

# FOCUS

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## TO STAY OR TO GO?

**22** | Between the City and the Savannah

**30** | Homesickness is in the Genes

**38** | A Decision for Life

22



On the move: two Wodaabe women load up parts of their mobile pastoral camp. Donkeys carry most of the loads, but motorcycles are also used, if available.

PHOTO: FLORIAN KÖHLER / MPI FOR SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY

# BETWEEN THE CITY AND THE SAVANNAH

*TEXT: MECHTHILD ZIMMERMANN*

The day-to-day life of the Wodaabe, a traditionally nomadic population group in Niger, has never involved staying in one place for long. But since the 1980s, an increasing number of them have begun to settle in cities to work. Florian Köhler, a researcher at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle, has observed the effects this has had on the lives of the Wodaabe.

Nano, Taafa and Maalam Buuyo are brothers. And although all three have taken different paths in life, they still pursue a common goal. They belong to the Wodaabe, a traditional nomadic community. The brothers grew up on the savannah, moving from pasture to pasture with their herds of zebu cattle, animals not prone to excessive eating with long, curved horns. The group's other possessions fit on the backs of a few donkeys. Life was driven by the rhythm of the seasons, the search for water and pastures, the welfare of the animals. As boys, the three of them herded goats together and later, as teenagers, danced the Geerewol with their peers at clan festivals – a tradition for which the Wodaabe have become known beyond Africa.

## Scattered groups, diversely networked

Since then, the lives of the three brothers have followed rather different paths. Maalam, the youngest, continues to live as a herder in the Damergou region, where he takes care of the family's herds. The other two have moved to the city for work. Nano lives about 150 kilometers from Maalam, in Zinder, the second-largest city in Niger, and often returns to the family's pastoral camp. Taafa, in contrast, lives far in Niger's south-east, in the city of Diffa, more than 600 kilometers away from his relatives. Despite this, he still maintains close contact with the family. "As different as the biographies of the three seem, they complement each other," says Florian Köhler, researcher at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology. "Viewed in economic terms, this is a diversification strategy: the brothers who live in the city open up new income opportunities in order to spread the financial risks and improve the family's income, while the third brother takes care of the herds."

Taafa Buuyo was the first person from the Wodaabe ethnic group that Köhler met – purely by chance. The researcher went to Diffa in Niger in 2004 as an aid worker. While there he employed a watchman for the house that he was renting at the time. This watchman was Taafa Buuyo, who lived with his wife and children in a small house on the property. "The security situation in Diffa was quite relaxed back then," Köhler explains, "but it was just normal for foreigners from the West to employ security staff." And thus, he got the opportunity to get to know the Wodaabe family better. After three years in Diffa, Köhler worked on another development project, this time in the city of Zinder. And again, there was a Wodaabe watchman – Baji Buuyo, a half-brother of Taafa. Over time, Köhler's scientific interest in the nomads and their life between the city and the savannah grew. In 2010, the anthropologist decided to systematically research the changes in

Wodaabe society. One central question that interested him was: what is changing in terms of belonging and social cohesion, mobility, and the relationship to other ethnic groups when a part of the group settles in cities for a longer period of time?

According to estimates from the 1990s, the Wodaabe comprise around 100,000 people, divided into fifteen clans. These clans live in small communities, which are scattered across the savannah, but are still interconnected in many ways. When a devastating drought hit the Sahel between 1983 and 1985, many nomads had to give up their former lives. Countless animals died and their owners settled on the outskirts of larger settlements; one reason for this being that the state and international organizations only distributed relief supplies in towns and villages at the time.

Some Wodaabe were able to rebuild their herds; others stayed in the cities. Much has changed in the pastoral areas of Niger. The country's population has grown from just under 7 million to more than 25 million since the mid-1980s. Population pressure means that an increasing amount of land is used for agriculture: areas that were once open pastureland are now fields. The pastoralists are running out of space, and these changes threaten the Wodaabe's existence. Florian Köhler says: "In light of this, income in the city ensures survival in the pastoral context as well." However, it was important for Köhler not to focus one-sidedly on the problems in his research, but rather on how people actively deal with them, their strategies and approaches to solving them.

