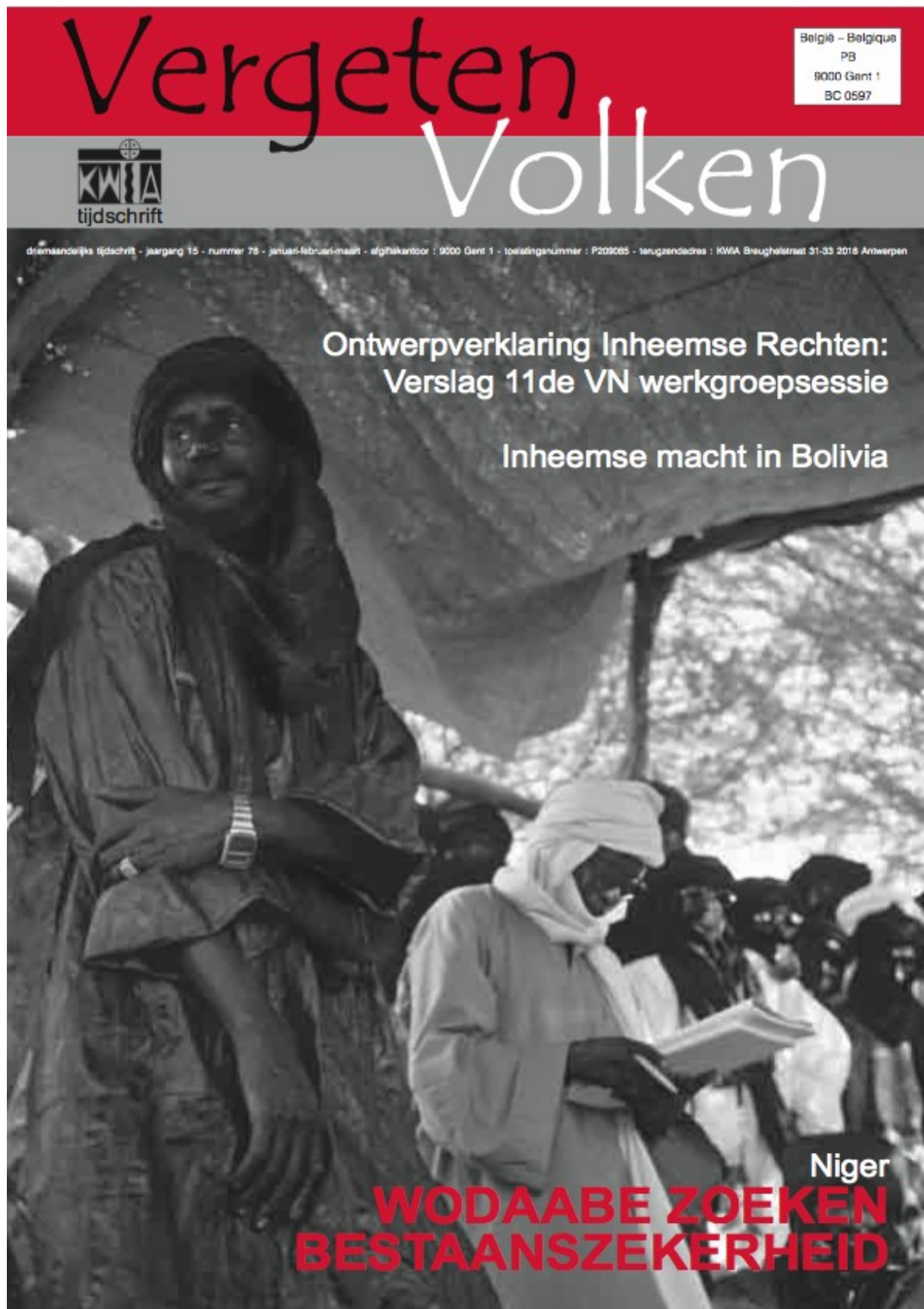


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New Wodaabe (*) gathering to be reckoned with Nomadic people in search of social security in a changing context

By iez Thiry, march 2006
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A complex kind of culture shock: in the Antwerp public library I surf the internet with Doula Mokao, Bodaado (singular of Wodaabe), co-founder of the 'Assemblée Générale des Wodaabe' in Niger, looking for pictures of this General Assembly. When I first wanted to talk to him there, late September 2005, he was dignified and tired amidst the 9,000 attendants - not a good moment for my questionnaire. In Agadez, where I dropped in on him later on, I couldn't really bring it up either. Time and again someone came to talk to him about some urgent matter, often he had to leave with them immediately. Luckily for me he spent a few months in Europe last winter, also in Belgium, where it took considerably less trouble to monopolize him.



