

# Some notes on the Fulani of Bamenda, in West-Cameroon

by Doctor M. D. W. Jeffreys

During the years 1936-1945 when in the British Colonial Civil Service, I administered the division of Bamenda, then the size of Wales, I was able to collect some notes on the local Fulani<sup>1</sup>. Among these notes are those concerning their tradition of origin.

Before giving these Fulani traditions I propose to give four from Britons well acquainted with these people.

## British Sources

Dr. Baikie (1856, pp. 174, 175) on the upper Benue in 1854 reported the comments of the Sarikin Hausa of Hamarawa on the origins of the Fulani: "... he (the Sarikin) said that he had always been told that the country they (the Fulani) came from was near Tumbuktu, and was named Male, probably meaning the District of Melli south-west from that city. This differs a little from the story given by Mr. Koelle's informant at Sierra Leone, who traced his race from Futa Toro, northward of the Gambia: but, after all, the difference is trifling, as the Melli of Arab geographers includes Futa Toro. From these regions they migrated eastwards, as a pastoral race, and where now stands the city of Sokoto, the vision appeared to the priest Fodio, which inspired him to action, and to deeds which ended in the subjugation of the fairest province of Central Africa. At this moment there are two great divisions of the Pulo race—the one, the Western or Senegambia Pulbe, and the other the Eastern Pulbe, to whom the name Fulata, as given by the Bornuese, more particularly applies. In appearance the people of these two branches closely resemble each other; those whom I met up the Binue being the same in feature and in manner with the Pulbe of Timbo and of the towns near Sierra Leone."

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1. For the origin of this word see M. D. W. Jeffreys, *L'origine du nom Fulani*, *Bulletin de la Société d'Etudes Camerounaises* Numéro 5. Année 1944.

The next authority is Taylor (1921, p. 7) the author of the Fulani-Hausa series of seven books who speculates on Fulani origins as follows. "The question of the origin of the Fulani is one of the most discussed and interesting subjects of the ethnologist. Some have tried to prove their origins from the Malays or Polynesians; others from the Gypsies driven from their Indo-Germanic homes by the Magyars, via Egypt; others including Delafosse, from the children of Israel who were in Egypt under the Pharaohs. The Pentateuch tells us that these Israelites returned to the country of their fathers, but Delafosse thinks it is possible that a number of them under a descendant of Joseph escaped from Egypt via the Nile and settled in the north of Africa. Others including Barth, identify them with the Leucoethiopians, or white Ethiopians, of Pliny and Ptolemy, though these are more probably the ancestors of the Berbers."

The next authority is Dr. Meek (1925, I, pp. 94-96) who wrote: "Ethnically the Fulani are a puzzle, and there are many theories of their origin. The traditional first chief of the Fulani was Ilo Falagui, son of Ham, and there is much to be said for the theory of the Hamitic origin of this people. The physical resemblance between the purer Fulani and representations of the proto-Egyptians is remarkable. (For example, see the picture of a proto-Egyptian given in Prof. Elliot-Smith's *Ancient Egyptians*). There is in both, the same shape of head, the oval face, the slight build suggestive of effeminacy, the characteristic chin-tuft, the absence of moustache and of the peppercorn hair of the Negro. The Fulani traditionally derive from the Pharaohs of Egypt their plaited method of doing their hair, as well as their custom of circumcision.

"Chantre and Broca, on physical grounds, relate the Fulani to the Fellahs of the Nile valley. Muller, on linguistic grounds classes them with the Naba of the Upper Nile. Other writers have thought there might be a connection between the Phoenicians and the Fulani. The reason for this assumption is, no doubt, that the Fulani are red and the Greeks called the Phoenicians the red men. There is also a possibility of some ancient connection with a Phrygian people. They wear a Phrygian cap, and have the Phrygian helmet-method of doing the hair... The Fulani are probably a very ancient Libyan tribe whose original home was Egypt or Asia."

None of these speculations on the origin of the Fulani satisfy me but that which Palmer gives, does. Furthermore it fits, as will be seen, the traditional story of origin of the Fulani.

Palmer (1931, pp. 35, 36, 33), who had much experience of the Fulani as governor of northern Nigeria, wrote; "Briefly then, the Fulani or Fulbe were the result of the union of Arabs and Judaizing Berbers who came into the Maghrib 650-750 A. D. with Tourud who had, in the Roman and Byzantine era, been the inhabitants of the region of Ganar, or Tagant, and Adrar in Mauritania. After helping the Arabs to destroy the Sarakolle or Wakore polity of Ghana, they were, in turn, driven south into the Senegal and Niger by Tuareg about 1050 A. D. and we first meet with them in the pages of El Bekri as an exclusive and indigent white race, alien to the surrounding populations. There is more than one reference in the books by Timbuctu authors, which shows that they were intensely disliked both by the Berbers (Tuareg) and negroes. They were raided and sold as slaves by Sonni Ali of Songhay, and notables would not let their children marry them. The first clear notices of them by Arab and other authors under their name of Fulani or Fulbe occurs in Makrisi (1364-1442) and Cadamosto (about 1450). ...It would then appear unnecessary to suggest any other origin for the Fulani than a fusion between Cushite Berber tribes in the region between Tarudant and Massina with Liby-Phoenicians and later with Judaizing Berbers".

