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OF INTEGRATION
AND CONFLICT:
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NGAANKA INTER-
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AMONG THE FULBE
WODAABE IN NIGER

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The Dialectics of Integration and Conflict: reciprocity and structural opposition in *ngaanka* inter-clan alliances among the Fulbe Wodaabe in Niger¹

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Abstract

The Wodaabe, a group of Fulbe pastoralists in Niger, practice two contrasting forms of marriage. The first, called *koobgal*, is clan endogamous and based on betrothal arrangements between families; the second, called *te'egal*, is generally clan exogamous and based on elopement of already married women with men from other clans. The paper elaborates on the cultural rules of *te'egal* marriage and its socio-political dimension. Sanctioned in a ceremonial framework of inter-clan alliances (*ngaanka*), *te'egal* marriage is of significance for structuring the political relations between Wodaabe clans, and as a culture-specific feature of distinction it is crucial in defining ethnic group membership. By interpreting the complex of *ngaanka* and *te'egal* with Mauss' concept of 'total prestation' as a form of reciprocal exchange, the paper shows that these institutions, despite their inherent conflict potential, have an integrative function and play a central role for identity construction and cultural reproduction. *Ngaanka* partnership opposes clans as rivals about each other's women, yet also ties them together through the kinship bonds resulting from *te'egal* inter-marriage.

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Introduction

Among more Islamised neighbouring populations, the Wodaaabe in Niger, a small group of pastoral Fulbe, have a bad reputation for ‘stealing’ each other’s wives. This practice, which the Wodaaabe call *te’egal*, is based less on violence than on mutual attraction and elopement. Since the consent of the women is presumed, yet not that of their husbands, acts of vengeance are common reactions. However, they are generally acted out on an individual level, without mobilising larger descent groups as might be assumed in an acephalous society with a segmentary lineage system.³ Although disapproved by the aggrieved husband in any particular case, *te’egal* in general is unanimously defended as a legitimate cultural principle governing the relations between clans. While forms of elopement marriage are known among other groups of pastoral Fulbe as well (e.g. Bocquéne 1986: 247ff.; Burnham 1996: 111f.; Reed 1932: 433), the particularity of Wodaaabe *te’egal* marriage is that it occurs within a formalised regulatory framework based on inter-clan agreements that, generally speaking, sanction the practice between clans and ban it within any one clan. Wodaaabe clans thus cooperate as rivals in an institutionalised competition of predatory intermarriage, their mutual consent to the practice being expressed and periodically renewed in reciprocal inter-clan ceremonies, called *ngaanka*.

This contribution has been stimulated by a recent theoretical discussion of Wodaaabe marriage by Nikolaus Schareika (2007, 2010a), which contains enlightening analytical insights, yet leaves important questions unresolved, in particular the crucial role of *ngaanka* for the institutionalisation of *te’egal* marriage as a legitimate social practice. This paper is thus an attempt to integrate some of the missing elements into the analysis of these institutions. It addresses the questions of what motivates the clans to cooperate in a competition over each other’s married women, how the consent about the practice is established and implemented, and how the conflicts resulting from it are controlled. By interpreting the complex of *ngaanka* and *te’egal* with Mauss’ (1925) concept of ‘total prestation’ as an institutionalised form of reciprocal exchange, I show that these institutions, despite their inherent conflict potential, have an integrative function and to this day play a central role for the cohesion of the ethnic group as a whole and, ultimately, for cultural reproduction.

Ethnographic Context

The Wodaaabe (sg.: Bodaado), part of the large Fulbe people, are known as highly mobile pastoralists, specialised in the breeding of zebu cattle. They live dispersed over wide areas of the West-African Sahel with the most important concentration in Niger and smaller groups in Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, and the Central African Republic. The Wodaaabe are organised in patrilineal descent groups that are part of a more complex lineage- and clan-system. In Niger, the Wodaaabe today divide into fifteen clans, each constituted by a number of sub-clans and lineages, and

³ The Wodaaabe can be roughly characterised as a segmentary lineage society, yet ‘segmentary contraposition cannot be generalized because the segments of the same level are dispersed and have no territorial attachment’ (Dupire 1975: 337).

belonging to either of two opposing clan clusters, Degereewol and Alijam.⁴ The Wodaabe themselves postulate an elaborate pattern of genealogical relations between clans, which follows the logics of the lineage model, but which is only to a limited degree historically founded (Dupire 1970: 221ff., 303f.). The contemporary structure must rather be understood as a result of continuous processes of fissions and regroupings due to a high degree of mobility and shifts in affiliation. Historically, Fulbe groups of different origin have been assimilated to the Wodaabe and integrated into their clan-genealogy after sufficient periods of co-residence, intermarriage, and shared ceremonial relations, while other groups have split away from the ethnic group (Bonfiglioli 1988).⁵ The different clans, and in many cases even the segments of one clan, live not in spatial proximity but dispersed over significant distances and are in some cases completely isolated one from another. A rather vague notion of the unity of the ethnic group is maintained through a network of relations between the different clans and their segments, but institutions or occasions that unite the whole group across clans do not exist (Dupire 1962: 319, 1970: 300f.). The Wodaabe live in loose migration groups, formed by a varying number of households of usually closely related kin. In the absence of a centralised form of political organisation, the most important function is that of the *ardo* (pl.: *ardube*). Originally, a pastoral leader on the level of the clan segment, nowadays the *ardo*, fulfils administrative functions for the state as a ‘tribal chief’.⁶ His authority, however, is based solely on his personal qualities and any family head can at any moment withdraw his allegiance and follow another *ardo* (Dupire 1970: 295). Decisions concerning interior affairs of a clan or relations between clans are taken communally by a council of elders (Schareika 2007, 2010a).

***Koobgal* and *te’egal* – two Contrasting Forms of Marriage**

Wodaabe marriage looks remarkably endogamous when ethnic identity is taken as a parameter. If one changes the scale, however, and looks for clan identity, two opposed, almost inverse, principles are in play, corresponding to the two principal forms of marriage that are practiced. The first, called *koobgal*, is a generally clan-endogamous union. It is a first marriage arranged between the families of the couple by betrothal, often from early childhood. The preferred patterns are FBD marriage and cross-cousin marriage. A majority of *koobgal* marriages are thus between kin who are

⁴ Although Dupire’s (1962) terms ‘primary lineage’ (*lignage primaire*) for the clan and ‘maximal lineage’ (*lignage maximal*) for the clan cluster are still widely in use, notably in the francophone literature (e.g. Loncke 2002; Lassibille 2008), I prefer not to adopt her terminology. A common ancestor might be assumed or acknowledged on these levels, but actual descent can in most cases not be traced. The term ‘clan cluster’, which I have chosen to refer to Dupire’s *lignage maximal*, also has the merit of emphasising the fact that the claim for common descent to explain the relations between the clans and the clan clusters is rather a social construct than a historic reality. The fifteen clans that constitute the Wodaabe in Niger today are: Degereji (also called Shahidooji), Gojanko’en, Jijjiiru, Njapto’en, Suudu Suka’el, Kasawsawa, Baagel’en and Hadaali (all in the Degereewol clan cluster); Bibbe Denke, Bii Ute’en, Bii Korony’en, Bii Nga’en, Yaamanko’en, Bii Hamma’en (also called Kabaawa) and Alamo’o (all in the Alijam cluster).

⁵ Although I refer to the Wodaabe here as an ethnic group, they can, in a wider context, also be regarded as a sub-ethnicity of the Fulbe (concerning this discussion, see also Diallo, Guichard and Schlee 2000: 232ff.; Boesen 2004; Köhler 2015). In contemporary Niger, the Wodaabe distinguish themselves clearly from other Fulbe groups and generally emphasise their difference. Although a perception of sharing cultural features with other Fulbe groups can be observed, the perception of difference generally prevails.

⁶ *Chef de tribu* (‘tribal chief’) is the local administrative title by the Nigerien state. Not every *ardo* is officially a *chef de tribu*. For a discussion of political offices among the Fulbe in general, see Kintz 1985; for a history of the ‘*chefferie traditionnelle*’ in Niger, see Fuglestad 1983.

genealogically closely related, and in many cases between agnates.⁷ The bride and groom do not have a say in the matter, nor is it easy for them as young men and women to refuse these prearranged engagements. The second form of marriage is called *te'egal*.⁸ It is also endogamous at the level of the ethnic group, yet generally clan-exogamous. *Koobgal* is the cultural ideal and thus of a higher social value than *te'egal*; the offspring of a *koobgal* marriage is considered of purer descent (Loncke 2002: 321). *Te'egal*, in contrast to *koobgal*, is a marriage of choice, contracted by the couple itself and not arranged by the families. For this reason, the relation of a man with his *te'egal* wife (or wives) is generally considered to be of more affectionate nature.

There are rare cases of *te'egal* within the same clan, but they are widely dismissed as harmful for the unity of the group. The reasons for this are fairly well explained in the following statement:

“Taking a woman who is already married, that is what we call *te'egal* – even if it is done in the own clan, yet this would entail problems and should therefore be avoided. For the one from whom you take the woman would in this case be your own relative, and she as well. This would constitute a problem, because where would you run to? It is therefore better to take a woman from a different clan, flee with her and bring her into your own clan.”⁹

In essence, this statement sums up the principles of *te'egal*: By definition, it is arranged with a woman who is already married according to the principles of *koobgal* and without the consent of her original husband. In practice, this means that the couple has to flee out of the reach of the husband in order to avoid vengeance and punishment by the latter, and to prevent him from taking her back. Within one clan, such a practice would inevitably lead to conflicts between close kin and is therefore banned.

The Difficult Relation between *koobgal* and *te'egal*

The literature on Wodaabe is not unanimous about the status of *te'egal* in relation to *koobgal* marriage. Dupire (1962) writes that Wodaabe society recognises (*'la société admet'*) the cohabitation of a woman who has fled her husband with another man by sanctioning it with a marriage of a secondary category, i.e., *te'egal* marriage (Dupire 1962: 250). She goes on to say that *te'egal* is 'socially admitted' because the animal sacrifice that it involves establishes a second union which invalidates the first one (ibid.: 251). Schareika has convincingly argued against this interpretation: the animal sacrifice, which serves to legitimise the *te'egal* union, cannot simply invalidate the existing *koobgal* marriage. Rather, the clan-exogamous *te'egal* establishes an alternative claim in an opposed 'legal sphere' (*Rechtsraum*), i.e., that of the clan of the new husband (Schareika 2007: 152f., see also Schareika 2010a: 111). The two marriages continue to coexist as structurally similar elements, yet valid in different segments of the ethnic group. The husbands and their respective families, who belong to two different clans, share the premises about

⁷ The fact that cross-cousins are often at the same time agnates is linked to the strong tendency of the Wodaabe, and Fulbe in general, to practice marital relinkings. This point has been documented by Barry (1996) for northern Cameroon. On marital relinkings, see also White and Johansen (2005). I am grateful to Martine Guichard for bringing this point to my attention.