Doula Mokao

Since 2004, during their annual General Assembly in September the Wodaabe have been defining their problems - access to water, pasture rights, participation in the administration ... - and thinking about possible solutions. From the beginning, Doula Mokao was involved in the process of growing awareness leading to the foundation of this General Assembly. Within the Wodaabe, Doula belongs to the Bingawa group. 'Their' territory is situated more or less to the north of Agadez and In-Gall. There, Doula was born in 1963, in time to experience the two big droughts of the seventies and eighties. In 1984 most Wodaabe and their cattle fled to the extreme south of Niger, towards Nigeria. Many young men, like Doula, leave for the cities, hoping to make a living.

Discontent

In Agadez, young Doula lives with his uncle Peroodji, who sells handicrafts to tourists. That's how he learns French, and that's how he gets to know foreigners. Some become friends. He travels with them in Niger, and takes them into the bush to visit his family. In turn, he 's invited to come and visit them: in 1990 he takes his first flight to Europe.

It's his French friends who make him aware of his people's uncertain situation when it comes to claiming rights to land or water. Also the possibility of an armed Touareg revolt is brought up. Discontent among the nomads is high at the time, hardly anything is done for them, they've been more or less left to their fate during the droughts. Because they haven't received our kind of education, they have no access to the classical ways of participation in the state of Niger, organized after our western model. Alas also old antagonisms between different ethnic groups remain: and in the new order, the nomads are clearly not anywhere near the seat of power.

These days the Touareg have some kind of representation, so a tiny little voice speaks up for nomad rights now. Still, the nomadic population misses out on most development projects and distress relief. Last year, many of them have once more lost most of their cattle. Doula asked me to type a list of family members who had lost all animals: a list of eighty family heads, with an average of two wives and 7.5 children each. To supply cattle-fodder is not on the programme of distress relief organisations. And once the animals have died, the damage cannot be undone by donating a couple of bags of rice.

Anachronism

Most home and foreign efforts are directed towards agriculture, villages, i.e. towards sedentary people. The nomadic way of life is often seen as a bit of an anachronism: cute as a tourist attraction, but surely doomed to disappear. Still, over the last years it has become clear that those nomads, with their ancient knowledge of the vulnerable Sahel environment, contribute greatly to the country's production. Exactly by living according to their traditions, moving around with their herds, they make use of regions not suited for agriculture without overgrazing one region definitively. Although several scientific studies confirm this, it hasn't been translated into an official policy yet.



Harouna going home from the well. From the age of about twelve, boys can be responsible for the cattle.

Where cattle breeding is supported, it's mostly in the form of large-scale projects, where the nomads, who haven't had any formal schooling, are at the most admitted as the lowest employees for menial tasks. That's a sad and frustrating existence when all your life you've been used to go your own way, or at least have had a reasonable say in what's going on.

Small-scale projects are started by small foreign organisations or even individuals. Out of continued contacts with tourists or friends made on a tour abroad, many a plan originated, mostly aimed at financing a well for one particular family. To water one's herd at somebody else's well, one usually has to pay. There are 'public' wells too in Niger, accessible to all. But when there's not enough for everybody, who will get it and who won't? And who'll pay for maintenance? In the dry season all of this easily causes conflicts.

Right to water

In discussing them abroad, Doula becomes aware of these issues. When he's back home after his first stay in France, he gathers the Bingawa and presses them to secure their rights to water in their territory, and to gather around these wells. This doesn't always go smoothly. Even though a Wodaabe family may claim to have inhabited a certain area for hundreds, if not thousands of years, without the necessary documents that's hard to prove. As said before, the Wodaabe themselves are not represented with the authorities. Others decide for them. Others who may have claims to the same territory.

Once a well is adjudicated or newly built, these days often a small settlement around it leaves no doubt about whose well it is. The Wodaabe call this, also in their own Fulfulde language, a 'centre' (as in French). Apart from the well there's ideally a small health centre, a granary and a little school. Part of the family settles there, the cattle keep on the move with a minimum of herders. Such a new way of living brings about quite a few changes. During the first General Assembly, the women expressed their hope that with



Water is scarce and precious in the Sahel. Those who don't own their own well, often have to pay to have access. This well belongs to a Wodaabe group.

sedentarisation, their workload would lessen. But of course, new tasks pop up as well. Planting trees for firewood for example. Nomads will gather dead wood around every new campsite, and after a while they'll move on and find new dead wood. If you stay in one place, you have to go looking further and further afield - or find alternatives.

