

## **Bridging The Gap Between Tradition And Science And Technology: Myths And Realities In The Fulbe Classification Of Women**

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### **Abstract**

As life partners and as mothers and wives women have remained inevitable to men since time immemorial. Different traditions and cultures see women differently, especially when it comes to selecting a life partner. In some traditions such as the Fulbe tradition selecting a wife was and to some extent still remains part of the responsibility of parents and elders within the family. This traditional practice is to ensure that, the marriage survives through a good choice. In the traditional Fulbe society where wives operate under full-term and are entirely domiciled in their husbands' house, marriage institution is so much respected and the objectives are not only for procreation and raising children but for providing the husband with the needed comfort and psychological support which often times translates into success of the husband in his life endeavors. In the light of the Fulbe tradition as reflected in the book: *Bolle Hikima De Dawa-see-dacce E Fulbe Wobbe*, women in marital terms could be classified into 10 unique domains. However, out of the 10 categories only one is considered worthy of preference. It is against this backdrop that, this paper attempts to synthesize the traditional classifications with the aim of bridging the gap between traditional beliefs and science and technology advancements of recent times. The paper proffers some remedies that would help in demystifying some of the basis for the traditional classification cum stigmatization, still practiced among some Fulbe.

**Keywords:** Fulbe, Tradition, women, marriage, science and technology

### **1. Introduction**

According to Awogbade in Daudu (1995), Fulbe are believed to be of mixed origin, with paternal Arab and maternal African etymology. According to oral tradition, Uqba bn Nafi, an Arab, married an African woman Bajjo Mango, through which the Fulbe race descended. Quite significantly, Fulfulde, the language of the Fulbe, is as widely spoken as the widely spread Fulbe and their tradition. As a language, Fulfulde is spoken by about 40million natives and non-natives and as a lingua franca in many West and Central African countries such as Burkina-Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Gambia, Guinea, Niger, Nigeria, Mali and Senegal to mention a few. Greenberg (1963) classified Fulfulde under the West-Atlantic group of Niger-Congo language phylum. Although, in a revised classification, Bender (1989) classifies Fulfulde in the index of Nigerian languages and observed that it belongs to the Atlantic sub-division of Atlantic-Congo language phylum. In Nigeria, Fulfulde is used as a medium of instruction across the levels of education and also used in print and electronic media in some countries such as Mali, Nigeria and Senegal. It is used in national and international broadcast of Radio Nigeria and Voice of Nigeria.

Fulbe People placed so much value to the marriage institution since time immemorial and perhaps well informed on the dire consequences of failed marriage as it affects many aspects of the society. Marriage occupies the most intimate aspect of our personal privacy and personal love, and reaches the pillars of the sacred institution in our society and tradition. According to Wood (2002), marriage is the pillar of man, but it is also the pillar of government, business, and the military particularly because marriage cuts across all spheres of men in the society. As goes marriage; so goes the nation. When marriages prosper, the nation rises; when marriages fail, the nation falls. Why, because as teachers, politicians, military commandos, ministers we need the emotional and psychological support to think and function appropriately. This is easily found from successfully married men and women. Divorce on the other hand does not only rattle the foundation of the judicial system and psychiatry of human being but, through its influence on children, alters the course of the next generation.

## 2. Traditional Classification of Women among the Fulbe People

According to Wanjohi (1999) many people often believe that all that's past or ancient is nice, while some believe that all that's new or modern is nice. These two of course are extreme viewpoints where truth isn't likely to reside in. Being fair to both cases entails that one create a synthesis of these two extremes and get to an average or moderate position where the fact is more prone to be located. It is on this basis that this paper analyses the traditional classifications of women among the Fulbe essentially to bridge the gap existing between traditional beliefs and scientific and technological advancements of recent times. It is evident that marriage and marital issues have attracted attention from the academia and social network essentially because it affects the socio-economic as well as the physiological aspects of both couples and their children (Lerman, 2002; Wilson and Oswald, 2005; Schoenborn 2004).

