theme is revealed in the following lines:

. . . Jaljallo girl and Baakaano girl and Arab girl
and fair-skinned my darling we die for you
Aadama left
now what will the Fulani do?

The nicknames here and in the following fragment all refer to specific people. The pain of abandonment is made more explicit, and the idea of acting bad to express one’s feelings is introduced. :

Rainbows; and the blue bitter smoke of wood;
And radiant raindrops couching in cool flowers;
And flowers themselves, that sway through sunny hours,
Dreaming of moths that drink them under the moon;
Then, the cool kindliness of sheets, that soon
Smooth away trouble; and the rough male kiss
Of blankets; grainy wood; live hair that is
Shining and free; blue-massing clouds; the keen
Unpassioned beauty of a great machine;
The benison of hot water; furs to touch;
The good smell of old clothes; and other such—
The comfortable smell of friendly fingers,
Hair’s fragrance, and the musty reek that lingers
About dead leaves and last year’s ferns . . . Dear names,
And thousand others throng to me!”
Think just look how bad “Buddy” can be
throwing money away out back of the party.
They had been sitting in Antel’s father’s house
and there were plenty of colas to go around.

I left and came to ask how things were at home
I burned up the ground but was told that “Summer” had
[come and gone.

Evil loneliness! They took her back in the afternoon
they made her leave the fair-skinned dark-lipped one.

These translations are very tentative. It is possible, however, to
say a few things with certainty. All the people and places mentioned
are known. Umaru’s daughter, for instance, is a beauty whose fame
is very widespread in the area; she lives with her husband, a merchant,
in Djibo. I don’t know who Nyodel is, but the mention of the little
beads of sweat on her face (caused not by work but by the heat of
sitting in a crowded hut on a hot day) is typical of the exactitude with
which Fulani observe each other and are touched by little details.
The feeling of loneliness, abandonment, of not knowing what to do, is
very frequent in Fulani songs. In real life, too, it is the woman who
leaves the man, never the reverse, while the man drives the woman
away. The “they” in the last lines of the last song is not a plural in
the original, but an impersonal; it refers to those who possess the girl
at the time, namely the husband and his people. In addition, it
seems to me that these lines express obliquely the feeling that it is
somehow not right for a beautiful woman to belong to just one man,
while at the same time the singer accepts this arrangement as being
in the nature of things.

In our culture there is a certain “distribution” of beautiful women
among the general population by means of movies and photographs
in magazines, but in Fulani culture there are no surrogates for the real
thing—except the songs, perhaps? A beautiful woman always has
admirers, if not lovers, and the husband of such a woman knows that
if he is away, whether on a trip or herding cattle or out looking for
women himself, ineluctably his wife will have visitors and that it
depends on her wishes alone whether she will go into the bush with
them or not. The activities and whereabouts of beautiful women are
known and followed with great interest. One such woman, who
normally lived in a village about twenty miles away, came and spent
a month in a village five miles away, where her family was watering
its cattle. More than the usual number of young men from our village
went there to water their cattle too.

The women’s attitude does not seem to be the mirror-image of the
men’s. Women do not sing songs about men in the same vein, and
though some of them feel great love for certain men, perfection in a
man is not conceived of as something to be sought after by individual women (though he may have women as a result of it), but rather as something that benefits society as a whole. According to my wife, Suzanne Riesman, women do not talk among themselves very much about their feelings towards men, and the presence of a handsome man in the vicinity does not throw them into a state of helpless consternation the way the presence of a beautiful woman does the young men. Instead, it seems that, to a point that varies with the character of the individual, the women regard themselves much as the men see them. In particular, the half-conscious feeling that a woman's beauty should not be enjoyed by just one man, often comes to be shared by the woman in question herself. She realizes that she doesn't have to be content with what she has, and seeks to act out in life the transcendence that men see in her. She becomes a prey that can never be captured, the object of a quest that can never be fulfilled. In practical terms, this means that beautiful women lead unstable lives. They almost never stay married to the person they are first given to by their parents. The man doesn't feel he possesses a woman until she is his wife, no matter how much he may enjoy her favours; as for the woman, not only does she not want to be possessed, but also to the extent that she feels herself to be the object of quest it goes against her very nature to be possessed. Whether married or not, the woman is always free—but in danger of losing her liberty. (To the extent that a woman is—or feels—plain or ugly, she will not feel the same freedom: to leave a marriage, for example. On the other hand, she may also be less inclined to experience marriage as possession in the first place.)