Palmer's suggested origin of the Fulani places them as of Caucasian or white stock finally settling in the regions of Futa Toro and Futa Jalon. This suggested origin seems the most plausible and the most satisfactory and agrees with Fulani tradition as given to me by Maidaiki, a helpless, middle-aged cripple of the Tukankejo lineage and a half brother of Ardo Sunda then living in the Wiya tribal area. I was able to collect another similar narrative from Mallam Mommadu of the Wellarbe lineage. This Mallam was born at Ngaundere and belongs to the Ba'en, division of the Fulbe people, that is to say Mommadu belongs to the **giddan** or town Fulani. Ardo Sunda, since deceased, was a most enlightened, progressive and co-operative Fulani. To instruct his sons Ardo Sunda retained Mommadu at his camp. I was also fortunate enough to come across an account in an Arabic document called *Deptere Wal-karte*.

### **Maidaiki's story**

In the beginning we were not Muslims and we lived in Ma'le. The Kano chief who was a Muslim summoned us to get a banner and to become Muslims. It was the Kano, not the Sokoto, chief who called us. We went to Kano and the chief gave us a banner

and we agreed to become Muslims but we said that we could not sit down in one place, we must move about with our cattle for the sake of the grazing. We suggested to the Kano chief that he should take our elders and our important men and settle them in town while our herdsmen could roam about with the cattle. The Kano chief gave our elders a territory called Jafen to graze in and they occupied it and that is how we got our name of Jafen<sup>2</sup>. We are also called Fulbe Ma'le which includes the two main divisions of our people, namely the Fulbe E'gal, the roaming Fulbe and the Fulbe Jo'nde, or the squatting Fulbe. "Ma're" means cattle in our tongue. We also call ourselves Ma're, but others call us Ma'le. Originally all Fulbe came from Ma'le.

### **Mallam Mommadu's story**

The Jafen call such townsmen as myself, Hwiaen and we retaliate by calling them Bororo after the name of their cattle, Bororoji.<sup>3</sup> These Bororo call themselves Jafen while we call ourselves Ba'en. Both branches call themselves Fulbe, which is the plural of Pulo, a person. No matter whether we are town or country folk, Bororo or Hwiaen, we all speak one language, Fulfulde. In the same way all the Fulbe people, no matter to what branch they belong came out of the country called Hirrna,<sup>4</sup> somewhere near Kano. We, the Ba'en came from Malle whereas the Bororoji came from Jafen and so call themselves Jafen. Both Jafen and Malle are in Hirrna.

The story of the origin of the Fulbe goes back to the days of Mohamet who sent from Medina six disciples to convert to the true faith the people of Hirrna. Of these six, one was called Yakaba.<sup>5</sup> Mohamet had prophesied before Yakuba had left Medina that he, Yakuba, would be the father of a people to be called

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2. Taylor (1932, p. 94) gives Jafunjo, Jafun'en one of the main families of the nomadic Fulani.

3. Ardo Sabga, living near Bamessing, and other Ardos say that the original Bororo were the Wodabe. This lineage (Ienyol) had and still has the largest number of cattle which were called *bororoji* whence the Wodabe were called Bororo. As a consequence the name was extended to all nomadic, pastoral Fulbe so that the Jafen were even called Bororo.

4. "Hirrna" here means West, cfr. "Hirrange" west.

5. The pronunciation of this name varied in the telling. Sometimes it was Hakaba, sometimes Yakuba. M. D. W. J.

## SOME NOTES ON THE FULANI OF BAMENDA

Fulbe. Mohamet had told Yakuba that when he heard his children talking Fulfulde he was to return at once to Medina if he wished to see him, Mahomet, alive.

After the six disciples had spent some years in Malle teaching the true faith, the time came for them to return. The King of Malle protested at all of the disciples going away at once, saying that just as his people were learning the true faith they were to be left without a teacher and a guide. He asked that one of the six should remain behind.