The Fulbe traditional practices classified women in matrimonial perspectives into 10 maintaining that only one out of the ten would make a good partner. The bases for the classification were really spelt out. Interestingly, because the nine classes of women were stigmatized as not-suitable for marriage there classification began with words of warning, "taa te'u" meaning: "Do not marry", then the metaphoric description of the woman would follow.

The categories are hereby brought forward one after the other vis-à-vis the current realities that demystify such categorization:

### 2.1. Taa Teu Debbo Juddo

'Beware of a tall woman'

As earlier mentioned metaphor was ideally the style used in classifying the unsuitable women. It begins by, 'beware of a tall women (when looking for a suitable wife)'. This describes a woman not by her height rather by her geographical location, her hometown or city. It means a woman should not be married from a far distance. The implication according to Fulbe tradition is that, even after marriage a woman must keep contact with her parents from time to time. This entails that she visits them once in a while. In the Fulbe tradition where wives are dominantly total housewives with little or no economic power all responsibilities are shouldered by the husband including when it involves travelling expenses when visiting her parents. Tradition therefore maintains that, the closer the distance the easier it is economically and psychologically because often time's travels incur anxiety with regards to safety of the people involved vis-à-vis the loneliness and boredom which is created because of the absence of our loved ones.

As much as the above really is an issue that concerns all, with the technological advancement in the world today this is not a serious matter. The stress, insecurity and boredom felt by the husband when the wife travels a long distance can be reduced considering the availability and affordability of the telephone, video chatting, Facebook and other electronic means of communication. Similarly, unlike in the past, the transportation systems of today also provide solace as thousands of miles could be covered with ease of time and stress. We live in a borderless world as such distance alone should not form a barrier against people who really want to marry one another. The remedy to overbearing responsibility is that, women should be educated and allowed to engage in safe-economic activities in order to help not only their parents but to cater for some of their more personal needs.

### 2.2 Taa Te'u Debbo Dammudo:

'Beware of short woman'

The woman metaphorically described as, 'short' is: The one married from around the neighborhood. Marrying this type of woman according to the Fulbe tradition is implicative especially if she is not from the same family lineage with the husband. Fulbe cherish endogamy where cross cousins are joined together in wedlock by their parents essentially because should there be a misunderstanding among couples the family elders are brought in to advice and counsel. In view of that, when you marry from your neighborhood but outside your family lineage the tendency is that, even a slight misunderstanding which could be tolerated and resolved amicably amongst you would be

exaggerated and magnified by her relations. It is easier to shun friends and colleagues from one's wife/family but not her family members. The remedy therefore is relocation to a relatively distant location from her parents. With the affordable communication gadgets in the world today contact with her parents could be sustained without necessary physical contact on regular basis. Above that, Love and Trust must be established and strengthened by the couples to avoid any third-party interference. With these palliatives, the proximity issue as impediment to marriage can be demystified. Marriage built on Love and trust is supposed to defy simple intimidations and interference.

### 2.3 Taa Te'u Debbo Daneejo

"Beware of a fair woman"

Although metaphorically this woman is described as fair-complexioned, the semantic implication here refers to a divorcee whose ex-husband was affluent or influential. It is traditionally believed that she had lived a life of luxury with her ex-husband and might be used to such luxuries and affluences. As much as this may be true, it is also true that it is dependent on her past experience. She could re-marry for love as it may not be the case in her past experience. It means irrespective of the economic status of the new husband she could align or readjust in as much as she has fallen in true love with him. Marriage is not everything about affluence or social status. There are still reliable and dependable women who may not just be lucky in their first marriages. Sometimes they get married or are forced into marrying rich or affluent persons who are arrogant or do not have the human heart. The remedy in this case is for the new husband to diligently find out the weak areas of the past experience so that he could strengthen or act on it. It may be dishonesty, intolerance, arrogance, illiteracy, bad character or other negative qualities of the Ex-husband that led to the divorce.