⁸ For definitions and discussions of the concept of *te'egal* marriage among the Wodaabe, see Bonfiglioli 1988: 44; Bovin 1991: 277ff.; Dupire 1962: 250ff., 1963: 68ff., 1970: 63ff.; Maliki 1981: 124f.; Paris 1997: 74ff.; Schareika 2007: 150ff., 2010a: 109ff.; Stenning 1959: 140ff. It should be noted that among other groups of Fulbe, the term *teegal* often rather generally designates a form of secondary marriage, which does not necessarily comprise the element of elopement characteristic of Wodaabe *te'egal*.

⁹ Gado Maunde, Gojanko'en Damergou, January 2012

the principles for the implementation of marriage claims, but they do not regard each other's claims as binding for themselves. Rather, each party considers the union established by its own members as legitimate and there is no such thing as an overarching institution in the form of a central power able to decide on the matter and to enforce a decision. Hence, *te'egal* challenges existing *koobgal* unions without being able to invalidate them and could thus be characterised as a counter-marriage (Schareika 2007: 152).¹⁰

Managing Conflicts Deriving from *te'egal*

Schareika's discussion of *te'egal* marriage suggests that the different clan groups live in different "legal spheres" (Schareika 2007: 151) that are widely separate, the only commonly shared rule being "to allow the war of all against all when fighting about women" (ibid.: 154, my translation). Notwithstanding the important regional differences between different Wodaabe groups – Schareika refers to a group in eastern Niger, whereas my own research focus was on east-central Niger – this formulation seems problematic. Schareika's reference to Hobbes' concept of *warre* seems to express a condition in which violence is a constant threat. Given that *te'egal* is conceived as an act of aggression between clans, one might say that this applies to the Wodaabe case. However, in Hobbes' *Leviathan*, the concept of *warre* is linked to the idea of a society in its 'natural state' and thus implies the absence of rules, based on the absence of institutions that could enforce them. This point seems rather critical with regard to the Wodaabe case. Although it is true that acephalous societies possess rather restricted means to enforce the respect of rules, there are, however, other mechanisms to assure that they are applied, or, if they are not, that the resulting conflicts are resolved by other means than uncontrolled violence. Total war is definitely not the primary principle of acting out conflicts evolving from *te'egal* marriage. As Schareika correctly remarks, two attitudes have to be distinguished: that of the approval of *te'egal* as a principle for structuring inter-clan relations, and that of a clear refusal, on the side of the aggrieved husband, to accept predation in a concrete case (Schareika 2007: 154, 187; 2010a: 113). Hence, violence can occur. It is, however, even on the individual level, far from being the only possible reaction. The following statement makes this quite clear:

¹⁰ The absence of a divorce prior to the establishment of the new union has led to discussions about *cicisbeism*. Stenning (1988 [1965]: 387f.), with regard to the Wodaabe of Borno, has characterised *te'egal* as such, referring to Meek (1925, 1931) and Smith (1953), who had applied the term to comparable forms of remarriage without divorce among other ethnic groups of the region. Dupire, however, put into question whether the term can reasonably be applied here. While Stenning stresses the fact that the first marriage is not dissolved by the second and that a certain polyandrous character thus cannot be denied, Dupire (1962: 257) argues that *cicisbeism* would imply at least partial rights of the first husband in the offspring deriving from the second union and thus presuppose one form or other of consent between the woman's family or her husband and the *cicisbeo* (see also Smith 1953: 319; Smedley 1980: 347). This clearly does not apply to the Wodaabe case, where *te'egal* is contracted against the will, yet out of the reach of the husband and the woman's family. Schareika's interpretation of *te'egal*, although he is not directly concerned with the question of *cicisbeism*, makes it quite clear that Dupire was right, although her assumption that the animal sacrifice in *te'egal* invalidates the *koobgal* union was wrong. The notion of *de facto* divorce, which 'has the merit of covering the practice of terminal separation' (Goody 1962: 51), might also be helpful here. This concept, applied by Goody for the case of the Gonja of northern Ghana, seems to be applicable to the Wodaabe case as well, even though the problem of separate legal spheres makes the Wodaabe context specific. Goody writes: "While there exist in Gonja mechanisms of jural divorce, there are also recognized patterns – a wife's departure, her husband's failure to seek her return, or her repeated refusal of his pleas – by which *de facto* divorce is accomplished" (ibid.). Similarly, the crucial point in *te'egal* is not merely its legalisation by means of a sacrifice, but whether it stands the test of time. The success of the woman and her *te'egal* husband in giving duration to their union by warding off the attempts of her kin and her affinals to bring her back, can eventually lead to 'terminal separation', i.e., to abandonment by the former husband and hence gradually to a more stable and finally unquestioned status of the *te'egal* union. Schareika's argument about the competing legal spheres aptly suggests that the question is not which union is more valid or more legitimate, but which side eventually imposes its claim. On this matter, see also Dupire 1970: 68.

“The custom regarding *te’egal* is as follows: Either the woman’s father or one of her affinals will pursue her and bring her back home. If she runs away again they will pursue her again, a second time, a third time. If she runs away a fourth time and the woman’s family comes to take her, then you may call together the elders and they will talk to them. They will say: ‘This time we will not give her back to you. We have returned her three times. Now it is enough.’ Such is the custom.” (Gado Maunde, Gojanko’*en* Damergou, January 2012)

Thus, many cases of *te’egal* become the object of negotiations. Usually, the father of either the woman or the aggrieved husband, or another of his paternal relatives will intervene on his behalf. They will try to find out where she is, go there, and ask for her return. Conventional rules play a role in these negotiations. At the first occurrence, the seducer will, in response to such a request, be urged by the elders of his group to return the woman in question; if she continually flees her original husband to rejoin the other man, however, the elders will eventually back the *te’egal* husband and refuse further requests from the other party.¹¹ An important principle with respect to *te’egal* is that the cases should remain an internal affair between clans. They are not supposed to be settled with implication of external actors, i.e., the legal authorities of the state (Schareika 2007: 154, 186f.). In the contemporary situation, however, this is more and more the case, yet generally criticised by elders as contrary to the tradition (*‘dum walaa nder ndonu’*) and against the political interest of the Wodaabe.

The General Interest in *te’egal* Marriage

Despite the conflicts associated with *te’egal*, the approval of the practice seems unanimous and is shared by almost everyone, including the aggrieved husband who, although he will strictly condemn the particular case that he became the victim of, will at the same time eagerly pursue the acquisition of a new wife exactly by *te’egal*. The interest in the practice is indeed general and multiple: for women, *te’egal* constitutes a possibility to escape from an unhappy marriage as for them divorce is not an option; for men, success in *te’egal* is a source of social renown. The option of individual choice, which *te’egal* offers other than *koobgal*, is an important argument for both women and men as it carries the promise of a more affectionate relationship. But the practice clearly is also of interest to the clan and from the inter-clan perspective. A man’s success in *te’egal* strengthens his own clan to the disadvantage of another, since wife and offspring of a *te’egal* union, if it remains stable, reinforce the man’s patrilineage. This aspect potentially gives *te’egal* a demographic and thus also a political dimension.

Economic reasons have to be considered as well: As noted above, *koobgal* marriage is a cultural ideal and remains the dominant marriage practice. Inter-marriage between the offspring of close agnatic kin helps to keep the productive property, i.e., cattle, within the patrilineage, and it has indeed been argued that this economic interest was responsible for the development of the closely endogamous *koobgal* in the first place (Dupire 1962: 241; see also Boesen 2010: 30).¹² Of the

¹¹ It should be noted that customs concerning this point seem to vary in a substantial way between clans and regions. The information given above concerns the Gojanko’*en* clan of the Damergou region. However, a similar rule has been reported by Loncke for central Niger: According to her, it is legitimate that the parents of the woman go and get her back, which she cannot refuse. If she persistently returns to the man of her choice, however, her family will finally abandon further efforts (Loncke 2002: 308f.).

¹² On the economic and social aspects of FBD marriage in general, see Khuri 1970.

cattle that are either given to the woman by her husband (*sadaaki*) or for which she receives milking rights from him (*sendereji*), it is assumed that her children will eventually inherit them (Dupire 1963: 81; Bonte 1977: 55; Maliki 1981: 125). And even the animals that are given by the husband or his father to the father of the bride (*puddirdi*), and that come closest to a bride wealth, will in the case of FBD marriage normally stay in the same merged herd (*dudal*) of brothers. This practice of rather symbolic transactions means *de facto* an avoidance of bride wealth payments. Dupire has aptly characterised this system of marital transactions as a “parody of commodity transfer” (Dupire 1962: 241), with the aim of reinforcing the economic strength of the lineage.¹³ The clan-exogamous *te’egal* marriage has a similar economic merit as *koobgal* insofar as it does not grant the affinals the benefit of a bride-price, neither in the form of cattle nor any other compensation. Hence, *te’egal* maximises marital options without abandoning the principal interest of keeping the cattle within the own patrilineage.

Perhaps the most important advantage of *te’egal*, however, is that it can level out a significant risk involved in *koobgal*: Over time, the practice of closely endogamous marriage would lead to an increasingly closed social group with the risk of isolating itself and thus becoming socially and politically vulnerable. This is why an element of exogamy of some degree is desirable. Schareika (2007: 316) makes this point for the Wodaabe, but of course it has already been remarked by Tylor that endogamy is “a policy of isolation”. Tylor has postulated for groups “the simple practical alternative between marrying-out and being killed out” (Tylor 1889: 267; see also Lévi-Strauss 2002 [1947]).¹⁴ The offspring of *te’egal* relations have uterine relatives in a different clan and thus have a more extended social network (Schareika 2007: 187).

Although a *te’egal* wife is integrated into the clan of her husband, she does not simply give up her former clan identity, with all the social relations it comprises. Rather, *te’egal* marriage links lead to multiple bonds and affiliations. Hence, the clan-exogamous unions open up new options for interaction, create alliances, and hence politically strengthen the ensemble of the regional clan segments (ibid.: 316). For the Wodaabe, the advantages resulting from a larger network of relations and alliances translate into a stronger political position for negotiating the access to resources, particularly water and pastures, which is of great concern with regard to the prevalent lack of territorial claims to land. But this means of access to new social bonds is also of economic importance on the individual level, since it opens up new possibilities for reinforcing networks of social security, e.g., by animal loans (*habbanaaye*). From this politico-economic angle, the opposing principles of clan-endogamous marriage (*koobgal*) and clan-exogamous marriage (*te’egal*) among the Wodaabe can be interpreted in terms of a struggle between two fundamental

¹³ Wodaabe *koobgal* marriage can thus be interpreted in terms of Weiner’s (1985, 1992) “paradox of keeping-while-giving”. It might in fact be rewarding to investigate the complex circulations of animals, notably cattle, among the Wodaabe under the analytic angle of ‘inalienable wealth’.

