



## Managing elopement on the mobile phone: continuity and change in Wodaabe *te'egal* marriage

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### ABSTRACT

Based on extended fieldwork among Fulbe Wodaabe in Niger and by analysing an ethnographic case, this paper discusses aspects of continuity and change in the practice of a culture-specific form of elopement marriage, called *te'egal*, in which a married woman leaves her husband to marry a man from another clan. The discussion focuses on two major aspects: (1) the extensive use of mobile phone communication in arranging and logistically managing elopement, and (2) the increasing police involvement in the settlement of *te'egal* cases. Mobile phone use in the context of elopement is interpreted as a modern means of achieving cultural ends. It acts as a catalyst, making elopement more dynamic. In the wider context of globalization and urbanity, however, this leads not simply to continuity but also to contradictions, as the moral and legal institutions of the state increasingly interfere with the normative framework of customary law.


### RÉSUMÉ

Basé sur un travail approfondi de terrain chez les Fulbe Wodaabe au Niger et sur l'analyse d'un cas ethnographique, cet article traite des aspects de la continuité et du changement dans la pratique d'une forme culturellement spécifique de mariage par enlèvement appelée *te'egal*, selon laquelle une femme mariée quitte son mari pour épouser un homme issu d'un autre clan. La discussion se concentre sur deux aspects majeurs : (1) l'utilisation extensive de la communication par téléphone mobile pour organiser et gérer logistiquement l'enlèvement, et (2) l'implication de plus en plus forte de la police dans la recherche d'arrangements pour les cas de *te'egal*. L'utilisation des téléphones mobiles dans le contexte de l'enlèvement est interprétée comme un moyen moderne d'atteindre des objectifs culturels. Elle opère comme un catalyseur, rendant l'enlèvement plus dynamique. Cependant, prise en compte dans le plus large contexte de la mondialisation et de l'urbanité, cette pratique ne conduit pas simplement à la continuité mais aussi à des contradictions, puisque les institutions morales et juridiques de l'État entravent le cadre normatif de la loi coutumière.

### KEYWORDS

Fulbe; elopement marriage; continuity and change; mobile communication; legal pluralism

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## 1. Introduction

The Wodaabe, a small group of pastoral Fulbe in Niger, practise a particular, culture-specific form of marriage, called *te'egal* (Dupire 1962). It involves the elopement of an already married woman with a man from another clan to marry him without prior divorce from, or approval of, her original husband. As this leads to multiple claims to women, this form of secondary marriage is highly conflictual. Aggrieved husbands are likely to make efforts to get their wives back by any means and it is perfectly legitimate for them to use force against the perpetrator (Schareika 2010a). Despite its significant conflict potential, Wodaabe generally approve of *te'egal* marriage as an established cultural practice and, owing to the kinship links between clans that result from the unions, it is ultimately regarded as positive for the cohesion of the ethnic group (Köhler 2016a; Loncke 2015).

The Wodaabe are mostly represented in the ethnographic literature as a paradigmatic case of highly mobile Sahelian cattle nomads (Bonfiglioli 1988; Dupire 1962; Schareika 2003). However, ecological and economic constraints have entailed profound transformations in Wodaabe society. The dramatic animal losses sustained during the Sahel droughts that have been recurring since the 1970s have forced many Wodaabe into labour migration to regional urban centres (Boesen 2004, 2007; Köhler 2016b; Loftsdóttir 2000, 2002, 2004), which has led to increased socio-economic stratification. The urban-dwelling segment constitutes a major driver of social change: the exposure to urban life with its own rules and moral laws, and the contact with new concepts and new technologies, have a transformative impact on cultural practices.