Another remedy is that, the new husband should be frank and honest to her about his socio-economic state. She should accept him as he is. With that, she may live to love him for his honesty and other good virtues as patience and humility. The traditional believe that you may only satisfy a woman divorced by a rich or affluent person if you are as rich or as affluent as her ex-husband should hold no water after all where there is love and understanding marriages last. With the simplest communication apparatus such as the hand-phone and face-book, love and romantic text messages are exchanged on regular bases thereby ensuring mutuality, love and trust among couples even before marriage. Accessibility to our love ones irrespective of time and distance is made easy. In fact wanjohi (1999) maintains that, African marriages today are characterized by freedom of choice, thanks to civilization, science and technology.

### 2.4 Taa Te'u Debbo Baleejo

"Beware of a black woman"

The metaphor, 'black woman' in this classification refers to such a woman whose ex-husband is a fortune teller, gangster or cultist. The implication of marrying such a woman is that, she could have garnered from her ex-husband his life-styles and the kind of friends he introduced to her who are quite enemies of the state and humanity. When a woman lives with such dubious people she too becomes incline and prone to behaving or feeling in like manners. She could easily use her charms, black magic or spells to rein havoc to the husband, his children or co-wife at the slightest provocation. The remedy to marrying such women is education and rehabilitation. This must be followed by close monitoring and mentoring on the need for peaceful coexistence and harmony among people. The tendency may be that she was even divorced because she could not condone such bad behaviours by her ex-husband in which case rehabilitation may not take so long a time. Lots of movies and video clips today showing the menace of such dubious behaviours and the dire consequences are available and affordable as such could be used in rehabilitation attempts among others.

### 2.5 Taa Te'u Debbo Nyolnoowo Awdi

"Beware of a barren woman"

According to the Fulbe tradition marriage is essentially for procreation, just as it is the practice in almost all African tribes. 'Nyolnoowo awdi' is a woman who is proven barren. The proof often was established after about 5 or more years of not successfully getting pregnant after marriage. Traditionally such a woman were considered as good only in weakening the husband, through unwarranted multiple sex. Marrying this category of woman goes contrary to the African norms which envisage that a marriage should be fruitful, or biblically for pro-creation. It is for this and other reasons that barren women were stigmatized and regarded as unsuitable for marriage almost in all African traditions. According to Wanjohi (1999) to Africans children are essentially the adornment of the house. She further maintains that it is most likely that the primary explanations why Africans marry is for childbearing. It is really an aesthetic reason anyway. Another excuse is the expectation that children could provide a leaning shoulder for the parents when the parents attain old age. As much as some of the points mentioned are somewhat genuine; time, science and technology have corrected much of those wrong believes and impressions about barrenness. After all people practice Invitro fertilization (IVF) to have a baby of their choice, thanks to science and technology. Sometimes such a woman considered as barren remarries and succeeds in getting pregnant. Based on what have been put forward barrenness should not be an impediment to marrying a woman in as much as there love, understanding and means to do that.

After all 21st century medical breakthroughs provide many ways of disproving barrenness ranging from healthy and fertility food that increase sperm swim and attitudes that generate sperm genetic make-ups to avoiding certain practices such as excess smoking and drinking. Weight checking could also be a healthy practice that improves fertility. According to Arewojulowu (2012) there is a general consensus among fertility experts that an optimum weight should be maintained when trying to get pregnant. Being over or underweight can affect the regularity of the menstrual periods and inhibit ovulation in women. Too much weight around the stomach can also affect the hormone balance, impair fertility and delay pregnancy.

#### 2.6 Taa Te'u Bonnowo Awdi

"Beware of someone's slave"

According to the Fulbe tradition, 'Bonnowo Awdi' is a woman who is circumstantially a slave to someone else. According to Wright (2000) in Africa, as in many places around the world, slavery is an old practice essentially resulting from warring groups taking captives often sold and transported to more distant places. Women constituted the majority of early African slaves. In addition to agricultural work, female slaves carried out other economic functions, such as trading, cotton spinning and dyeing.