¹⁴ Although beyond the scope of this contribution, it should also be noted that apart from the socio-political relevance of exogamy postulated by Tylor in his ‘alliance theory’, genetic aspects should not altogether be excluded from the analysis. In contrast to Tylor’s environmental explanation, Westermarck (1922) proposed the Darwinian hypothesis that incest avoidance is a mechanism that results from a process of natural selection, preventing the detrimental effects of inbreeding. For a recent discussion of the hypotheses of Tylor and Westermarck, and more generally of environmental versus evolutionary explanations of complex social and cultural behaviour, see Leavitt (2013). Remarks of Wodaabe on pathological anomalies in the offspring of marriages between close relatives confirm a certain consciousness for the risk of inbreeding depression, yet this risk seems to be associated with breaches of cultural marriage restrictions rather than corresponding to biological theory. For instance, mother’s sister’s daughter (MZD) marriage is culturally restricted among the Wodaabe, while from a biologist’s point of view, it shows the same inbreeding coefficient as the favoured patterns of father’s brother’s daughter (FBD) marriage and cross-cousin marriage. The emic explanation generally given for the prohibition of MZD marriage is that the children of sisters are said to have been fed with the same mother’s milk (*endam*).

principles that can be observed in group processes of forging alliances: on the one hand, the strategy to keep the in-group closed and, on the other, the strategy “to define wider identities” and “to widen alliances” – in short, the dialectics of “inclusion and exclusion” (Schlee 2009: 1; see also Schlee 2004). Schlee has shown that both principles can be advantageous in different given situations and that actors strategically apply them according to their situational interests (*ibid.*). The Wodaabe case is a good illustration.

Establishing Bonds through Acts of Aggression

It has been pointed out that the uterine bonds across clan boundaries that result from *te'egal* are often of a very affectionate nature because, in contrast to the agnatic relations, they are generally free from possible rivalries about inheritance (Paris 1997: 75; Schareika 2007: 184ff., 316). *Te'egal* marriage thus establishes networks of kinship relations between clans, relations ‘by mother’s milk’ (*endam*), which are strong binding forces. They create cross-cutting ties with an important integration potential between clans.¹⁵ An expression like ‘*Gam endam, ngoore!*’ (‘In the name of the mother’s milk [that we have shared; i.e., in the name of the uterine bonds that exist between us], stop [quarreling]!’) expresses an almost congruent meaning of uterine bonds and harmonious kinship relations. And yet, paradoxically, these affectionate relations across clan lines originate in what is clearly conceived as acts of aggression. Patrick Paris (1997: 76) has thus aptly called *te'egal* an act of “predatory seduction”, which however establishes important alliances between clans. This form of predatory marriage¹⁶ is organised between clans in the form of a competition which, as I will show, is crucial for structuring their mutual relations.

From a male perspective, women are ‘stolen’ from another clan with the declared intention of doing harm to that clan. This is underlined by the principle that only married women are valid *te'egal* matches. The mere betrothal is not a sufficient criterion. Rather, they must have left the status of young girls (*surba'en*, sg. *surbaajo*) in order to legitimately contract a *te'egal* marriage (Paris 1997: 75). When I asked a young man why this was so, he added, smilingly, that if possible the woman should even already have children, in which case the *te'egal* would ‘hurt’ the other clan more (‘*Kul mo woodi bilki'en, ngal buri nawdum*’).¹⁷ Such a statement hints to the specific character of rough competition, yet within the framework of clear rules that the Wodaabe have given to the practice of *te'egal*. In order better to understand this aspect, it seems crucial at this point to introduce the notion of *ngaanka*.

¹⁵ Cross-cutting ties between groups have long been discussed mainly as a factor of social cohesion (e.g. Gluckman 1955; see also Schlee 2004: 143f., 2008: 49). As pointed out by Schlee (2008: 49), however, they can situationally be either emphasised or ignored. Actors have multiple options for identification, opening up possibilities for selective and strategic use of certain relational constellations. For Bollig (1992: 23; see also Schlee 1994: 2, 1997: 577), the mere existence of cross-cutting ties is not enough to prevent violent conflicts. Rather, the crucial question is whether they lead to conflicting loyalties. In the Wodaabe case, both these aspects are of concern: As Schareika’s (2007: 187, 313, 385) analysis of the discussions during an inter-clan meeting in eastern Niger shows, moral obligations resulting from the cross-cutting ties between clans do play a role. However, this does not prevent them from engaging in a conflictive competition over each other’s wives.

¹⁶ Dupire uses the terms “mariage rapt” and “mariage par enlèvement” as translations for *te'egal* (Dupire 1962: 247ff., 1970: 63ff.); Stenning translates alternately with “marriage by capture” or “marriage by elopement” (Stenning 1959: 143ff.). Schareika (2007, 2010a) uses “*Raubheirat*”. Boesen correctly argues that the terms “rapt-“ and “theft-marriage” are problematic insofar as the women are never abducted without their consent, the woman generally being determined beforehand to leave her husband. Boesen acknowledges, however, that the Wodaabe “perceive it as ‘theft’ insofar as it is an act of aggression by which the lineage is robbed of one of its female members” (Boesen 2008: 154; see also Dupire 1970: 63). This is apparent in the etymology of the term, which is derived from the verb ‘*te'etugo*’, ‘to take by force’ (see Schareika 2007: 130).

¹⁷ Concerning this point, see also Schareika 2007: 210.

Ngaanka – Contractual Inter-Clan Agreements on Mutual *te'egal* Marriage

Ngaanka designates institutionalised ceremonial meetings that are based on reciprocal visits between two clans or their regional segments.¹⁸ Delegations of other clans can attend these meetings as guests, but it is the bilateral relations between visitors and hosts that are primarily at stake. A clan can entertain *ngaanka* relations with several other clans, either from the same or from the opposite clan cluster.¹⁹ A core element of these relations is a contractual agreement involving the legitimacy of mutual *te'egal* between the respective clans. The ceremonies notably comprise performances by the young men in the emblematic *geerewol* dance. The declared aim of the participants is to seduce the married women of the adverse clan and, if possible, to contract a *te'egal* marriage with one of them (Paris 1997: 73f.). Indeed, the numbers of women 'stolen' by each party are a matter of much discussion after the ceremonies.²⁰ Consequently, *ngaanka* is also referred to as 'war' (*konu*) – i.e., 'war' about women (*konu rewbe*) by means of seduction (Paris 1997:73f.; Schareika 2007: 296, 325). Several ritual elements of *ngaanka* more or less explicitly make allusion to war, e.g. the nocturnal and attack-like arrival of the visitors, who in fact impose themselves, and the symbolic, miniature-like war-axe (*jalel*) that dancers hold during *geerewol*. The active role of women in what is conceptualised by the men as 'war' and 'theft' (*nguyka*) of women must, however, be stressed. Despite their warrior-like rhetoric, the men largely depend on the decisions of the women, because, in fact, a woman is never abducted against her will.²¹ The rhetoric of war describes not so much the relations between the sexes, but rather those between the clans. In keeping with the war imagery, one could say that just as important as men who capture are women who, by betraying their husbands, desert their clans.

The direct link between *ngaanka* and *te'egal* marriage is not only explicitly expressed in verbal statements of participants, but also symbolically in several elements of the ceremony. One is the reciprocal choosing of dancers by two or three young girls of the adverse clan at the end of each *geerewol* performance; another is a symbolic image of abduction that occurs at the end of the *ndubbitaanga*, the concluding dance performance just before the end of the ceremony. Like the *geerewol*, this dance performance ends with a choosing, although less dramatised. The girls that formed the jury during the preceding dances collectively approach one performer and mark their choice by gently stroking his chest. As the girls withdraw, the bulk of the dancers follow them and

¹⁸ In the literature, the term is often spelled *ngaanyka* (e.g. Paris 1997; Loncke 2002; Boesen 2008). Another term frequently applied to the ceremonies is *daddo*, the exact usage varying between regions and lineages. Sometimes *daddo ngaanka* is also heard (see also Loncke 2002). The term *daddo* designates at the same time the age-group institution for young men and girls, and the place where they meet for their nocturnal dances. During a *ngaanka* ceremony, the place in which the *geerewol* dance is performed carries the same name. In addition to this, *daddo* is also the designation for the place in the west of the Wodaabe homestead where male visitors are received. Maliki (1981: 130) refers to the ceremonies as *bakaawal*, which designates basically a large gathering of people; Dupire (1962, 1970) uses '*gereol*', yet strictly speaking, this term covers only the specific dance which is a central element of the meetings. Different ritual elements of *ngaanka* have been the object of a meticulous ethnographic description by Paris (1997). My remarks are based on this valuable source as well as on my own fieldwork.

¹⁹ Although some authors (Bonfiglioli 1988: 50; Schareika 2007: 210; Boesen 2008: 153) emphasise a principal opposition in *ngaanka* between the Alijam and the Degereewol cluster, which is indeed expressed by the fact that clans of one cluster can principally join each other in a *geerewol* dance 'against' the clans of the opposite cluster, *ngaanka* and *te'egal* are today established principles between clans within and across clan clusters (see also Paris 1997; Loncke 2002: 198).

²⁰ Although the ceremonies are an important occasion for contracting *te'egal*, the latter is not only legitimate in this framework. The ceremonies' function is rather to establish and reconfirm the bilateral agreements about the practice.

²¹ Of course, this is the interpretation of an external observer. Wodaabe men are convinced of their active part in deciding matters of *te'egal*, by means of natural charm (*togu*) and magical preparations (*maagani*). The female role and its male perception diverge to an important extent.

crowd around them momentarily as if to abduct them (see also Paris 1997: 75f.). Given the existence of such elements, Dupire (1962: 319) plausibly referred to *ngaanka* as a rite of abduction, yet it seems important to point out that these symbolic elements at the same time stress the active, and in fact initiative, part of the women.

The reciprocally organised ceremonies, in which the two clans involved alternately play the roles of visitors and hosts, are institutionalised in a way that could be characterised as contractual agreements (Mauss 1947: 183ff.). The emic term *kosngal*, literally ‘leg’, which is used to designate these contracts (Paris 1997: 76f.), alludes to their importance for the cohesion of the ethnic group, which can stand firmly only on the entirety of its different ‘legs’, i.e., the entirety of *ngaanka* contracts. Given the competition about women at the basis of *ngaanka*, one could speak of relations of contractual opposition. The ceremonies invariably end with the sacrifice of a bull (*ngaari ngaanka*). The central role of this sacrifice has been impressively demonstrated by Paris and is probably best expressed by the words of an elder, claiming that to leave the ceremony before the ritual presentation of the bull would basically mean not to have participated at all (Paris 1997: 94). I will come back to these different elements later on.