The beauty of women moves men to action, it makes them go after that beauty. Beauty in a man also moves people, but men are not inherently the object of quest. (In the few cases where a woman has actively gone after a man, the situation was regarded as absurd and ridiculous by the Fulani.) Thus while what attracts men to a woman seems to be self-evident, what makes a woman love a man is not represented by any exterior quality, but is rather an essentially mysterious gift (davla) that is like what we call personal magnetism. The woman, then, is seen as exercising a power of choice that the man does not have, for she is not only the prize but also she decides who the winner will be. An example that reveals this clearly presented itself in our village recently. A beautiful girl who had been fighting with her husband for a long time was finally divorced. This had been a first marriage, and such marriages are always arranged between the parents of the bride and groom. After the divorce was made known, she had at least ten suitors between the ages of twenty and forty who were giving the preliminary presents to her parents, and only one of them was not married at the time. (I had already come back from the
field when this was happening, but had the good luck to return for a brief visit several months later after her remarriage had already taken place.) One of my friends, who had been visiting this girl secretly for several years, was the one to win her hand, but another of my friends was one of the losers. Their attitudes are revealing. The winner was, of course, very happy, though pretending to be nonchalant, but he particularly liked to make fun of the losers. "Go ask your friend J... what happened," he said with a laugh. I had been completely surprised that J... had wanted to marry her, for he had never spoken of an interest in her before. He told me that in fact he did not really love her but that he had tried because he thought he had a chance, since the girl's father liked him very much and was opposed to her marrying the suitor who eventually got her.

After reading this far, the reader may have the feeling that this all seems rather familiar and that the Fulani are not so very different from ourselves. Either they really are similar or I have been projecting onto them images and feelings from my own culture. After all, is not female beauty an important force in our cultural life, and is it not usually the man who goes after the woman rather than the reverse in our culture also? And do not our beautiful women (e.g. movie stars) lead similarly unstable lives? I don't have ready answers to these questions, for when I began to write this essay I did not realize that I would run into them. These resemblances, however, are more apparent than real, for while they may bear witness to facts of sexual attraction that are true of men everywhere, the attitudes of the people towards the activities I have been discussing, and their conceptions of what they are doing, are quite different in the two cultures. Rather than analyze these differences now—a task that would require a whole study in itself—I would like to suggest a reason for the appearance, at this point in my essay, of the question of familiariness or resemblances in the first place. Perhaps if I had not mentioned the idea it would not have occurred to the reader either; I do not know, and it is too late anyway. But it suddenly struck me that the words I am writing with had taken over and right before my mind's eye, so to speak, were drying the immediacy out of what I had experienced in the field. Feelings were becoming electrons, and what had seemed beautiful was becoming a postcard of itself that could be mailed anywhere in the world. The words form sentences, the sentences are intelligible, but their very intelligibility cheats the wonderful specificity of the reality out of its place and time. At times it seems that the more the words crowd the page the less room there is for that reality—like trying to catch an irrational number in a noose of integers. London Bridge has fallen down and I am walking across it.

We go on.
The practices I have been discussing here are a part of the normal behavior of people in Fulani society, and yet it is clear that these activities are in principle forbidden by the society's moral code. What are we to make of this? Does it mean that the changes induced by colonization and peace have weakened that code to the point where a majority, if not most, of the people flout it? There is some evidence that the strength of the code has weakened. Old people tell me that divorce, for instance, which is easy now, was more difficult when they were growing up. On the other hand, there is no evidence that the code was not flouted then. It may have been more dangerous for the individual to challenge it then, and hence a smaller proportion of people may have done so, but indirect evidence from stories, sayings about women and discussions with old people about the past, indicates that the attitudes and practices we are discussing have a long history. This constant challenge to the moral code of the society is not the same thing as a protest against it. First of all, the fact that it is a defiance of the code enhances the value of what is sought in defiance of it. The very fact that Woman is sought in contravention to the official values suggests that something "higher" is at stake, something "beyond" the routine of "normal" life. This may be part of the nature of Woman herself, as conceived by the Fulani, for it is through her that new life comes into the society. The apparent marginality of women on many occasions in social life may stem not from the fact that she really is considered marginal, but rather from the fact that she belongs to two worlds more obviously than man does, namely the natural world, in which society is embedded, and the social world. And yet, although the quest for Woman seems to suggest the valuing of a good that is beyond the social, to the extent that men and women do participate in the same culture and maintain the same society, this quest heightens the value the Fulani place on their own society as well.