Wright (2000) maintains that Kinship, also known as link with a person's family through bloodstream or marriage lineage among Africans generally, is an extremely important component of the person's identity for integration and interaction in the society. Typically, individuals without accepted kinship were basically stigmatized by society. In this case there is a legal implication of marrying a slave essentially because tradition has decreed that all the children begotten from the union belong to her owner (master) and not the husband. This to the Fulbe is tantamount to a waste of energy and time, since the husband can't claim the children, even though he is their biological father. Wright (2000) however claims that many African societies decreed also that after three or four generations, descendants of slaves could often shed their slave status. Thus slavery, on one hand, cut people off from their kin but, on the other hand, provided them with the possibility of becoming attached to other families and, after several generations, reintegrated into the web of kinship.

However, where a slave woman exist the remedy to enslavement and slavery in the 21st century is for the woman to attain social and educational liberation. Many a person labeled as slaves are considered as free-born, respected in the society and cherished as a result of their economic and social achievements achieved through education. After all a slave can set himself free after paying his master an agreed sum when it comes to the worst.

#### 2.7 Taa Te'u cankitoowo Awdi

"Beware of a restless woman"

Patience is the bed-rock upon which marriages rests. However, some women are really grossly impatient and restless. Traditionally, the Fulbe consider such a woman metaphorically as the one with scattered seeds. Her seeds are all over with no coordination. This class of woman who has recorded several divorces often gets married bear a child or two then finds her way out to yet marry another victim. The implication is that, she has children but of different fathers; she scatters her children. It is indeed not desirable to marry an habitually impatient woman when the end results is having your children with many half-brothers or step brothers of relatively inconsistent number because the tendency may be that she won't be long with you too since she is used to remarrying. I wonder if time, science and technology could also check-mate this attitude but I firmly believe that illiteracy is responsible. In view of that, proper enlightenment and reorienting the woman may make a difference.

#### 2.8 Taa Te'u Mo Be

“Beware of a menopausal woman”

The woman here as referred is such who was married and had children with the Ex-husband then she got divorced after attaining menopause. Traditionally Fulbe see this woman as always maintaining her affiliate with her Ex-husband under the pretext of, ‘Father of my children’. With telephone devices in the 21st century the new husband may choose to allow her communicate with her ex-husband if need be in his presence, to avoid any suspicion that may arise as a result of her communicating to her Ex. She must not visit the Ex-husband to be able to pass message concerning her children. Although she is not likely to give the new husband any child as a result of her age but may be full of experience. Thanks to civilization many Africans today understand that marriage as a union is not all about having a baby but having a partner who gives moral and physical support to the husband. With her vast experience a woman can provide the necessary moral, economic and social security required for advancements of the whole family.

#### 2.9 Taa Te'u Mo mo'on

“Beware of “yours” woman

The metaphor, ‘yours’ here refers to a woman divorced after she bore up to 4 children with the Ex-husband. She is still virile and you could also have issues with her but it carries with it socio-economic as well as psychological implications; the children from you and those from her Ex-husband are entirely from the same mother but from two different fathers. Your children and the other children all become, ‘yours’. It is therefore expected that as their step-father you may be required to support them socio-economically. Any attempt to treat them differently may trigger disaffection from their mother who may feel that you hate her children just because they are not directly your children. The remedy is that, you educate and come to terms right from the beginning, agree on the dos and don'ts if possible it should include issues concerning her other children. According to Fagan et.al (2002) marriages can thrive when couples learn the skills to make their relationship works. The husband should also empower her economically so that she can take care of the needs of her children.

### 3. The Qualities and Requisites of the Right Choice

Believing that the foundation of every sound society stems from the peaceful nature of the family, the Fulbe tradition X-rayed the most suitable partner to be sought after. With the unique characteristics of both the potential husband and wife spelt out clearly such qualities could serve as yard-stick or food-for-thought to the bachelors and intending husbands to make a selection of their choice quite meaningful, for a lasting relationship and matrimony. The characteristics and the requirements are made clear also such that they can be passed from generation to generation.

