

Ethnic groups in Niger

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INTRODUCTION

The population of Niger is divided into nine major ethnic groups among which the Hausa, the Zarma-Songhay and the Fulani are the most important as regards their share of the total population. Other groups like the Touareg, the Beri-Beri, the Kanuri and the Gourmanché can be regarded as ethnic minorities in the mosaic of Niger's ethnic diversity. The following short description of the three main ethnic groups should not be seen as an attempt to fully describe the ethnic diversity in Niger but as brief background information for those readers who are not familiar with the vast sociological and ethnographic literature on ethnic groups in Niger.

ETHNIC GROUPS

The Hausa

The Hausa are a dominant group in Northern Nigeria and Southern Niger. The majority of Niger's population belongs to this ethnic group and even more people use the Hausa language as a 'lingua franca'.

Originally Hausa was not an ethnic classification but used to describe a multitude of regionally and socially differentiated groups who are linked by a common language. At the beginning of the 16th century, the Hausa began to expand their influence into major parts of West and even Central Africa. Their cultural and commercial impact has been enormous in these areas. However, they were never able to form a coherent Hausa empire because of subsequent civil wars between the seven 'legitimate' Hausa states (Spittler 1981, Ki-Zerbo 1981, Riedel *et al.* 1990).

In rural areas, the basic social structure of the Hausa is the *gida* (compound) having one head, the *maigida*, who is generally male. Several *gida* constitute the village (*gari*) headed by the *maigari*. Hausa society is strongly hierarchically and patriarchally structured (Miles 1987). Any economic activity of the wife/wives of a *maigida* is subject to his authorisation.

The Hausa rural economy is dominated by cultivation of cereals for subsistence. Cash income derives primarily from peanuts, cowpea, cotton and livestock¹. Beside agriculture, commercial activities play a central role in Hausa economy.

The strong links between Southern Niger and Northern Nigeria are mainly based on the exchange of inputs, agricultural and other consumer goods. By controlling the trade

¹ Spittler (1980) has extensively described the historical factors leading to more market-orientation in the Hausa economy.

with Nigeria, the Hausa of Niger exert a predominant economic influence, although the political arena and the state administration is still largely dominated by the Zarma-Songhay (Riedel *et al.* 1990).

The Zarma-Songhay

The second largest ethnic group in Niger are the Zarma-Songhay. Some sources suggest that the Zarma-Songhay left their homelands in what is now Mali after the destruction of the Songhay empire of Gao in the 17th century and moved down the river Niger to the region around Ouallam, called Zarmaganda (Raulin 1961, Gado 1980). Other authors suggest that the Zarma-Songhay were expelled from their area of origin by the Fulani (Koltchkoff 1982). Legend has it that a Zarma chief called Mali Bero gathered his compatriots in a flying basket and brought them to Zarmaganda (Gado 1980). There is certain evidence that the first Zarma leader, *zarmakoy* Tagorou, united the Zarma into a common people at the end of the 18th century. He expanded their influence from Zarmaganda to the region of Dosso which became the most important centre of Zarma settlement (Olivier de Sardan 1984, Salifou 1989).

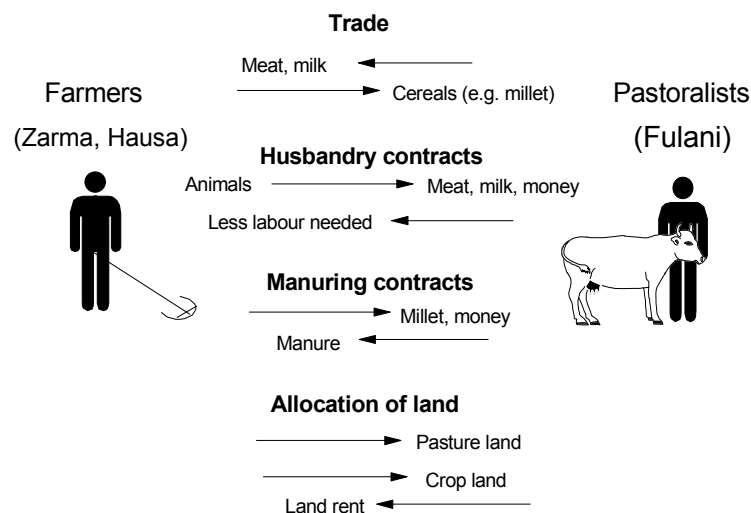
The Zarma-Songhay used to be a group of warriors and hunters. However, the integration of agriculture into their economy has a long tradition. Under pressure of the Touareg who invaded the Zarma area of settlement in their search for slaves, the Zarma-Songhay regularly had to leave their fields and move to the plateaux. At the end of the 18th century the region was nearly deserted and the scattered villages were divided by virgin bush and forest vegetation (Raulin 1961). In contrast to the Hausa who founded a complex state administration, the Zarma-Songhay did not have a central political institution (Riedel *et al.* 1990). The social structure, however, was strongly hierarchical: at the top of the social order of precedence was the *zarmakoy* (chief of the land) whose area of influence comprised several villages at most. The villages were led by *kwara koyey*, the oldest descendants of the village founder, who were responsible for allocating the land to the family patriarchs (*djiné bora*) according to the needs of the respective families (Ngaido 1996, Neef 1999). The free men (*borcin*) who could be warriors, hunters or farmers followed next on the social scale. At the bottom end of the hierarchical structure were the house slaves (*horso*) and the labour slaves (*ciré banniya*) who had to carry most of the work load. The latter could be resold at any time whereas the house slaves had their regular position within the household (Olivier de Sardan 1984). At the beginning of the colonial period, the slaves constituted approximately two thirds of the population in the Zarma-Songhay region (Riedel *et al.* 1990).