Instead of banning the conflictual practice of *te’egal*, the Wodaabe have thus developed it into a competition between clans, the framework of which is established by *ngaanka*. The way *ngaanka* regulates *te’egal* certainly cannot claim the merit of preventing conflicts. Rather, it seems to stimulate them by sanctioning the practice. Nevertheless, *ngaanka* partnership plays an important role for conflict regulation: The institutionalisation of *te’egal* on the inter-clan level prevents it from doing harm within a clan, from where it is banned, and the competition fosters the solidarity on the intra-clan level (Loncke 2002: 351). From an inter-clan perspective, *te’egal* marriages strengthen the cohesion of the ethnic group by establishing multiple cross-cutting ties, and ultimately networks of kinship and alliance, which bind its segments closer together (ibid.: 73). Especially this last aspect seems apt to explain the mutual interest in *ngaanka* relations. Because of its potential for fostering the cohesion between clans, *te’egal*, despite its high conflict potential, is regarded as a source of prosperity for the Wodaabe (*‘te’egal riskini en’* [Schareika 2007: 350]). In *ngaanka*, as I will show, the practice is ritually approved of as a legitimate cultural principle and reconfirmed as an accepted practice on the bilateral level between two particular clans. The regulated character of a competition with rules ideally assures the control necessary to prevent the individual quarrels between husbands from causing serious damage on the level of inter-clan relations. In order to understand inter-clan *te’egal* in the framework of *ngaanka* partnership, I will now proceed to a closer examination of these rules and how they are implemented.

What Does ‘*La société admet*’ Mean in the Case of the Wodaabe?

Schareika (2007: 151) has criticised Dupire’s formulation ‘*la société admet*’ with respect to *te’egal* as it seems to assume that a set of cultural rules might have a power to impose themselves. His objection is that Dupire presumes the existence of universal social conventions without being able to identify a sanctioning power in the form of a concrete group of actors who actually apply these rules (ibid.):

“‘*La société admet*’ does not apply to the Wodaabe. Here, rights are based on the formulation of a claim, the legitimization of this claim with rhetorical means by referring to the past and,

most important, the establishment of a collective capable of enforcing it.” (ibid.: 151f., my translation)

Although criticising Dupire for her assumption of the effectiveness of ‘cultural rules’ without analysing how they are established, Schareika a little later does the same thing: He refers to an “institutional and general agreement” (ibid.: 154, my translation) between the Wodaabe clans, claiming that they have agreed on a ‘higher rule’ concerning *te’egal* and the “war about women” (ibid., my translation). This postulation is as much or as little substantiated with evidence as Dupire’s ‘*la société admet*’. The question how these rules are established and their respect assured is left open and it is astonishing that, in this context, Schareika does not mention the role of *ngaanka*.

I argue that if ‘*la société admet*’ is not read in the sense of a sanctioning force of legal character, but as a basic normative force governing social practice, it has an interesting potential for explaining the connection between *ngaanka* and *te’egal* and their role in Wodaabe inter-clan relations – not in terms of legality but in terms of legitimacy and, hence, social acceptance in Dupire’s sense. To substantiate such a claim, the crucial point is to show how the ‘cultural rules’ about the admissibility of *te’egal* are established and how their respect is assured. In order to rehabilitate Dupire’s ‘*la société admet*’, I will therefore in the following try and do what she omitted to do: identify the groups of actors and the institutions that hide behind her formulation (‘*société*’) as well as the mechanisms that make them recognise (‘*admet*’) the principle of *te’egal*.

Schareika’s argument about the establishment of marriage claims in *koobgal* is based on an interpretation of the animal sacrifices it comprises. In the following, I will use the same interpretive framework to analyse the bull sacrifice during *ngaanka* ceremonies. Like Schareika, I argue that social relations are established by, and based on, exchange. But I extend this argument to the level of inter-group relations, where the same principle can be observed.

Sharing the Meat of Sacrificial Animals

Among the Wodaabe, all important ceremonial occasions are marked with the sacrifice of an animal (Stenning 1966). For my concerns, three such occasions are of particular interest and deserve closer examination: (1) the sacrifices that sanction *koobgal* marriages; (2) the rather unpretentious sacrifice of an animal to validate a *te’egal* marriage; and (3) the sacrifice of a bull at the occasion of *ngaanka* ceremonial inter-clan meetings.

Koobgal

Koobgal marriage involves numerous transactions in several steps, normally covering a number of years, often from shortly after the birth of the wife until the weaning of her first child and her definitive transfer to her husband (for details see Dupire 1963: 59ff.). For my purposes, it shall suffice to concentrate on the animal sacrifices which *koobgal* comprises and which are carried out up to three times during the process, generally during the annual gathering of the regional section of the clan (*worso*). The sacrificial animal, ideally a bull (*ngaari koobgal*), is provided by the father of the husband and its meat is ideally shared among all clan members. Schareika (2010a), referring to Rappaport’s (1999) theory of ritual, has given a convincing interpretation of the significance of the sharing of the meat for establishing a collective which advocates and protects the marriage in

accepting the claim that it entails. According to Rappaport, ritual acts are similar to Austin's (1962) illocutionary speech acts in that "in the case of (...) ritual acts and utterances (...) the sign brings the state of affairs into being" (Rappaport 1999: 108). The ritual, by symbolically representing them, creates social relations (Schareika 2010a: 103). Thus, the ritual act of the sacrifice and the shared consummation of the meat establish the marriage as a social reality. Yet, participation in a ritual means commitment to the symbolically expressed meaning that it contains and the public character of the ritual creates social pressure to respect this commitment henceforth (ibid.: 105; Rappaport 1999: 123). The meaning of this, and in fact the importance of the act of the ritual sharing of the meat for the recognition of a marriage claim, is contained in expressions such as – 'I have eaten the meat of her/his marriage' (*mi nyaami tewu koobgal makko*), meaning 'I participated in her/his marriage'. By referring to the sharing of the meat, the validity of the marriage is recognised. The implicit logic is not merely that of a testimony, but also that of an obligation deriving from a gift for the person who accepts it. Mauss' (1925) classic model of gift exchange is based on a dyadic relation between the one who gives and the one who receives, and, in addition, an enigmatic third element, vaguely identified by Mauss as a force inherent in the gift, with the power to induce the obligation of returning it (for critiques of this problematic point in Mauss' analysis, see Lévi-Strauss 1966; Sahlins 1974; Godelier 1999). Schareika, in his analysis of *koobgal*, adapts Mauss' model by resolving the question of this mysterious force and proposing a triadic relation between the two parties engaged in the marriage transaction and a third party represented by the collective of the clan members. They all receive a share in the meat of the sacrificed animal and hence become obliged to assure – if necessary by active intervention – that the reciprocal obligations between the two mainly concerned parties are respected (Schareika 2007: 133ff.). Schareika admits that the obligations of the third party remain diffuse (ibid.: 135), but they lead, in the case of *koobgal* to an effective protection of the marriage link – by respect (the clan-members will not try to seduce the woman) and, if necessary, by defensive action (the clan-members will act solidarily and help the husband to take his wife back in case she elopes with a man from an adverse clan).

The ritual thus establishes a collective approval of the union. The collective of the clan members acts as a sanctioning force which protects the marriage claim established by the sacrifice and publicly recognised by the sharing of the meat. Those who receive a share are symbolically indebted to the husband in the sense of an obligation to reciprocate. The offering of meat establishes a new social relation which elicits solidarity. The gift is returned in the form of solidary behaviour. At the same time, the sharing of the meat establishes a collective on the clan-level, comprising those who, by participating in the ritual, have given their consent to accept the union as binding. However, *te'egal* from members of other clans remains a threat because there is no community nor any institution of legal assistance that could defend the *koobgal* union above the confines of the clan.

Te'egal

The sacrifice on the occasion of a *te'egal* marriage principally serves the same purpose: the husband's kin, by sharing the meat, testify to the union and accept the new husband's claim on his wife (Dupire 1992: 250f.). Following the logic of the above discussion, this obviously does not have any consequences for the status of the woman's existing marriage within her own clan, since her clan members do not partake in the sharing of the meat. Nevertheless, the ritual is an important

marker to establish the status of the woman as the legitimate wife of her *te'egal* husband within his clan. The structurally similar way of implementation makes it quite clear that *te'egal*, just like *koobgal*, is a proper form of marriage and not any sort of concubinage, which is socially dismissed (Dupire 1970: 67). An important difference to *koobgal* marriages is that *te'egal* marriages are often concluded in a rather hasty way (Dupire 1962: 250), the animal sacrifice being carried out on the spot, with whoever might be present from the man's lineage after successful elopement, and not, as in the case of *koobgal*, in the context of the *worso* that ideally unites a representative part of the regional clan segment (Maliki 1981: 124f). Following the logic outlined above, this results in a potentially weaker support within the own clan.

Structurally speaking, we thus have *koobgal* marriage, which is established on the level of one clan, and *te'egal* marriage which is formalised in a similar way (by means of an animal sacrifice), but on the level of an adverse clan – in full knowledge, yet deliberate disrespect of the claim that already exists in the other group. The two marriages thus co-exist as competing claims in two opposed spheres of customary law (Schareika 2007: 152f.; 2010a:111). I will now go on to examine the element of the sharing of meat in the context of a third ritual occasion where a bull is sacrificed: that of *ngaanka*.

Ngaanka

As mentioned above, *ngaanka* ceremonies principally end with the sacrifice of a bull (*ngaari ngaanka*), usually provided by the *ardo* of the hosting local clan-segment. Its meat is grilled in parts which are then reconstituted in their anatomical order on the hide (see plate 1), before the whole animal is presented to the visiting clan (see plate 3). The delegation of the visitors will then longitudinally cut the hide into halves and divide the different parts of the bull into two equal shares, one of which they present again to the hosts before the meat is shared within both clans and eaten by all participants (Paris 1997).



Plate 1: Reconstitution of the grilled parts of the sacrificed bull on its hide. Abdenaser, Damergou region, October 2011.

I argue that this ritual sharing of meat has a function similar to that of the corresponding act on the occasion of a *koobgal* marriage. The meat of the sacrificed bull (*tewu ngaanka*) is the functional equivalent of the meat in *koobgal* (*tewu koobgal*), not in the sense that it establishes a concrete marriage claim, but in the sense that its ritual sharing establishes a collective. In the case of *ngaanka*, however, this collective transcends the clan level; it comprises representative parts of at least two clans, visitors and hosts. The sharing of the meat establishes a commitment to the principles that are symbolically expressed in the different rituals of the ceremony. Central among these principles is the mutual approval of the reciprocal exchange of married women by *te'egal*, as symbolised (1) by the mutual ritual choosing of a dancer by a girl from the adverse clan, and (2) by the mock-abduction imagery at the end of the *ndubbitaanga*. In this way, *ngaanka* ritually implements a normative framework for the acceptance of mutual *te'egal* as a shared cultural practice and, hence, as a positive value and legitimate principle governing the marital relations between the two clans involved. By participating in the ritual, the members of the two clans commit themselves to this rule. This is congruent with the theory of Rappaport who maintains that:

“The primary function or metafunction of liturgical performances is not to control behavior directly, but rather to establish conventional understandings, rules and norms in accordance with which everyday behaviour is *supposed* to proceed. Participation in a ritual in which a prohibition against adultery is enunciated by, among others, himself may not prevent a man from committing adultery, but it does establish for him the prohibition of adultery as a rule that he himself has both enlivened and accepted.” (Rappaport 1999: 123)

From a gender perspective, it is significant that women are excluded from participation in the rituals of the sacrifice of the bull – the presentation and designation of its parts, and the preparation and repartition of the meat (see also Paris 1997: 82). In the distribution of the meat, however, they are considered just as the men are. This means that they are excluded from the collective that establishes meaning by carrying out the ritual, yet they are included in the collective that is committed to accept the consequences. In other words, the decisions about *te'egal* are taken by men, but women are obliged to submit to the rules thus established. It is true that women enjoy certain advantages deriving for them from the institution of *te'egal*, but it is exclusively the men who make the rules.