Environmental awareness

Waste disposal demands a new approach as well. Unfortunately, in the bush everything is simply left behind. Formerly, the only traces of a deserted campsite consisted of a few unnaturally arranged faggots. Nowadays all kinds of less perishable junk lay about: worn plastic sandals, pots and pans, glass fragments, and also quite a few empty batteries. Six times I've visited the same nomadic family, so to some extent they've become 'my' family. Each time I try to make them understand that especially those batteries are very polluting. "Yes, that fits in. Our animals are ill more often these days, that might very well be caused by those batteries and so on. But well, what can we do?" That seems very obvious to me: whoever goes shopping in the village, takes the collected garbage with him and throws it away there. What an absurd idea! They laugh derisively, "Who would ever do that?"

So I was overjoyed when during our conversations Doula himself started to express his worry over problems like deforestation and pollution - especially those batteries! With his idea to fix water points he had already broken new ground: he might just be able to strike the right note to awaken his people's environmental awareness as well.

Powerlessness

In 1992 Doula attends his first international indigenous conference, in Sweden. He speaks about the Wodaabe and gives a dance demonstration, all on his own. All kinds of people meet, talk about their problems and possible solutions, which is all very inspiring. He'll attend again two years later. After this first conference it's clear to Doula that the Wodaabe need to make themselves heard through official channels. Unknown is unloved! Back in Niger he encourages everybody to found legally recognised associations, which will make the Wodaabe problems known to the authorities and all kinds of home and foreign institutions.

In the meantime, the Touareg have assumed armed resistance. Traditionally, the Wodaabe are no warriors. Although only the odd Bodaado joins the fight, they too count their victims. The region is unstable, cattle thieves and other bandits can do as they please. In a raid the Wodaabe find themselves confronting fire-arms with spears, slings and bow and arrows. When they ask the authorities for protection, they are told there's no possible way to control the bush, and they are advised to purchase fire-arms themselves.

There's an immense overall feeling of powerlessness. Doula and some friends draw up a report on the situation that's sent to the president. In June 1993 they call together representatives of all Wodaabe clans in Abalak for deliberation. Conclusion: because they don't want to use violence, again there's only one thing the Wodaabe can do: to found legally recognised associations, in hope of being heard by the government and abroad.

International contacts

In 1996 Doula first visits the 'Salon International de l'Artisanat de Ouagadougou', a huge inter-African biannual crafts fair. An interesting event for international contacts. That first time he meets Daniela there, who has him come over to her homeland Brazil to meet Indian tribal chiefs. Two years later it's Marc, a Canadian who started a cheese factory in Ouagadougou. He befriends the Wodaabe delegation and comes to Agadez to do the same for them. First of all they have to found an association. None of the Wodaabe can read or write very well, so they hire a non-Bodaado for the paperwork. Between that man and Marc something goes very wrong: the Canadian disappears without any news, the project is abandoned. The association however gets founded anyhow, while Doula is in Brazil. He returns home to find out he's now the Secretary-General of the 'Coordination Associative Pour l'Elevage et l'Artisanat Baraka'.

Another 'Ouaga-acquaintance' is Céline, who travels along to Niger with the Wodaabe after the 2000 crafts fair and spends some time with them in the bush. Right then, Michael Palin's team comes along recording their Sahara documentary. Doula accompanies Michael during his Wodaabe visit. The team also follows them to the Cure Salée (**).



*Elderly women comment freely on the dancers.
Foudouk, September 2005.*

Alternative gathering

The Wodaabe are less and less pleased with this Cure Salée. There's an official stage with all kinds of Niger artists; but in fact it's the Wodaabe, with their traditional dances in the margin of the event, who form its main attraction, and they're well aware of it. Some foreign travel agencies even describe the Cure Salée as a Wodaabe celebration. They get nothing out of this: they pay for their own transport, are left to find their own lodging and aren't offered any food or water. Lots and lots of impressive pictures are shot, but it all earns them little

respect. Neither the tourists, nor the authorities seem interested in their problems. After the exceptionally well attended 2003 edition, Doula and some others decide on a Wodaabe boycott for next year. Perhaps finally someone will sit up and wonder why the Wodaabe aren't happy.

Early in 2004 Doula, with the association Baraka, and Douchi Mamane of the Bikoron'en-clan with the association Eleveurs du Ténéré start with the practical organisation of an alternative gathering, where all tribal chiefs and representatives of Wodaabe associations will be invited. It will be a genuine General Assembly, to be held every year from 22 to 29 September, each time in a different guest 'centre'. Several meetings are on the programme, and apart from that, as in every Wodaabe-gathering, traditional dancing. Foreign visitors pay a fee to attend, so the organization can cover its own costs and provide food for the participating Wodaabe.