The Zarma rural economy is largely dominated by subsistence agriculture. The main crops grown on fields controlled by the predominantly male household head (*windi koy*) are millet, sorghum and cowpea. On individual fields the Zarma women grow peanuts, various kind of vegetables and, on the banks of the river Niger, wet rice. During the growing season, the animals of the Zarma are generally given to Fulani herdsmen who take care of them against payment in kind or in exchange of land. The mutual dependence between Zarma and Fulani has created a highly complex agropastoral system in Southwest Niger.

The Fulani

The vast area of distribution of the Fulani ranges from the Sahelian countries and northern Sudanian zone to the humid savannas of the West coastal African states. Due to their pastoral economy, their semi-sedentary settlements and their regular migratory movements (transhumance), the Fulani do not have a unified social structure. Historical and regional differences have created very diverse cultural and social structures (Riedel *et al.* 1990). In the western part of Niger, the Fulani dominated the sedentary Zarma and Hausa farmers in precolonial periods, especially on the left bank of the river Niger. From Sokoto in today's Northern Nigeria Ousman dan Fodio (1754-1817) initiated a religious war (*djihad*) and created an Islamic empire that extended from today's Cameroon to Southwest Niger. There, the Fulani partly adopted a permanent settlement pattern. The small town Zay became the religious and political centre of Southwest Niger. In the Zarma villages which acknowledged the Fulani sovereignty, the former village chiefs (*kwara koy*) adopted the religious title of *amiiru* (Salifou 1989).

Complementarity and cooperation



Competition and conflict

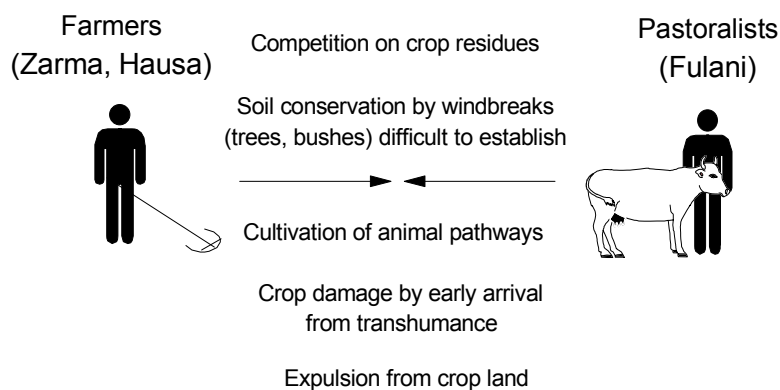


Figure 1. Interaction between farmers and pastoralists in Niger (Neef 1999)

The power relations changed during the period of French colonisation. The Zarma and Hausa gained political influence whereas the Fulani were more and more marginalised. This socio-political situation has been more or less maintained until today (Olivier de Sardan 1984, Riedel *et al.* 1990).

In rural areas, the Fulani still place their main emphasis on extensive livestock keeping, complemented by subsistence production of millet and sorghum. Most prestige is derived from keeping cattle, but the composition of the herd is organized in a way that makes sure that the livestock keeper can cope with droughts and other crises. Therefore, sheep and goat which are less demanding as to the sources of fodder are also kept. In general, animals are only sold when there is an immediate demand for cash, i.e. for paying taxes or for a marriage celebration. Women supplement the household income mainly by selling small amounts of surplus milk and butter (Neef 1999).

They mostly settle in the vicinity of Zarma or Hausa villages with whom they have intensive relations due to the complementary production systems (see figure 1). In recent years, a continuous shift from complementarity to conflict has been observed as land resources and thus the area for extensive grazing become more scarce (Neef 1998).

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