To carry out his study, the researcher lived with a Wodaabe group for 15 months. This is in line with the ideal of participant observation, according to which anthropologists should, if possible, participate in the social and cultural life of the community under study for at least one annual cycle. The aim is to gain as deep an understanding as possible of community structures, ways of thinking and acting – but without judging these things. For Florian Köhler, that meant learning Fulfulde, the language of the Wodaabe, living by humble means with them in the city as well as in the savan-

**“Many Wodaabe find the city dirty and confining.”**

FLORIAN KÖHLER



City life with privileges: this Wodaabe watchman (center) can live with his wife and children on his employer's property.

nah, and traveling together with them on open trucks, motorbikes, camels, in bush taxis, and on foot.

In Zinder, one of the main sites of Köhler's research, there lives a larger group of Wodaabe. Unlike the time before the great drought, when migration to the cities was a seasonal phenomenon, young men now settle in the city for longer periods. In Florian Köhler's research group, most of them work as watchmen, partly for expatriate businessmen or aid workers, partly at markets or in shops. Many have brought their wives and children with them to the city. The women also earn money: by braiding hair, or pounding millet, or as domestic helpers for wealthier families. The living conditions vary greatly: those working as watchmen for private individuals can often live with their families in a small house on the property. For others, it is more difficult to find a place to stay. They camp in unclaimed open spaces on the outskirts of the city or on construction sites, where the owner tolerates their presence, as it reduces the risk of construction materi-

als being stolen. "If possible, the urban Wodaabe also keep a few goats in the places where they stay; they also grow millet or beans," Florian Köhler tells us. "That's quite common in Nigerien cities."

Regardless of the specific housing situation, the Wodaabe mainly have negative associations with the city. They find the urban environment dirty and unhealthy and feel confined there. The positive counterpart to the city is the open pastureland of the savannah. This is what most Wodaabe in the cities continue to identify with, even if they have not lived there for years or decades. The community of the pastoral camp from which they originate is still their "home" – even if this is not a fixed place, but a social group that is itself mobile. The deep connection arising from a community of origin remains, regardless of whether its members live in the city or in the country. Some urban Wodaabe also own cattle themselves: they ask relatives to buy the animals and take care of them. The investments are often not enough to build up larger herds. However,

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PHOTO: FLORIAN KÖHLER / MPI FOR SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY

26 Improved accommodation: some Wodaabe live in the city on building plots where work has been paused; this is a common occurrence in Niger.

Köhler sees this as an expression of attachment to pastoral life, one that simultaneously provides support for relatives who continue to live nomadically.

Cell phones now play an important role in the exchange between the scattered communities. The cell phone network in Niger has undergone increasing expansion over the last few years, stretching even to rather sparsely populated areas. At markets in rural regions, generator-powered chargers provide the necessary electricity. Cell phones allow nomadic groups to inform each other about the condition of pastures in different areas, about the condition of watering holes, or about market prices for animals or millet. Thanks to mobile telephony, those who live in the city can call their relatives in the pastoral camps at pretty much any time. One Wodaabe woman who settled in the city with her husband told Florian Köhler that cell phones had played an important role when it came to accepting a life far from her home community. However, cell phones do not replace the frequent mutual visits of relatives in cities and the countryside – on the contrary, they are also used to organize larger meetings.

Many Wodaabe are extraordinarily mobile – although few of them have a driver's license, or even their own car.

They are already accustomed to changing location regularly thanks to the tradition of nomadic life. Even if they have lived in the city for a very long time, many Wodaabe there try to return to the pastoral camp as often as possible – preferably for longer periods of time. Women and children often spend the entire school holidays there during the summer rainy season. During this time, for example, the boys help their cousins herd goats, keeping them in touch with nomadic life. Conversely, relatives from the countryside often visit family members in the city, too.

**“Most return to the pastoral camp as often as possible.”**

FLORIAN KÖHLER

Mobility in Niger, however, works somewhat differently than in Europe: there is no railroad, and the state operates hardly any public transport. According to figures from 2014, only about 4800 of the approximately 20,000 kilometers of road network are paved. Nonetheless, the Nigerien population as a whole is very mobile. Rural collective taxis operated by small entrepreneurs connect towns and villages; these could be minivans, Land Rovers, trucks, or old Unimogs with open loading areas, depending on the demand and the road conditions. This serves to provide a functioning transport system for people and goods – even if it is usually not very comfortable, as Florian Köhler experienced first-hand. In the countryside, camels, donkeys, and oxcarts are still vital means of transport.