Secondly, this defiance enhances the value of the individual, both for his own sake and as a member of society. By acting against the moral code the individual is demonstrating that he is a free being and that his actions are not automatically determined by social rules and social pressures. But if the individual is free to disobey, then he is free to obey too, and the value of his adherence to the society is thereby enhanced. For, although the Fulani recognize greater or lesser degrees of coercion in social life, it never works with predictable

1. In these remarks I am indebted to Dominique Zahan, Professor at the Sorbonne, at the University of Strasbourg and at the École Nationale des Langues Orientales Vivantes (Paris), for many insights into the nature of Woman in African thought. In his lectures at the last-named school (1964-65, 1965-66), his stimulating analysis of H. A. Junod's *The Life of a South African Tribe*, London, 1927, has greatly helped my own understanding.
results; if it did, if the person had no choice but to act in a certain way, then for the Fulani the situation would not be a human one. In fact, I believe that such situations do not exist in Fulani society; rather, the maintenance of society is thought to depend on the wills of its members, not on laws, and so, for the Fulani, everything that people do they do because they have chosen to. Acts performed under compulsion, whether of need (e.g. thirst, hunger, bowel relief) or of force, have no value.

The importance that the Fulani accord to the spontaneous activity of the individual, and that we have glimpsed here in analyzing the quest for Woman, is attested in all aspects of daily life, though nowhere else is there so clear a defiance of official morality. And yet this defiance, we have noted, plays itself out in the pursuit of a universally esteemed good and seems, as it were, built into the organization of social life itself. Are there other types of defiance in Fulani society that are less respectable, that call the system into question, for instance, or imply other sets of values? There are instances of deviance, such as refusing to pray, refusing to work, and theft. These acts do not seem to me to be structural, a part of the system, however, and their proper study would require another paper and perhaps a different approach. They involve a comparatively small number of people, and each instance would have to be studied separately before deciding whether it could be considered part of a class. One thing that can be said of these three kinds of deviance, however, is that they express a refusal to participate in the system, whereas the defiance of the moral code that we have been studying here is, for the Fulani, the manifestation of an absorbing and zestful participation in the life of the community.

There was a grain of truth in our hosts' notion that the reason I didn't go after their women was that I didn't like them. In reality I found myself strongly moved by them, but I resisted these feelings. Was it only to remain faithful to my wife and to maintain our marriage? This was indeed very important to me, but I believe I would have reacted the same way—only with greater mental torment—had I not been married. For to enter a sexual relationship with someone in that community would have implied for me a deeper involvement in its social life than I felt capable of sustaining. This sense in the pit of my stomach colors my interpretation of the facts I have presented in this essay. Our relationship with the villagers was one of friendship, though it was often described by them as a kind of kinship. It is true, older people all felt like parents to me, people my age were brothers and sisters, and younger people were our children. I was living in an atmosphere of warmth and security that I had never experienced in my own culture, and for which I was not prepared
by my upbringing. It was like breathing pure oxygen. But the independence and freedom that I believe the Fulani experience in this atmosphere—I was afraid I could not, for the independence that I am used to from my own life consists in being able to withdraw, separate and differentiate myself from everyone else. I feared that I didn’t have the strength that the Fulani do to maintain my sense of self in such a tumult of feelings, for my defense-mechanisms were designed for an emotional economy of scarcity rather than abundance.

Fulani culture offers to its members a life that is supremely worth living. The individual is a member of the society from the day he is named (seven days after birth), but his adherence to it feels freely given rather than automatic or compelled, as I believe the example of the quest for Woman shows. What this quest means to them cannot be put into words, except perhaps in their own poetry, for it is by nature both specific and indefinite, limited and infinite. The important thing is that the Good in life is available to them within their culture and it calls from them the fullest expression of their individual personalities as they strive to obtain it. This quest cannot be mine, however, for there is nothing that calls me forth in the same way. I think that many Westerners feel that our culture does not offer anything worth striving for; for myself and others who share this feeling, then, the search is for something to want, rather than for something we know we want. Both kinds of searches have in common that they can never end, for if they did, society would stop. But the place from which the search is begun is different in each case: for myself, it begins from a feeling of essential non-relatedness to the rest of the world, while for the Fulani the beginning is in a set of relationships that the person finds himself to be in with other beings.

P.S.: This article was written in the spring of 1969 in response to proposal that a book of essays be edited in honor of Dorothy Lee. Readers familiar with the sensitive and highly original writings of this student of man (cf. Freedom and Culture, Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1959) may recognize that the problem set myself in this essay, and the methods I employ to deal with it, owe a great debt to her teachings. Having recently learned that the publication of the complete Festschrift has been cancelled, I now offer what was to be my contribution to it to the readers of Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines.