Sharing a Valley. The changing relations between agriculturalists and pastoralists in the Niger Valley of Benin

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Introduction

It is a tense period in the month of November in the Niger Valley of Benin, a strip of land enclosed by a forest reserve and the Republic of Niger. The pastoralists from Niger are crossing the river in large numbers and there is no way of keeping them on the other side. They come to profit from the crop residues but on this side of the river some crops have not even been harvested yet and the agriculturalists sleep in their fields to protect their crops. Tension rises...

Standing under a tree, Ibrahim, a thin but wiry man beckons his visitor to follow him to his compound, "welcome, welcome" he says and offers a gourd filled with water. Groups of silent children gather round the visitor. In the centre of the compound women are pounding cereals in giant wooden mortars, their bodies shiny with sweat. A Eucalyptus tree offers virtually no shade in the scorching heat. The person I am visiting is an inhabitant of the Beninese village of Tondikuaria. His land has been damaged by roaming cattle twice now.

He wants to relate his experiences because he is upset: "The first time my field was damaged was in June. It was caused by cattle from the neighbouring pastoral camp. The proprietor admitted that one of his cows might have left his camp and because he did not deny it, I knew that it was not bad will; I believed that the cow just wandered away from the camp on its own. I forgave the proprietor because only young millet shoots were concerned, not a mature crop ready to be harvested. But the second time was a disaster because it was much later in the rainy season. A cow or several cattle - I do not know - just went in and flattened all the stalks of sorghum. The damage was terrible. After I saw that there had been cattle in my field I called on the chief of the village and the extension officer. They drew up an official report and sent it to the mayor. The culprit did not report himself and now the matter is being dealt with at a district level but nothing whatsoever is happening. And it is always the same problem. The authorities do nothing in the end whereas I even had to pay the extension officer's petrol because otherwise he would not have come at all to survey the damage. Is it not terrible that in one night five months' work is destroyed? Yes, with the local pastoralists we have only one problem that interferes with our friendship and that's damage to our fields. But the pastoralists from Niger are our enemies. When they arrive, you must keep a constant watch over your field.

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1 To protect the people's privacy, fictional names are used.
because they could not care less whether there's damage or not. These foreigners are like dew: you think they are there in the morning but they disappear suddenly when the sun has risen, leaving you with the damage inflicted by their cattle.”

It is still early in the morning; Sournana and his eldest son have been busy milking the cows since the very early hours and offer me milk after I have sat down. The pastoralist has set up his camp in an uncultivated area in Tondikuar; a small tent made of stalks for his old mother and two large huts for his wives. The cows are impatient for they are used to leaving immediately after being milked. Sournana has not many cows left and tells me about his problems: "Last year was a very bad year. I lost many animals and that's the reason why I could not hire people to grow millet. I now work on the land myself with the help of my eldest son while the youngest one looks after the herd. But today we all have to go with the youngest to help him water the animals. There is hardly any water left in the area far from the cultivated fields because the puddles have evaporated after the rain has stopped. We have to go to the river now but it's evident that all the corridors leading to the river are blocked. Certainly you need three people to keep the animals under control. Care must be taken because when an agriculturalist notices that his field has been damaged by a hundred pastoralists and sees you walking by in the distance on your own, he will accuse you while you have not even done anything."

In northern Benin, as in other parts of semi-arid West Africa, the land is mostly used in a complementary way by agriculturalists and pastoralists. During the dry season, fallow lands are used as dry-season grazing areas for cattle and during the rainy season cattle are grazed in areas far from farmland to prevent any crop destruction. As soon as the harvest is over, the herds return to the harvested fields to benefit from the crop residues. In some regions the agriculturalist makes an arrangement with the pastoralist concerning the grazing of crop residues in return for manure for the agriculturalists' field.

Besides the complementary utilization of the same land, other relations have developed between these specialized groups of people. These vary in intensity from place to place. As McCown (1979) described, some pastoral groups are engaged in exchange relations with agriculturalists by bartering livestock products for cereals, bringing out the complementary character of the agricultural and pastoral economies. Other pastoralists are linked with the agriculturalists in an intricate network of service and social relations. Especially those pastoral groups who have settled in close vicinity to agriculturalists' villages maintain mutual relations.

It is evident that in a situation of cohabitation of groups with different modes of existence disputes may arise. The most common cause is the threat of crop damage because crops and livestock are in close vicinity on the same land; turning the agriculturalists and pastoralists into rivals during a certain period of the year. The earliest written records available, such as reports from the colonial administration, reveal that disputes between the two groups have always existed. However, from the 1980s onwards reports have appeared on disputes evolving into more violent confrontations. In 1991 a report even reached the Dutch newspapers:

Niamey (AFP, Reuter) - At least 98 nomads of the Fulbe people in Niger were murdered on Wednesday by agriculturalists of the Haussa people. The massacre took place in a region half a mile east of the capital Niamey. This was announced by the President of the National Conference on Thursday. The Haussa were furious after the Fulbe (also known as Fulani or Peuhl) and their cattle, sheep and goats had moved through their region. The
conflict started on Tuesday after a row between an agriculturalist and a pastoralist who wanted to go across his field. The pastoralist killed the agriculturalist. The other agriculturalists in the region sought vengeance. They set fire to the pastoralists' huts and went at them with chopping knives. Among the victims were 66 women and 13 children (Volkskrant, 1 November 1991)

Such an event generates many questions. How can the event be explained? Was it an ethnic conflict? Did the previous regulatory mechanisms that used to prevent disputes evolving into major conflicts cease to work? Or was the problem related to the availability of resources e.g. after a period of drought?

And the most important question of all is whether the reported cases were isolated incidents or whether tensions had risen over the whole agro-pastoral zone. Hussein (1998: 39) warns that through the lack of rigorous studies of changes of conflict and of the difference in levels of conflict, the danger exists that notions about increasing conflict are based on collected anecdotes only. Therefore he calls for more detailed and historical studies to try to explain the background to such events.

This study is one of those case studies in a high-tension zone. It tries to contribute to a deeper understanding of the coexistence of two different modes of existence in the same area. It looks into the changes that have occurred since the period of drought in the early 1970s in relations between agriculturalists and pastoralists in the Niger Valley in northern Benin. An investigation has been carried out into what effect the change of the ecological resource base has played in the process of change and what effects external influences such as government policy and increasing commercialization have had on these relations.

The study started in the summer of 1990 with a literature review and a visit to Berlin Free University where a large group of students had already done fieldwork among the Fulbe of Benin. The fieldwork covered the period from November 1990 until April 1993 with intermediate periods in the Netherlands. From 1993 onwards correspondence was maintained with one of the field assistants. According to the information received to date, no major changes have taken place.

The study is organized in the following way. In the next chapter the coexistence of agriculturalists and pastoralists is put in a wider perspective on the basis of a literature review. The zone in which contacts between agricultural and pastoral groups take place is defined, linkages developed between these groups over the course of time are described and the causes of disputes in different regions are analyzed.

In the third chapter an analytical framework is presented to allow analysis of the problem statement; the limits of the present study are defined and the research methodology is presented.

The focus shifts to the Beninese situation in the fourth chapter. The modes of existence in the past are described and the different linkages between pastoralists and agriculturalists in the region are presented and analyzed.

In Chapter 5 the changes in the region since the period of drought in the 1970s are described and their impact on the modes of existence is discussed. A clear distinction is made between changes in the resource base and the influence of external factors. Part of this chapter was published in 1998 as an article entitled "Le Poisson est Devenu du Mil;

Chapter 6 deals with the effects of the changes on the linkages between the specialized groups. In addition the possible direct causes for confrontations are described and the measures taken by agriculturalists and pastoralists themselves to prevent these confrontations. Part of this chapter was published in 1999 under the title "The End of the Herding Contract: Decreasing Complementarity between Fulbe Pastoralists and Dendi Agriculturalists in Northern Benin" in Pastoralists under Pressure? Fulbe Societies Confronting Change in West Africa edited by V. Azarya et al., published by Brill, Leiden.

Chapter 7 addresses the question of how the changes in the political and organizational setting have affected the mechanisms by which manageable disputes have turned into hostile conflicts in the region.

Finally, in Chapter 8 an overview of the research results is given, conclusions are drawn and policy implications presented.