None of the six would agree to remain, so each wrote his name on a piece of paper, folded it and placed it on the ground and then the Malle king sent one of his heralds to choose a paper. This was done three times, on three different days and each time the herald without knowing it, picked up the paper with Yakuba's name on it. The other five said that it was clear that it was Allah's will for Yakuba to remain behind in Malle. The other five then departed.

The Malle king now gave Yakuba his daughter, Bajemongo, as a wife. After a time Bajemongo bore a daughter who was dumb. Then latter on she bore a son. One day when the little boy was crying Bajemongo was amazed to hear her formerly dumb daughter comforting the crying babe saying to it in a strange tongue "Leda, leda, inna mai warte". (Don't cry, don't cry, your mother is coming), and the little boy apparently understood what was said.

Bajemongo reported this incident to Yakuba saying that she did not understand the talk of their daughter. Yakuba started to weep and remarked that what Mahomet had prophesied had come true. These children were the start of a new race the Fulbe<sup>6</sup>, and that if he wished to see Mahomet alive he must set out at once. However he tarried awhile.

While still living with Bajemongo Yakuba warned her against sleeping away from the house. She disobeyed him and one day he noticed that she had conceived without his assistance. Thereafter he left her alone and she bore a daughter and latter on a son. When Yakuba asked Bajemongo the name of the father of those children, she replied that she did not know the person responsible, nor his name. Yakuba then told her to tie a Koranic talisman

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6. M. D. W. Jeffreys. *The Speculative origin of the Fulani Language. Africa.* Vol. XVII. Jan. 1947.

"Liaru" round her neck, and go with her two illegitimate children to the local river. There she would see her paramour come out of the water. She did so, and a man rose out of the river and Bajemongo said to him, "Here are your two children" and leaving them there she departed.

The man spoke to the two children saying he would give them something, a thing he called "na'i" (cattle) but of which they then had no idea. He told the two children that with this gift they could never return to the town but would always have to live in the bush with the "na'i". He stated that the "na'i" would come out of the river<sup>7</sup> and follow them and that they must walk away from the river calling Hi! Hi! Hi! and then the "na'i" would follow. He told them that they must not look back because if they did, the "na'i" would cease to come out of the river.

..... The two children obeyed but after a time they looked back and the river which had become a river of cattle became again a river of water and that is why the Jafen haven't as much cattle as they might have had.

Yakuba now decided that it was time for him to return and see Mahomet. Before he departed he called Ladan, his Malle Muslim servant, and told him he was to marry Bajemongo and look after her as he, Yakuba, would not return to Malle. Ladan refused this duty and so Yakuba took Ladan into the presence of the king of Malle who then ordered Ladan to marry Bajemongo

Yakuba now set off but on the way heard that Mahomet had died and so when Yakuba reached Adamawa he halted and died there. Bajemongo bore Ladan a son called Waygareyksen.

It is from these children of Bajemongo that both the Fulbe and the Hausa have come. The boy and girl born to Yakuba married and started the Ba'en as we town Fulani call ourselves and the boy and girl who were illegitimate married and started Jafen who speak Fulfulde.

Waygareyksen was the father of the people who speak Hausa. Hence the Ba'en and the Jafen have the same mother and speak the same language but have different fathers.

All this story which I am recounting is recorded in a book called "Kajino Walkarti" and Mallam Alkali Bajorga at Chup has the book, so also has Mallam Umaru at Bikom.

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7. M. D. W. Jeffreys. The Water origin of Cattle. *South African Journal of Science*. June 1948.

SOME NOTES ON THE FULANI OF BAMENDA

Here ends the Fulani accounts of their origin. I was never able to get into touch with either Bajorga or Umaru.

The Muslim mission under Yakuba to Malle did not succeed in making the Malle true converts. They were still mostly pagan and it was not until the Shehu, whose descendants now rule at Sokoto, had made seven journeys into Malle that the Malle became true Muslims. His next task was to convert the Bororo. The following account was then given to me. The Shehu called a number of the Bororo together and said that though they were good Fulani they were not Muslims. He recommended them to accept the teachings of Mohamet and that they should then make obeisance to him—the Shehu—who would bestow on them a banner.

The Bororo then fixed a day when they would meet the Shehu. They never turned up. The Shehu sent for them again and told them he would like to organise them as Muslims into one people and to appoint one of them as a chief to rule over them. They replied that they would hold a meeting and arrange to send their deputies to meet the Shehu. They never did so. Where upon the Shehu laid a curse upon them saying that for ever they would be wanderers and that their women would rank as slaves to build the huts and barter in the markets. Neither of these two activities which the Bororo women still perform are customs observed by other Muslim women. There are other Jafen customs that are not Muslim such as the "detawal" form of marriage, namely to elope with another man's wife to the sanctuary of your own camp; the "shero" or the public flogging of young men at feasts.

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