Even though the urban Wodaabe's ties to their home community are strong, permanent close coexistence in the city entails new contacts with members of other ethnic groups. Europeans might find it surprising that different ethnic groups with different languages and

cultures are living permanently on one and the same territory and have been doing so for some considerable time. In the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Europe developed into largely uniform states in terms of language and culture. On other continents, however, especially in Africa, the coexistence of different ethnic groups is a matter of course. And contrary to what we often perceive, this coexistence is often peaceful to a large degree. Despite the close proximity, the groups hardly mix. According to Florian Köhler, there are several reasons for this: “The cohesion within the community plays a role, but so does the individual's attachment to their own culture and rules – especially marriage rules that dictate that one should marry within one's own ethnic group.” All this ensures that ethnic boundaries are maintained. At the same time, the different ethnic groups occupy different economic and social niches.

In Niger, for example, the Wodaabe traditionally keep mainly cattle, but there are also other nomadic ethnic groups that breed camels or sheep, as well as sedentary ethnic groups that mainly farm or trade. “Complementarity helps to avoid conflict and at the same time keeps the ethnic groups in contact via barter or trade,” says Köhler. However, conflicts do also arise here, especially between farmers and keepers of livestock. For example, animals invading fields and eating or trampling cultivated plants is a common occurrence.

## Mocking and joking encounters

One regional particularity in the relations between different ethnic groups in Niger is called known as joking relationships. These were even recognized as intangible cultural heritage by Unesco in 2014. A case in point is the playful taunting and banter that occurs between the Kanuri, an ethnic group that mainly practices agriculture, and the Wodaabe. All members of the respective ethnic groups, even if they are strangers to each other, exchange provocations and pleasantries when they meet. In doing so, they allude to clichés about each one another. For Köhler, joking together has a dual function: “On the one hand, you are setting yourself apart from the others by emphasizing certain

Hardly any usable space: Niger is about twice the size of France, but two-thirds of the country is desert. Most of the population lives in the south, where agriculture is possible. Florian Köhler focused his research on the savannah areas of southeastern Niger.



Pastoral life in the city: many Wodaabe keep a few animals in the city to support themselves.

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## SUMMARY

Since the 1980s, members of the Wodaabe, a traditionally nomadic ethnic group, have increasingly been settling in cities – which also helps support nomadic life in the savannah.

In the city, there is increased convergence with other ethnic groups and a partial alignment with the majority culture.

At the same time, the urban migrants are in close contact with their pastoral relatives, which has the effect of strengthening cultural continuity.

