

Clan Politics Meets Democratization and Development: The Case of Pastoral Wodaabe in Niger

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Following the anthropology of dispute negotiation and current discourse-oriented political and legal anthropology, the paper explores the confrontations between several actors of a nomadic group of West African cattle herders. Two Wodaabe clans of south-eastern Niger assembled in March 2004 in order to discuss the question of whether they should stay united under the pact of a collective refusal of state law and authority or whether they should allow for fission of the clans. To some Wodaabe, the latter option had become more and more of a necessity since they had suffered from several breaches of what they considered the Wodaabe code of conduct and clan values. Although political rivalry, jealousy and, therefore, trickery seem to be an ever present part of Wodaabe segmentary lineage life, I will argue that these breaches were motivated by changes in the general political situation in Niger. They were calculated acts of a political newcomer who aimed at destabilizing the authority of the local Wodaabe chief and at building up his own base of followers. This political ambition resonates perfectly with the fact that in the current era of decentralization, local collectivities beneath the "traditional" chief's administrative level were treated as appropriate "target groups" for the execution of so-called participatory development projects. Becoming the leader of such a development bureaucracy compatible collectivity and loosening at the same time the "traditional" leader's grip on this community can thus become a profitable way to new riches. However, despite this temptation for some to seek fission, the Wodaabe political actors equally realized that other nomadic groups of the region had organized themselves along ethnic lines to seek possible advantages from the restructuring of administrative units into communities. These Wodaabe clearly felt that political unity and thus group strength was their main asset in the political conflict with other nomadic groups over pasture and water rights.