The Enigmatic Third Element

The ritual has thus established an agreement about the mutual toleration of *te'egal*. But how is it assured that this principle is respected? If we want to follow Schareika's interpretation of *koobgal*, where respect of the contractual claim is controlled by a third party formed by the clan members, here as well we will have to identify the collective which assures the respect of the ritual agreement between clans. I think, the question about this collective (Mauss' enigmatic third element) can be answered in different ways.

Ngaanka being a public ceremony between primarily two clans, the collective that assures control of the agreements at stake is congruent with the ensemble of the participating members of these two clans. Participation in the rituals of *ngaanka*, in particular the sharing of the meat of the sacrificed bull, establishes a collective that comprises the members of the two clans involved, who will henceforth, by virtue of their repeated participation in the rituals and the indirect commitment

it entails, accept and actually defend *te'egal* as a legitimate principle and 'cultural rule' because they have interiorised it as a part of tradition (*ndonu*, or *ko tawden* – 'that which we have found'). In Schareika's (2007) protocols of an inter-clan meeting, devoted to the question whether *te'egal* should be abandoned between the two concerned clans or not, this becomes evident in the arguments put forth to defend the practice: It is the way of the tradition, literally 'the way we have found' (*laawol ngol tawden*, *ibid.*: 366) and therefore a good or 'clean' one (*laabngol*, *ibid.*). Hence, the only acceptable answer is to keep on following it (*tokki laawol ngol*, *ibid.*) – which in essence is also the final outcome of the meeting. Here, then, we have a group of actors who 'legitimise the claim' (about *te'egal*) 'with rhetorical means by referring to the past' and thus represent a 'collective capable of enforcing it'. I think this is where we have to look for the meaning of '*la société admet*'.

But this is not all. Over time, the exchange of women by means of *te'egal* has concrete, physical results: it leads to uterine bonds, to cross-cutting ties, which in fact make relatives of the members of adversary clans. This becomes equally evident from Schareika's (2007) data. One speaker refers to the members of the other clan as 'those who gave birth [to us]' (*danyoobe*, *ibid.*: 363) because among the mothers in one group are women from the other, who had been integrated by means of *te'egal* (*ibid.*: 309, 363f.). It is in this sense that the uterine bonds between clans, which are considered to be of outstanding value (*endam feere woni*, *ibid.*: 343), are said to have created the Wodaabe (*endam aawi en*, *ibid.*: 371). Hence, *te'egal* is regarded to be at the basis of the shared identity and the abandonment of the practice is morally impossible because ultimately, too many Wodaabe are children of *te'egal* marriages or have been begotten by men who were socialised in a clan other than that of their legal fathers, because their mothers had eloped in *te'egal* with another man when they were small children (*agolaaje aawi en*, *ibid.*: 341). In this reading, the sanctioning force assuring the application of the rule would be constituted by these individuals with social and kinship ties in two clans. By their concrete, physical existence they remind the community of the close familial bonds – ties of 'blood' and 'milk' (*yiyam* and *endam*) – between clans. It is these cross-cutting ties that make the importance of *te'egal* for the unity of the ethnic group palpable. *Te'egal* is at the same time a cultural heritage and an important factor for perpetuating the cohesion of the ethnic group by binding it together through uterine bonds.

'*La société admet*', with regard to *te'egal*, is not to be understood in the sense of a 'universal convention'. 'Society', with regard to the Wodaabe, is never the merely hypothetical whole of an ethnic group ('*tribu*' in Dupire's terms), since the latter does not have any level of interaction that coordinates all of its constitutive segments. Above the level of the clan, or its regional segment, 'society' exists at best as the sum of the bilateral relations maintained with other segments of equal order. *Te'egal* and *ngaanka* are crucial institutions by which these relations are initiated, materialised, maintained, and structured.

A Precarious Balance

Although *ngaanka* thus institutionalises *te'egal*, it leaves unresolved the question of the status of the *koobgal* unions, which are put into question by the practice. *Te'egal* elopement thus remains, on the individual level, an act of aggression. The declared will to maintain an agreement which might be of interest for the society at large, yet involves a practice that is considered an aggression by the

concerned individuals, means having to keep a precarious balance. This can only function if reciprocity is maintained.

The opposing elements of competition and balance are a recurring motif in *ngaanka*. An elaborate protocol of balancing elements stresses that the two competing clans are equal partners. In fact, the contrast between the declared intention to aggress and the extreme politeness and respect of the other group is so pronounced that it could seem almost paradoxical. In the following section, I will undertake a closer examination of some of the ritual constituents of *ngaanka* which are of strikingly antithetic character, some stressing unity, equity, and reciprocity, others rather symbolic of the aggressive act of predatory marriage which is a core element at stake in the ceremony and thus stressing the aspect of competition. Some of the antithetic elements already contain the opposite principle in themselves: pronounced moments of reciprocity can be found within the competitive elements; competitive aspects are inherent in the elements stressing reciprocity.



Plate 2: Choosing ritual at the climax of a *geerewol*-dance. Abdenaser, Damergou Region, October 2011.

Reciprocity within the Competition

The competitive character of *ngaanka* seems readily visible and obvious in the public dance competition that it comprises. The clans alternately perform the *geerewol* dance and each dance ends with the ritual choosing of the most outstanding performer by a jury composed of two or three young girls (see plate 2; for a detailed description see Loncke 2002). These dance performances instantly evoke the idea of a competition between clans and have indeed mostly been interpreted in this way. Lassibille (2008) has stressed the aspect of inter-clan competition in *ngaanka*, characterising *geerewol* as a means by which one clan tries to defeat the other (Lassibille 2008: 164). Such a characterisation is certainly not wrong insofar as the attendants of a *ngaanka* interpret

the matter in these terms, by comparing the performances of the competing clans. It should also be stressed, however, that at no point during the ceremony explicit public statements are made about the clans' relative assessment. The question which clan is the 'winner' ('groupe vainqueur', *ibid.*: 165) in a *geerewol* contest is nowhere the object of a direct vote by a jury and the aspect of direct competition on the inter-clan level is never put to the foreground. In fact, there is not a single occasion on which representatives of the two adverse clans compete directly against one another. Rather, they take turns in dancing and the girl jurors of one clan choose a winner from within the competing dancers of the adverse clan. The chosen performers are distinguished as exemplary representatives of their respective group, without assessing them in relation to the dancers of the other group. Hence, a winner in a *geerewol* contest has won first of all in a direct competition against his own clan mates, not against the rival dancers of the other clan. At no point during a *ngaanka* meeting is a 'winning' clan ever explicitly determined. This is not to say that the audience does not fervently discuss the question of which group delivers the stronger performance and has the more beautiful dancers, in short, which clan is better than the other. The dances are competitive on an inter-clan level insofar as the performances of the dancers are the object of discussions by the public and, indeed, assessments of the clans are made on this basis. But these assessments, however explicit they might be, remain on the level of individual opinion and a matter of interpretation and debate, even after the end of the ceremony. They are never the object of decisions or of an official declaration. Rather than assessing a ranking between the two clans involved, the mutual ritual choosing has a symbolic function: It is a ritualised, aesthetic and dramatic representation of the central conflict element at stake in *ngaanka*, i.e., *te'egal* (Paris 1975: 75).

Moreover, the fact of delivering the stronger performance and having the more beautiful dancers is probably less directly linked to the capacity of seducing the other clan's women, than one might be tempted to believe: As Loncke (2002: 336ff.) points out, from the perspective of Wodaabe women, the canonical beauty of a *geerewol* champion is not a central quality sought for in a potential husband, and it is thus not decisive for contracting a *te'egal* marriage. This means that winning a *geerewol* competition is not automatically an entry ticket to gaining *te'egal* wives. In the same sense, the supposed 'winner' – in terms of performance – of a *ngaanka* meeting is not necessarily the clan who will 'win' in terms of numbers of women 'stolen'.

Competition within the Reciprocity

On the explicit level, rather than stressing the aspect of competition, *ngaanka* is overall characterised by reciprocity and respect between the clans involved. There is an extremely pronounced and elaborate protocol of ceremonious courtesy and the smallest transgression of the strict standards of the protocol can cause serious complications in the mutual relations, or even lead to their rupture (Paris 1997: 79). On the implicit level, however, and behind the courtesy, hide numerous subtextual messages (*ibid.*: 81). In fact, one cannot but recognise a competitive aspect in even the elements stressing reciprocity. This is perhaps most pronounced in the presentation of the sacrificed bull (*kollol*, see plate 3).

During the presentation of the sacrificed bull, a representative of the hosting clan has to enumerate, in a strictly prescribed order, the different parts of the animal (for all details, see Paris 1997). The visitors will then return one half of all parts and present them, for their part, to the hosts. This mutual presentation and enumeration is a crucial element of the overall ceremony. It occurs towards the end of the meeting and the presentation by the visitors generally ends with a

formula expressing a re-invitation, i.e., an approval of the maintenance of the mutual *ngaanka* relations.

The enumeration of the parts of the sacrificed bull has a double function: Firstly, it is public proof that no part is missing, that the party who is offering the animal has accomplished the sacrifice in the prescribed way, and that both parties will receive the share they are due. In this sense, the ritual stresses the principle of equity and balance which, on a symbolic level, expresses the necessity that the competition about women, which is at stake in *ngaanka*, remains equally balanced between the participating clans. Secondly, the enumeration is a demonstration and a mutual test of ritual and, more broadly, of cultural knowledge. Each clan aims to demonstrate that it is worthy of further engagement in ceremonial, and hence, marital exchange.²²



Plate 3: Preparing the presentation of the sacrificed bull. Kilaake, Damergou Region, October 2011.

²² The motif of the dissection, reassemblage, presentation, and repartition of the meat of sacrificed animals, including the motif of the test of ritual and cultural knowledge, is more widespread among Fulbe. Oumarou (2012: 219ff.), for example, mentions a ceremony on the occasion of the investiture of a pastoral guide (*garsoo*) among Fulbe in the Dallol Bosso Region of western Niger. Here, the meat of a bull must be grilled, the parts cut into small pieces, and then partitioned to prepare skewers that must each contain a piece of every part of the animal. Every skewer is thus a symbolic representation of the sacrificed bull. Oumarou describes the task of partitioning and preparing the skewers as proof of the knowledge of and conformity with cultural rules and values (*pulaaku*).

Rituals of Cultural Affirmation

The bull (also called *ngaari fulfulde*, the bull of the Fulbe tradition) is a symbol of the pastoral way of life (*ngaynaaka*). Its presentation comprises, in addition to the parts of the animal itself, a number of emblematic items of pastoral life: an axe (*jammber*), a calabash dipper (*horde*), a knife (*labi*), a milk beater (*buruugal*), and, most importantly, two strings of bark-fibre which are attached to the animal, one through the nasal septum and one to the tail (see plate 4). They are called *ba'ajol pulaaku* or *ba'ajol fulfulde* and are symbols of the code of conduct and moral law which the Fulbe call *pulaaku* and the Wodaabe in central Niger call *mbodangaaku*.²³ The cultural 'way of the Fulbe' (*laawol pulaaku*) is sometimes metaphorically referred to as a rope or a net which maintains the unity of the ethnic group by binding its elements together (Maliki 1981: 130; Bonfiglioli 1988: 7; Schareika 2007: 319ff.). The metaphor *gassungol wodaabe* as a designation for the ethnic group is an expression of the same imagery (see Paris 1997: 76; Loncke 2002: 202, 243; 2008: 219f.; Lassibille 2006: 126; Schareika 2007: 209). *Gassungol* or *boggol gassungol* is the name of a special net of rope which is used to attach the load of the household goods to the pack animals when camp is moved.

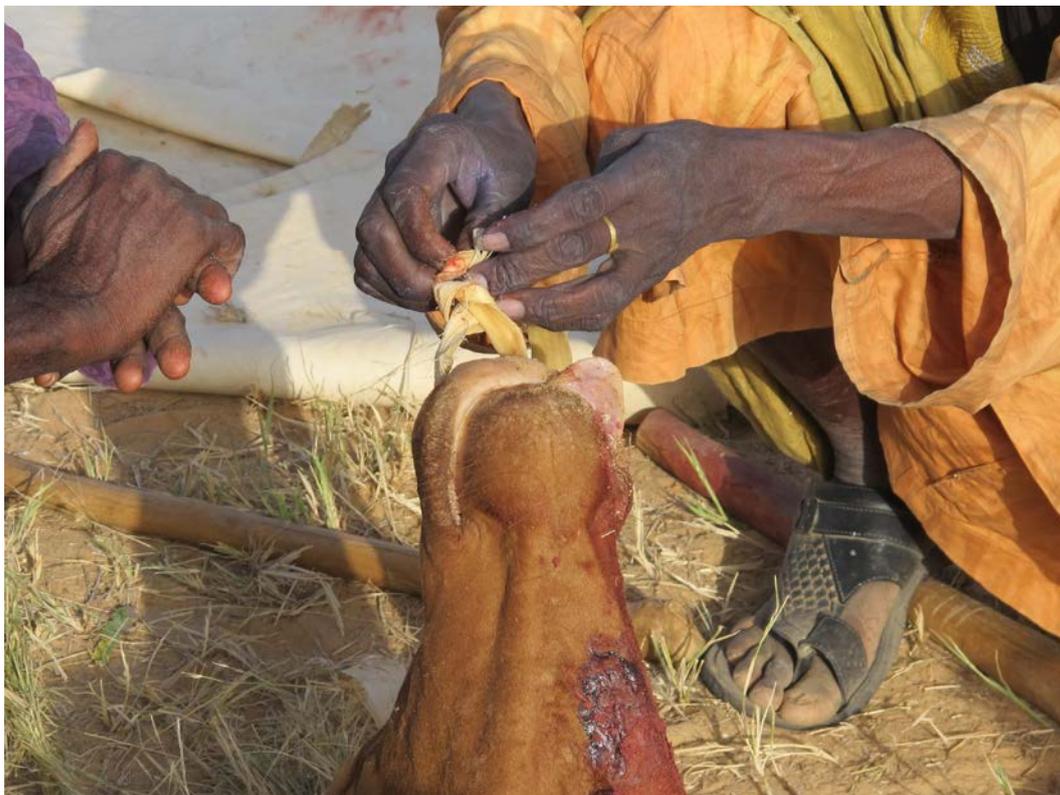


Plate 4: A string of bark fibre is fixed at the nares of the sacrificed bull. Abdenaser, Damergou Region, October 2011.

²³ The term *mbodangaaku* (or *mbodangansi*, Loftsdóttir 2000) has been developed by the Wodaabe in central Niger to set themselves apart from more sedentary Fulbe, from whom they often feel alienated, accusing them of having betrayed the proper way of the Fulbe (Bonfiglioli 1988: 63). In eastern Niger, the term *pulaaku* prevails (see Schareika 2007, 2010b). In some contexts, the term *fulfulde* is used in a similar sense to refer to culturally adequate conduct. For a discussion of the term *pulaaku*, see Dupire 1962: 296, 1981: 169; Bonfiglioli 1988: 7f.; Breedveld and de Bruijn 1996. Schareika (2007, 2010b) has criticised the essentialist interpretation of the concept of *pulaaku* in the Fulbe literature, stressing the ideological use of the concept as a political tool. In a wider sense, the term *pulaaku* refers also to the community of the Fulbe.

The enumeration is thus a ritual evocation of essential symbols of cultural identity. The presentation of the bull can be interpreted as a ritual appreciation of the adverse clan, based on the mutual recognition of the other's conformity with the cultural norms and values of *mbodangaaku*. This mutual appreciation between clans, which is at the basis of the agreement on the competition about women, is another central function of *ngaanka*:

“(...) if two clans visit each other alternately, jointly to celebrate *ngaanka*, they issue each other a certificate of conformity with *mbodangaaku*, ‘the way of the Wodaabe’, and on this basis, they admit or tolerate between each other the circulation of women by *te’egal* marriage. It is this reciprocal inter-clan licence, which is also symbolized in the ritual choosing.” (Paris 1997: 75, my translation)

This ‘license’ is granted after mutual testing on the basis of a multiple competition in dance, song, male beauty and ritual knowledge. The different ritual performances in *ngaanka* are dramatic evocations of shared cultural values. *Te’egal*, as symbolised in the ritual choosing during *geerewol* and in the abduction imagery of the *ndubbitaanga*, is a central part of these values. Hence, participants in *ngaanka* make a commitment to this practice as a positive element and part of the cultural way of the Wodaabe, the *mbodangaaku*. The crucial point, then, is that the statement about the affirmation of *te’egal* is imbedded in a more general affirmation of the shared cultural identity. Competition (not only about women) as a basic structuring principle for the relations between clans is an important part of this shared cultural identity, as their structural opposition does not separate the segments but rather ties them together. Competition and mutual recognition cannot be separated, just as the question of *te’egal* cannot be isolated from other elements of cultural identity. *Ngaanka* is a ‘total’ cultural phenomenon.

Ngaanka as ‘prestation totale’

Dupire (1962: 317) has referred to *ngaanka* as a ‘*prestation réciproque*’. Although she probably did not have this connection in mind, the term evokes Mauss’ concept of ‘*prestation totale*’ (‘total prestation’²⁴; Mauss 1990 [1925], 1947; see also the discussion in Godelier 1999: 38ff.). In fact, Mauss’ definition of ‘total prestation’ comes close to the essence of Wodaabe *ngaanka*. Following his definition, ‘*prestation*’ designates first of all a contract to receive and to return a thing or a service (Mauss 1947: 185). Such a contract, according to Mauss, implies an alliance: If I make a contract with someone, it is because in some way we are allies (ibid.). In *The Gift*, Mauss has further defined the following characteristics of ‘*prestations totales*’: (I) “it is not individuals but collectivities that impose obligations of exchange and contract upon each other. The contracting parties are legal entities: clans, tribes, and families who confront and oppose one another either in groups who meet face to face in one spot, or through their chiefs”; (II) “what they exchange is not solely property and wealth (...). In particular, such exchanges are acts of politeness: banquets, rituals, military services, women, children, dances, festivals, and fairs, in which economic transaction is only one element (...) of a much more general and enduring contract”; and (III) these

²⁴ Godelier has pointed out that the translation of *prestation* with ‘service’ would not adequately express the different dimensions covered by the French term. He therefore proposes to keep the original term (Godelier 1999: 226, note 59). See also the ‘Translator’s Note’ in the first English edition of Mauss, translated by Ian Cunnison (Mauss 1966: xi).

total prestations and counter-prestations “are committed to in a somewhat voluntary form by presents and gifts, although in the final analysis they are strictly compulsory, on pain of private or public warfare” (all quotes: Mauss 1990: 5²⁵). Mauss further distinguishes (IV) between non-agonistic and agonistic prestation (ibid.: 7), the latter characterised by an element of “rivalry and hostility” (ibid.: 6) of a varying degree. For Mauss, the agonistic rivalry finds its expression in a competition (V) in the exchange of gifts and counter-gifts (as best illustrated in his example, the *potlatch* of the North-American West Coast, which he takes as exemplary for agonistic total prestations).

In *ngaanka*, we find all these elements: the Wodaabe clans (I) engage, among themselves, in reciprocal exchange which has the character of a contractual agreement. The exchange comprises (II) rituals, dances, sacrifices, politeness and, above all, women. All these aspects take the form of competition (V) and the last aspect, the exchange of women, above all others defines the agonistic character (IV). With regard to the exchange of women by mutual *te’egal* marriage, one could say that the exchange here takes the inverted form of negative gift-exchange, i.e., mutual ‘theft’.

Dupire, without explicitly referring to Mauss’ theory of reciprocal gift-exchange, has made a similar point by underlining the obligatory character of *ngaanka* (*gereol* in her terminology), calling it a debt that does not expire (Dupire 1962: 312). The offering, by the hosting group, of the sacrificial bull, the meat of which is shared between the members of the two clans, establishes a communion and at the same time induces a debt and the obligation for the visiting clan to return the gift, even after years, and thus renew the communion to assure the continuity of the relationship and the social contract it expresses. Yet, the contract comprises an implicit agreement about another object of reciprocal exchange: the exchange of women by means of *te’egal*. A cycle of exchange between the groups is thus initiated, as in many societies, by the exchange of women (Lévi-Strauss 2002 [1947]) and a permanent alliance kept up by means of intermarriage (Tylor 1889: 267). The specificity of the case is that these women are already married in their own clans and that the exchange is of a negative kind: based (in its conception by the Wodaabe men) on ‘theft’ and violence.

This brings us to Mauss’ aspect of seeming voluntariness, which is in fact compulsory (III): Although an invitation had been pronounced at the end of the preceding ceremony, the visiting group in fact imposes itself. The delegation arrives unannounced, at night and in the fashion of aggressors. It ‘attacks’ the hosting group which is then obliged to prepare the ceremony within a delay of a few days (Loncke 2002: 303ff.). They will now ‘voluntarily’ select a representative bull to be slaughtered, not only because this is a welcome occasion to demonstrate the grandeur of their own clan and thus position themselves in a favourable way, but also, because a denial would have severe consequences for the mutual relations, not leading to “public or private warfare” (Mauss 1990: 5), but, paradoxically, just as fatal, to the opposite: to the abandonment of the mutually desirable state of ritual ‘war’. In the same sense, the hosts ‘voluntarily’ accept that the visitors have come to ‘steal’ their women, because they know that the next time it will be their turn to ‘attack’.²⁶

²⁵ For the French original: Mauss 1925: 36f.

²⁶ Generally, the visiting clan is in the better position, because the hosts assemble for the occasion with a usually important concentration of complete households (*worso ngaanka*), including the married women. The homesteads of the visitors, in contrast, might be far away and they have come only with a delegation of young dancers (*kaye’en*), senior dance group leaders (*samaarii’en*), and a group of young girls (*surba’en*) comprising the jurors. It is in this sense that the visit can be regarded as an attack: The visitors have come to ‘steal’ women. The hosts accept this under the premise of reciprocity. They know that by the principle of alternation the next time the others will have to accept the role of hosts.

This alternation of roles assures that the relation remains balanced. Indeed, in the terms of Sahlins (1974: 191ff), the constellation could be called a balanced system of negative reciprocity.

Looking at *ngaanka* in terms of reciprocal exchange allows for a better understanding of the competing processes of opposition and social cohesion which are at work. The mutual interest in the exchange of women binds the parties together in contractual relations of total prestation. Total prestation, even if it is motivated by agonistic interests, can be considered as a contractual agreement on a form of exchange. Even if a central element of this exchange has the character of a negative gift, it is still based on reciprocity, and the contract is apt to establish social bonds. The establishment and maintenance of these social bonds is what can be regarded as the central overall motive for cooperation between the clans – their motive to engage in *ngaanka* contracts. The establishment of relations of reciprocal exchange (in ceremonies, in dance, in sacrifice, and ultimately in women by way of *te'egal* marriage) resolves the problem posed by the principle of narrowly endogamous *koobgal* marriage: the danger of a group, politically and socially, closing itself more and more down in itself (Schareika 2007: 316). The adversaries become partners who, by reciprocal acts of giving and receiving, become mutually indebted to each other. This mutual debt between collectivities means in practice that each party has the right to take (the negative form of gift-exchange) and the obligation to accept if the other takes in the same way. Seen from this angle, the question of toleration with respect to inter-clan *te'egal* must be reassessed. The acts of aggression which *te'egal* constitute are not passively tolerated, rather, they are balanced with counter aggressions of the same kind, which comes closer to an understanding of vengeance as a form of reciprocal exchange²⁷ – however generalised it might appear in the case of *te'egal* – than to toleration.

In this sense it seems pertinent to look at things under the aspect of Mauss' notion of the peace that results from fulfilling the pact which binds the contracting parties (Mauss 1947: 186). Peace is here kept at the price of conflicts, or, to put it more paradoxically, at the price of 'war': The fulfillment of the contract demands the acceptance of violations of basic social rules in the name of other rules, of a higher virtue.

The Knots Tying together the *gassungol wodaabe*

Godelier has developed Mauss' concept of prestation further and recognises as one of the central functions of such 'total' social phenomena their capacity to allow society to reproduce itself:

“The social fact of exchanging gifts is total because in it are combined many aspects of social practice and numerous institutions characteristic of the society. This is the sense Mauss gives to the word “total.” But the word has another meaning. Social phenomena can also be considered to be “total,” not because they combine many aspects of a society, but because in a way they enable the society to represent itself (to others and to itself) and to reproduce itself as a whole.” (Godelier 1999: 40)

This clearly applies for *ngaanka* as well, which has often been interpreted as central for perpetuating the cohesion of the ethnic group. As Dupire (1962: 312) has pointed out, it is the only ceremony that exists on the scale of the ethnic group. In the same vein, Lassibille states that “in

²⁷ For an interpretation of vengeance as negative gift exchange in the context of classical Greece, see Saïd 1984: 50f.

geerewol, the continuity of the group is at stake – the ‘physical’ continuity, by way of the marriages that it implies, and the continuity of identity, by the values which are embodied and affirmed” (Lassibille 1999: 257, my translation). Boesen (2008: 158f.), without explicitly referring to Godelier, even uses a very similar phrasing: “[*Ngaanka*] can be seen as (re-)creating the community as a whole – both through concrete matrimonial exchange (*te’egal*) and in the sense of a symbolic self-manifestation.”²⁸

As we have seen, Wodaabe symbolically allude to the ensemble of their clans, i.e., to the ethnic group, with the metaphor of a ‘net’ (*gassungol*) or network. Groups can become integrated into or drop out of this network, and the maintenance of *ngaanka* contracts – or the failure to maintain them – is a crucial element in these processes. In this sense, the contracts are not only of social but also of political relevance. According to Dupire, mutual *ngaanka* relations define political group membership (Dupire 1962: 312). Similarly, Lassibille (2008: 7ff.) has underlined the importance of dance for (marriage) politics and for group relations in general, calling it a social and political act (ibid. 9).

The *ngaanka* contracts with their implication of reciprocal exchange of women through *te’egal* inter-marriage can be regarded as a condition *sine qua non* for a clan to become and to remain a part of Wodaabe society. However, a direct *ngaanka* contract with all segments at the same time, is not a necessary condition for recognition and belonging. It is enough to connect with some segments as *ngaanka* partners and for these again to connect with others in a way that forms the network of multiple relations that defines the ethnic group. This principle is excellently captured in Paris’ (1997) seminal article on *ngaanka*: By analysing, over a period of more than twenty five years, all the pairings of clans who entertain mutual relations of *ngaanka*, Paris gives a comprehensive idea of how the fluid entity of the ethnic group is maintained in this sort of a loose network of bilateral relations, and of the role that *ngaanka* plays in this process. The Wodaabe have given their ethnic group a well-fitting, metaphoric designation with the image of the *gassungol Wodaabe*. The unity of the group is conceived as a net that holds together the whole, and *ngaanka* is what ties the knots together – through the uterine bonds that it creates and that, quite substantially, tie the clans together (Schareika 2007: 316), and by the fact that the ritual contracts are a materialisation of political alliances.

On the one hand, a clan could in principle interrupt all its *ngaanka* relations and abolish *te’egal* inter-marriage, but it would then risk dropping out of the above described network and losing its ethnic identity. On the other hand, non-Wodaabe groups can be integrated into the ethnic group by establishing *ngaanka* relations. Historical studies have shown that both principles have occurred at one point or other (Bonfiglioli 1988; Dupire 1962, 1970, 1994). Groups have been assimilated into the ethnic group (e.g. the case of the Kasawsawa, ‘adopted’ by the Gojanko’en) and others have dropped out of it (e.g. the case of the Mbororo’en/Wewebbe). The reasons why groups might drop out of the system of *ngaanka* relations – and eventually out of the ethnic group – can differ. Important factors are an increasing cultural orientation towards other ethnic groups (e.g. the case of the Bibbe Denke, see Dupire 1962: 312; Loncke 2002: 225f.), if they become too small in numbers, so that *ngaanka* relations would be unbalanced (e.g. the case of the Buubuanko’en, see

²⁸ See, in this context, also Oumarou (2012: 221), who has discussed a ceremony among Fulbe in the Dallol Bosso Region of Niger at the occasion of the investiture of a pastoral leader, and in particular the element of testing of ritual knowledge along the preparation and distribution of meat that it contains, with Mauss’ concept of total social phenomena, serving the function of (1) instructing the young, i.e., of socialisation, and (2) of social regulation with the aim of maintaining the norms and practices on which Fulbe identity relies.

Paris 1997: 79), if they become too geographically isolated (e.g. the case of the Shahidooji, see Paris 1997: 77f.; Loncke 2002: 199; Bonfiglioli 1988: 50f.), or if they are completely detached by migration to new territories (case of the Suuduuru, Baabeeru and Galooru, see Paris 1990: 199). It seems, however, that such processes of fission can also be reversible. While Paris notes in 1997 that the 'Bibbe Denke had not been involved in a single *ngaanka* contract for at least two decades and hence were rather at the margin of the ethnic group, prone to split away sooner or later, today they are again engaged in *ngaanka* relations, as attested in October 2011 with the Suudu Suka'el of the Damergou Region.

Ultimately *ngaanka* contracts are what allows for the continuity of the group as a whole, what “enables the society (...) to reproduce itself as a whole” in the sense of Godelier (1999: 40). Participation in the *ngaanka* network is the basis of a clan's recognition as part of the whole; hence, in *ngaanka*, ethnic identity is at stake. Ultimately, not engaging in the reciprocal relations would mean to lose the network of allies. This is reminiscent of Mauss' postulate that a contract expresses an alliance and allows for a further answer to the question about the sanctioning force. In this reading, the collective that controls the respect of the rule would be formed by the ensemble of clans with which a given clan entertains *ngaanka* relations. A leader accepts that his subjects become victim of *te'egal* by members of an adverse clan, not only because of the obligations deriving from the *ngaanka* contract with this particular clan, but ultimately because opposition to *te'egal* relations with this clan would equally put the relations with other clans at risk.

Regulating Mechanisms

As stated earlier, outbreaks of violence generally remain on the micro-level of the individual and his closest kin, without mobilising clans or clan segments. The hostilities which are bound to result from cases of *te'egal* must not put into question the good relations between the clans (Loncke 2002: 308f.). If, however, the system of taking and counter-taking, the equilibrium of aggression and partnership between clans, becomes dysfunctional because of an excess of either wife-taking or revenge, other mechanisms will come into play.

If necessary, *ngaanka* contracts can be suspended by the elders to prevent serious damage, but ideally, a balance will be kept and peaceful solutions sought. If a serious conflict threatens to disturb the proceedings of a *ngaanka* meeting, the elders from third party clan groups, who have come as mere guests without being directly involved as either hosts or visitors, can function as arbiters. The leaders and the elders, in general, remain the arbiters who can stop the competition if it risks becoming too harmful to social peace. Their word is fairly important and will usually be respected.

In some cases there seems to have been a consciousness for the possible negative impact *te'egal* can have on the relations between the groups concerned. As a consequence, individual pairs of clans have abolished their mutual *ngaanka* relation and prohibited the practice of *te'egal*, in some cases inter-marriage in general, by a ritual ban (*kippol tummude* – ‘the calabash turned over’²⁹, see

²⁹ A calabash is turned over at the foot of a tree and no one is to ever touch it or turn it around again. The leaders of the two clans give a sermon formally forbidding the abduction of women from the adverse clan (Dupire 1962: 253). The calabash is associated with womanhood and marriage (see Köhler 2013). Hence, a calabash which is turned over and shall not be touched again expresses the negation of marriage. Loncke (2002: 203) further interprets the symbolic of the imagery as expressing the termination of the reciprocal *ngaanka* ceremonies, because the calabash is also the bowl in which food is offered to visitors.