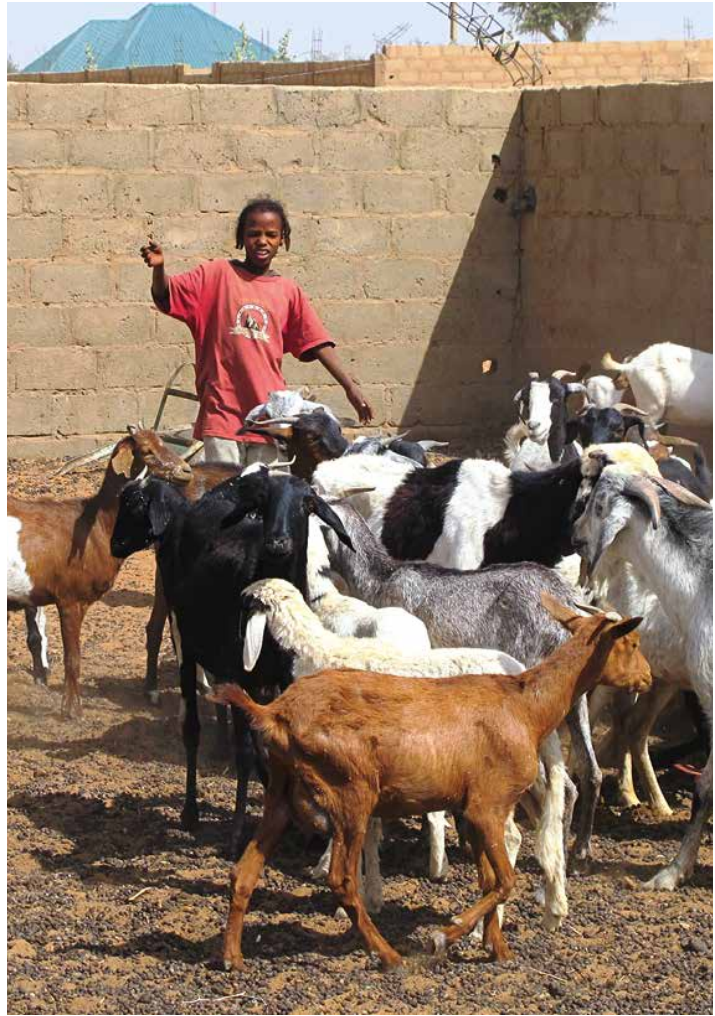


PHOTO: FLORIAN KÖHLER / MPI FOR SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY

characteristics of theirs in a witty and pointed way. On the other, this is exactly what establishes a relationship, because the mockery is reciprocal, and the shared humour connects.”

In the cities, where the Wodaabe live in close proximity to other groups, relationships also change. The women in particular establish networks in the immediate vicinity. For example, the Max Planck researcher reports that sharing food with neighbors and acquaintances is common. The children naturally integrate the most; inter-ethnic friendships almost inevitably develop at school. This also means that the parents become better acquainted. However, proximity also has an effect on cultural distinctions. At school, Wodaabe children mostly speak the majority language Hausa, and many give up ethnic characteristics, such as traditional hairstyles. To avoid being ridiculed by their classmates, the girls forsake the characteristic topknot on their foreheads,

and the boys cut off their traditional braids, sometimes without the consent of their parents. However, the hairstyle is an integral part of the Wodaabe ideal of beauty and thus important for participating in cultural events such as the Geerewol dance competitions. As Köhler has observed, though, the young men have come up with a pragmatic solution to the problem: they make hairpieces from their cut-off braids and join in the dances with these instead.

Not all contradictions between urban and rural life can be bridged so easily, however. The longer the Wodaabe live in the cities, the stronger the influence of the majority society becomes: the Wodaabe are not only increasingly adapting their outward appearance, but also changing their attitude towards certain moral issues. “The Islamic religion plays a special role here,” says Florian Köhler. “Although almost all Wodaabe nominally belong to Islam, in rural areas the rules on marriage or sexual intercourse



Three brothers, one goal: Maalam Buuyo (left) lives as a livestock herder, Nano and Taafa (center and right) work as watchmen in two different towns. Both of them support the extended family with their income.

before marriage, for example, are usually still determined more to a greater extent by their own tradition.” Urban influence, for example, means that young women are encouraged to wear a veil and not to go out at night.

## Translocal communities also exist in our society

“Today,” says Florian Köhler, “the identity of the Wodaabe as an ethnic group is equally shaped by life in the savannah as by that in the city. Young people, in particular, who grew up in the city, get on there as naturally as they do in the rural pastoral camp, creating complex links between these two spheres through constant mobility, communication, and exchange,” says the researcher with reference to the translocal dimension of urban migration. Translocality is a concept from social science

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that has been gaining importance for several years. It posits that social ties between people are not necessarily bound to one a single place, but exist even can even exist over greater distances thanks to modern means of communication and transportation. In this respect, translocal relationships differ from the classic village community, whose members are tied to their hometown and concurrently to the people who live there. One particularity of the Wodaabe is that, as a nomadic ethnic group, they have always formed a translocal community. Consequently, maintaining social connection over a certain distance is not a new development for them – as Köhler has observed. The fact that the Wodaabe are culturally familiar with mobility and the temporary separation of the social group also helps them to maintain community ties between the city and the savannah.

The example of the Wodaabe can also give us in Europe new perspectives on the coexistence of people from different countries or cultures. For example, many migrants here in Europe also maintain contact with their home community, language, and culture. Yet at the same time, they are an active part of our society – these parts of their identity are in no way mutually exclusive. Furthermore, this shows that even among people who have not migrated, circles of friends and relatives are now expanding over further distances. Translocality is becoming more and more commonplace for many of us. Perhaps this common ground can help us to develop more empathy for people with a migrant background and to define the concept of “homeland” a little more generously.

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