The 10th class which is essentially the last category of woman whom the tradition of the Fulbe portrays as capable of making a good partner has a total of nine inter-woven variables thus:

#### 3.1.1. Taa Bura mo jawdi

‘The husband should be richer’

This is essentially because in the Fulbe tradition husbands as the bread-winners of the family provide all that is required to manage the house. These involve feeding, clothing, health care and other un-foreseen legal and economic demands.

### 3.1.2. Taa buraa mo anndal

‘The Husband should be more educated’

This is particularly to have control over the affairs of the family and to provide all the guidance and discipline. You cannot take charge if you are not more knowledgeable since wisdom is an essential ingredient in maintaining peace and harmony between couples.

### 3.1.3. Taa buraa mo haa be’itte

‘The Husband should be more man-enough’

It is really important that before marriage the man should ensure that he is healthy enough to go into wedlock. Cohabiting is essentially one of the inevitable in marriage, as such one is advised in this context to bite what one is confident of chewing. Although the biological sexual demands of each woman is unique and cannot be ascertained before marriage, since pre-marital sex is a taboo among the Fulbe, should there be discrepancies arising from either of the couples inability to satisfy the other after marriage, medical advice should be sought. Thanks to science and technology there are useful guides to how sexually either party can be satisfied. Taking a cursory look at books that give remedies to gynecological problems should not be a bad idea. Gynecologist could personally be contacted to acquire the necessary skills required to keep the friendship and love among couples flowing.

## **3.2. On the other hand, according to the Fulbe traditions you share equally the followings:**

### 3.2.1. Poton ndimu

*‘Both of you should be devoid of traces of slavery’*

This simply means both husband and wife should be free-born and not slaves to anybody.

### 3.2.2. Poton daraja

*‘Both should be within relatively similar socio statuses’*

To ensure that marriage last for a life time compatibility issues must be taken into cognizance. Look for your like mind. If you are educated go for the educated and if you are a teacher you may be better understood by person in the same field.

### 3.2.3. Poton lenyol

*‘Be equal in terms of family lineage’*

Same family lineage is so important amongst the Fulbe because it is believed to ensure bonding and communality as you both share common dos and don’ts.

## **3.3 The woman/wife should take the larger percentage of the following:**

**1. Yidde** ‘Love **.2. Woodugo** ‘Beauty’ **3. Munyal** ‘Patience’

The implication of the claims above according to Fulbe tradition is that, when it comes to love the wife should have and exhibit larger share. The husband on the other hand should devote his time to taking care of the wife, her

demands and that of their children more as opposed to being carried away in love. Similarly, in the Fulbe tradition it does not really matter how handsome the husband is but essentially the wife should be beautiful enough. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder but is crucial in keeping the chastity of husbands and for his psychological satisfaction. After the day's hassles a look at a beautiful wife should cool the heart. Lastly, a woman/wife should be more enduring in matters of matrimony maintains the Fulbe tradition. Patience is surely the ingredient of marriage and in view of her status as provider of necessary psychological comfort and support a wife should be exercising more patients.

#### 4. Conclusion

So far this paper has attempted to x-ray all the 10 classifications of women as found in the Fulbe tradition reflected in the book, *Bolle Hikima De Dawa-see-dacce E Fulbe Wobbe*. No doubt, time, science and technology have demystified some of the bases or reasons given for castigating/stigmatizing the nine classes of women (as unsuitable for marriage) in the past. Today, most of such myths surrounding our old beliefs could be taken of successfully if the people involved are determined to find solution.

Attempt was made in this paper to demystify the negative impressions labeled against certain class of women in the Fulbe society through the eyes of time, science and technology. Irrespective of her circumstance, no woman should out rightly be labeled as unsuitable for marriage; men also are liable to many shortcomings. This paper is expected to some extent, assist potential husbands in getting down to fairly treat women with love, humility, kindness and respect so as to build happy families full of love and tranquility.

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