The first Assembly is held in September 2004 in Tagedoum, the Bikoron'en centre, near In-Gall. Thirteen Wodaabe associations and a handful of Westerners involved with the Wodaabe help to prepare it. Attendance is high: about 4.000 Wodaabe from all over Niger, from sixteen different clans, from a total of 215 tribes. Women, tribe chiefs, elders, youth ... have their own reunions and draw up their want lists. The idea then arises to found a collective to defend Wodaabe interests throughout the year, to make



Meeting during the General Assembly in Foudouk, September 2005

sure all this talking doesn't just end with a written account. This collective has been started up in the beginning of March 2006.

Obvious succes

Whoever came to In-Gall in september 2004 in search of Wodaabe dancing, came in vain. A small group kindly performs some traditional singing on the official stage, which is spoiled by three completely obsolete microphones, but they're in their everyday outfit. No make-up or ostrich feathers in sight. Unhappy tourists all around.

Originally, last year's official Cure Salée in In-Gall was set for 10 September 2005. When I arrived there, I found out the date had been changed to, of all days, the 22nd, i.e. the first day of the Wodaabe Assembly. "The Wodaabe will just have to delay their event a week". Doula was even threatened with imprisonment if that wouldn't happen. But of course there was no more delaying: after a whole year of preparations, a long list of visitors and travel agencies from Niger and abroad had the Assembly on their agenda. So, although last autumn 'something had been done' for the Wodaabe in In-Gall, they only danced there before the official opening ceremony: then they continued to their own celebration, this time in Foudouk.

Foudouk, about 80 km south-east of In-Gall, is the Bingawa 'centre', that of Doula's family. This time sixteen associations had committed themselves. Attendance had more than doubled, with even some personalities present: the Sultan of the Aïr (traditional Touareg arbitrator residing in Agadez who to this day yields authority), the Nigerian Minister of Cattle-Breeding ... Unicef vaccinated children against the measles, a traveling cinema warned about aids. Obviously, after only one edition, the Assembly had become an event to be reckoned with. With the foundation of the Wodaabe collective, its continuation is now assured.



Meeting during the General Assembly in Foudouk, September 2005

So what about the celebration in In-Gall? Not only the Wodaabe aren't happy about it anymore: for the Touareg and the Ingalese themselves as well it has become too official and commercial. It's no longer their thing, they prefer the region's smaller, local events. Personally I hope the gathering In-Gall will find a new élan. It would be a good thing if Niger's celebrations' season, after a series of local, 'ethnically restricted' events, would culminate someplace where everybody could meet, full of new plans and ideas. The ideal meeting-place for the different nomadic groups, for nomads and villagers, for people and authorities, for locals and foreigners ...

(*) The Wodaabe in a changing world

The Wodaabe (singular Bodaado) are a sub-group of the Peul, who live all over West-Africa. Traditionally the Wodaabe are nomads, moving around with their bororo-cattle (zebus) in the Nigerean Sahel. And they have been doing this for quite a while: rock paintings have been found dating back to, according to some, seven thousand years, depicting a camp organized exactly like a present-day Wodaabe camp, even the women's hairdos look the same. Have they been living in this region since time immemorial then? Have they moved on to come back in a circular way? There are lots of fascinating theories about where the Wodaabe and the Touareg come from (Atlantis!). To themselves this isn't all that fascinating, they've got enough on their mind figuring out where they're going. After the big droughts in the early seventies and eighties rainfall remained irregular and unevenly spread. The region is much barer than before, which means more erosion, some patches no longer recovering ... From the green south, agriculture has grown towards the north. Thanks to modern techniques, ever more and more areas that were formerly thought unfit were brought under cultivation. Nice for agriculture, but not so nice for the nomads, who in the process have lost their best pasture lands. Once limits were set to the agricultural growth, but these have long been exceeded. In very dry years, when the nomads are forced to move far to the south, conflicts between nomads and farmers are almost inevitable.

() The Cure Salée**

In the Sahel cattle-breeding is practiced on a nomadic basis for several reasons. First of all the land is very fragile: if cattle stays on the same spot too long, this will be overgrazed, which means the vegetation cannot recover there. Apart from this reason, the animals ideally also need different kinds of food in different periods of the year. These are found on different kinds of soil, so in the course of a year they change between sandy and clayey soil. At the end of the rainy season, about the end of September, the animals need extra salt. That's found in the soil around In-Gall. All nomads, who live spread out over hundreds of kilometers for the rest of the year, then gather in the same region. Because they're closer to each other now, this is when the traditional family celebrations are held. Since the foundation of the state of Niger, there's also an official celebration, in In-Gall itself. Ministers, foreign guests of state, representatives of all kinds of organizations, lots of Touareg and Wodaabe and some tourists attend it. It looks a bit like our festivals: music and dance (traditional and modern) on a stage, and around that stands with food, drink, crafts and information. There's also - unlike at our festivals so far - always at least one camel race.