Dupire 1962: 253; Paris 1997: 77; Loncke 2002: 203). The specific reasons having led to such ruptures of *ngaanka* relations can differ: Oral history of the two pairs of clans for which this case applies today indicates that acts of solidarity (case of the Gojanko'en and Yaamanko'en) or strong cross-cutting ties through frequent intermarriage (case of the Njapto'en and Bii Ute'en, see Dupire 1962: 253) were at the basis of the decision. In both cases, the reason for the rupture was thus to prevent the conflictual practice of *te'egal* from doing harm to the mutually good relations. According to Paris (1997: 77), another possible reason would be the uncontrolled escalation of conflicts due to excessive or unbalanced *te'egal*. Dupire remarked as early as in the 1950s that the ritual bans of *kippol tummude* were a phenomenon of the past, suggesting that the authority of the *ardube* was already too weak at that time to enforce such a rule (Dupire 1962: 253f.). However, although the prohibitions obviously date back to a distant past, current practice shows that they are largely effective to our days.

Schareika has interpreted this practice as weakening the clans' autonomy, since it would imply the interference of an external force – i.e., the state authorities or the so-called *chefferie traditionnelle* – into clan affairs (Schareika 2007: 154). This does not seem to be the case. Rather, cases of disrespect of these prohibitions would ideally also be handled on an inter-clan level. The implication of state authorities in cases of *te'egal* rather seems to be a contemporary phenomenon in times of a fading influence of the *ardube* and an increasing presence of the state. Historically, the rupture of a specific *ngaanka* contract between two clans by way of a ban of mutual *te'egal* did not imply a complete rupture of friendly relations, as Schareika (2007: 308) suggests, nor a departure from the ethnic group. If the aforementioned pairs of clans have done away with their reciprocal *ngaanka* relations and forbidden the mutual 'theft' of women, this suggests that they did not, at a given point of time in their history, perceive of the cost-benefit ratio of *te'egal* intermarriage as balanced any longer. The fact that such cases remain the exception and that the same clans continue to entertain *ngaanka* relations with other groups suggests that there is continuing motivation to hold on to the institution.

Te'egal, ngaanka, and Contemporary Change

Even if the institution of *ngaanka* and the practice of *te'egal* seem archaic today and are regarded with disdain by more Islamised neighbouring groups in Niger, they have not lost their relevance in the contemporary context, nor does *te'egal* seem to diminish in numerical importance.³⁰ A contemporary trend in Wodaabe society towards stronger Islamisation has not entailed an abandonment or even a significant weakening of the practice. Many Wodaabe do not seem to see a contradiction between considering themselves as Muslims and practicing *te'egal* in the traditional framework of *ngaanka*. Although *te'egal* among urban-dwelling Wodaabe migrants is rather discouraged by the elders and a matter of much debate, this does not mean that the legitimacy of the practice in general is put into question, not even by a majority of urban-dwelling Wodaabe. Rather, it seems to be considered as problematic in the urban milieu because the external regulation instances of the state are more present and tend to be implicated by concerned actors in the sense discussed above, which is seen by the elders as a potential threat to the customary institution (see

³⁰ I do not have exact figures for the current situation, but the prevalence of *te'egal* has remained significant to the present day. With regard to my principal study group of Gojanko'en in east-central Niger, I estimate that between a third and one half of the population at one point or other in their life makes at least one attempt at *te'egal*, although this does not mean that all these cases result in stable marriages.

Schareika 2007). Despite these debates, however, *te'egal* is vividly practiced also in the urban milieu. One reason for the continuing importance of *te'egal* might also be the fact that, as a result of an increasing general pauperisation, many young Wodaabe today do not obtain from their fathers, according to the principle of *pre mortem* inheritance, the animals necessary to contract a *koobgal* betrothal marriage. In this context, *te'egal* has become, for many, a less costly alternative. This also means, however, that *te'egal*, in such cases, changes its character from a prestigious secondary marriage to an auxiliary marriage for the less well-off.

Just as important as an indicator for the continuing relevance of the institution of *te'egal* as a cohesive element for Wodaabe society and as an element of cultural continuity is the question of existing or lacking maintenance of regular *ngaanka* ceremonies. *Ngaanka* meetings remain a vital element of inter-lineage relations and the practice is by no means diminishing. In 2011, at least five *ngaanka* ceremonies took place in the Damergou Region alone.³¹ It seems noteworthy, however, that new forms of political interaction between clans have emerged and are emerging today: 'General assemblies' (*assemblées générales*) of the Wodaabe have been organised since the early 2000s in central Niger, explicitly addressing an outside audience and combining touristic and political aspects, aimed at networking with potential donors and at representing the Wodaabe self-confidently towards political decision-makers. These meetings, which unite the Wodaabe at the regional level, are the result of increasing efforts of a cooperative and associative organisation that are more developed in central Niger than further east. The assemblies have been described as being characterised by the same dialectic of cooperation and competition between clans that is characteristic of *ngaanka* as well (Lassibille 2009: 319), and that is ultimately a central principle of Wodaabe inter-clan relations and a basis for the interaction among the constituent parts of the ethnic group. If, for the mature men, the political dimension of the meetings is central, for the young, they are an occasion for dancing (ibid.: 321) – and thus potentially for arranging *te'egal* relationships.

Conclusion

The institution of *te'egal* marriage is ambivalent in many ways. As an alternative form of marriage by mutual consent, it grants an element of choice to both men and women in a context where their primary marriages are generally arranged without their say. Although the practice is symbolically conceptualised as a form of wife capture, it is ultimately decided upon by the women. Given that *te'egal* marriage in the context of *ngaanka* partnership has a highly political relevance on the level of inter-clan relations, this significant degree of female agency in individual *te'egal* arrangements is remarkable. Despite the striking exclusion of women from decision-making in the ceremonial framework of *ngaanka*, the institution nonetheless opens up options for women to influence and manipulate the patriarchal structures of society.

Although *te'egal* is overall positively valued by society, any particular case is condemned by the aggrieved husband as an act of aggression. While *te'egal* is thus a source of important conflicts, the cross-cutting ties between clans established by a long history of mutual *te'egal* relations have a potential for maintaining social cohesion. However, they function only to a limited degree as a means of conflict prevention. Through the institutionalisation of *te'egal* in the form of bilateral

³¹ Jijjiiru and Baagel'en; Yaamanko'en and Baagel'en; Gojanko'en and Jijjiiru; Biɓbe Denke and Suudu Suka'el; Yaamanko'en and Jijjiiru.

inter-clan agreements of contractual character, the clans become engaged in structural opposition and confrontation. The clans cooperate as rivals in what they themselves call a 'war' about women, a war that is not fought with arms but with the means of seduction.³² Although Wodaabe regard and define their predatory competition as war, it is definitely not war of all against all, and by any means. Rather, it is structured by a complex set of rules. *Te'egal* and the conflicts resulting from it are externalised from the own group to avoid a weakening of the unity on this level. Conflicts are, however, not *per se* prevented or avoided. *Ngaanka* perpetuates tensions between clans, since it encourages and sanctions the continuity of a conflict-provoking practice.

The hypothesis that *ngaanka* developed historically as a mechanism to limit the harm done by formerly uncontrolled predatory marriages, is perhaps not too far-fetched: It establishes clear limits and channels the conflictive practice out of the core group where it is potentially the most dangerous. The close interweaving of elements symbolic of the predatory act and antithetic, appeasing elements also suggests such an origin. The rituals of *ngaanka* stress partnership and mutuality to keep the balance with the elements of opposition and aggression and finally to prevent conflicts about *te'egal* from degenerating into inter-clan confrontations and collective violence. However, despite its regulating character, *ngaanka* merely transforms the potential conflict into a competition with rules, yet leaves the question of the multiple claims to women unresolved.

Regardless of the aspect of competition, *ngaanka* requires cooperation between clans and, hence, at the same time fosters mutuality and reciprocity. Fierce rivalry and a strong sense of belonging through the affirmation of a shared ethnic identity are intrinsically linked here. The aspect of marital exchange between clans to reinforce the cohesion of the group is just as important in the ceremonies as is the ritual occasion for reaffirming common cultural values. The competitive character of the pacts is apt to enliven central cultural expressions that are crucial for the formulation and reproduction of ethnic identity. *Te'egal* is part of this identity and, hence, a positive value. In the symbolism of *ngaanka*, it is explicitly represented as part of the cultural values of the group, hence of identity. In this perspective, *ngaanka* can be regarded as a conflict-regulating institution that establishes common values and is thus an important factor for we-group stabilisation (Elwert 2002: 47). Schareika (2007: 315) has convincingly demonstrated that the agreement about the admission of *te'egal* is the expression of a conscious political will for structuring the relations between clans. The benefit is visible in the extended network of social and political relations established by intermarriages and ceremonial alliances. Hence, Wodaabe approve of *te'egal* in the framework of *ngaanka* contracts, because both the ceremonial and the marital exchange are vital for the continuity of the ethnic group.

Barth (1969) has stressed the importance of boundaries for the formation and maintenance of ethnic identity. In the case of the Wodaabe, crucial identity boundaries do not only define the group in relation to other ethnic groups (outward boundaries), but also the different segments in relation to each other (internal boundaries). These boundaries are characterised by the dialectics of opposition and alliance typical of segmentary lineage societies and find their clearest expression in the institutionalised competition over women. The ethnic group is eventually defined and shaped along these boundaries – the interface between different clans – just as much as along the outward boundaries – the interface with other ethnic groups. The structural opposition between the segments

³² In a metaphorical sense, the Wodaabe example can be regarded as a particular case of the pattern 'we marry those with whom we are at war', or, 'we marry those whom we fight' (Fortes 1969). Declared war between clans, in this case, can be regarded as a condition for mutual marriage (of a particular type, i.e., *te'egal*). *Te'egal* marriage is the reason for this war and, at the same time, its weapon.

is defined by and expressed in the *ngaanka* contracts. The example thus illustrates the principle that the segments of lineage societies need the opposition of other segments to constitute and consolidate themselves (Evans-Pritchard 1940). In the case of *ngaanka*, this is manifest in the clans' ritual interdependence. By cooperating as rivals they mutually serve each other as the constituting other. While the institution of *ngaanka* thus reiterates clan boundaries and clan identities by reinforcing the internal structural opposition between clans, it also assures the permeability and constant transgression of these boundaries by sanctioning the practice of *te'egal* marriage that creates multiple cross-cutting ties among clans. Although *te'egal* constitutes a constant source of inter-clan conflict, it is, at the same time, the social glue that holds the clans together in the network of the ethnic group.

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