Based on fieldwork carried out between November 2010 and January 2012, this paper discusses aspects of continuity and change in the practice of *te'egal* elopement marriage under conditions of urbanity and modernity. By analysing an ethnographic case, it elaborates on two major points that are of significance today: (1) the extensive use of modern mobile communication in arranging and logistically managing elopement, and (2) the increasing police involvement in the settlement of *te'egal* cases.<sup>1</sup>

The paper contributes to the current anthropological debate on the impact of the mobile phone on societies in which a step had been made directly from no phone network to mobile phone use (Archambault 2011, 448). Anthropologists have shown how the cultural and social appropriation of mobile communication devices takes place in a dialectic process (De Bruijn, Nyamnjoh, and Brinkmann 2009, 11–13; Orlove 2005, 700), and they have highlighted the ambiguities resulting from the complex interactions between new technologies and the societies which use them. Although the introduction of the mobile phone doubtlessly induces dynamic change, this change is not automatically and one-sidedly towards modernity and homogenization – it can also reinforce particular customary practices, “traditional” networks and cultural processes (De Bruijn, Nyamnjoh, and Brinkmann 2009; McIntosh 2010; Tenhunen 2008, 531). Similarly, in the example case, the use of the mobile phone by the different actors involved supports and facilitates cultural patterns of interaction – elopement itself, as well as the pursuit of elopement cases – thus introducing new dynamics into the domain of *te'egal*. However, the case is more ambiguous in terms of continuity and change: the very context of modernity in which the use of mobile telephony reinforces customary patterns at the same time also encourages practices that are in conflict with the cultural rules of interaction. In the case example, this notably entails the involvement of external actors – i.e. the legal institutions of the state – in affairs of *te'egal* marriage. Since they represent a value system different

from that of the Wodaabe, this constitutes a threat to the social legitimization of the practice. The paper thus suggests that the transformation processes of modernization are complex and multidimensional, and that the analysis of any element of change – such as the social impact of the mobile phone – must imperatively be situated in a wider context.

In the following sections, the ethnographic case is first outlined and more detailed information is provided on the practice of *te'egal* elopement marriage before the case is discussed along the two major issues outlined above.

## 2. Elopement marriage in a time of mobile communication and urbanization

In January 2012, in a narrative interview, Gado – a young man from the Gojanko'en clan of the Wodaabe in the Damergou region of Niger – gave an account of his various attempts at marriage. As is customary practice among the Wodaabe, Gado was betrothed, while still a small boy, to a cousin whom he hardly knew. Although, as he said, he eventually really loved his wife, the marriage did not work out, but was dissolved by his father-in-law, who accused Gado of having treated his daughter badly. After an unsuccessful attempt at arranging a new marriage within his clan, Gado finally opted for a *te'egal* elopement marriage with a young woman from the Bii Ute'en clan in Diffa and, later, another one with a woman from the Jijjiiru clan from the Tchintabaraden area in central Niger, whom he first met in Kano (northern Nigeria) where she was staying with her husband. Gado's first successful *te'egal* marriage with Laadi, the Bii Ute'en woman, took place in 2009. This is remarkable insofar as Gado had never met Laadi before the two finally decided to elope together and get married. At first he only knew Laadi's sister Mobappa, but there was no question of marrying her because she had just entered a period of seclusion after the birth of her first child. However, Gado learned that Mobappa had a sister, Laadi, and that according to his Diffa-based clan mates who knew her, the two were "all the same (*be fuu be go*)". Gado managed to get Laadi's mobile phone number and the relationship developed via mobile phone conversations alone, to the point where the two agreed that Gado should travel to Diffa – a journey of about 475 km – to take her.

After this first successful *te'egal* marriage, Gado and Laadi lived together for about one and a half years. At first, Gado continued to work in Zinder as a watchman, later finding employment in Kano (ca. 250 km south of Zinder). This is where he finally fell in love with Jemmassu, a married woman from the Jijjiiru clan, and the two agreed on *te'egal* marriage. Gado sent Laadi back home to Diffa, abandoned his job in Kano in order to avoid being tracked by the aggrieved Jijjiiru husband, and took Jemmassu to Zinder, where many of his clan mates lived. The two got married but – unable to find work in Zinder, and with no animals to allow him to return to a pastoral livelihood – Gado was finally forced to move away. He decided to go back to Kano, where job offers were comparatively abundant, although his new wife's husband lived there too. The relative anonymity of the northern Nigerian metropolis – a city of more than two million inhabitants – indeed allowed the couple to stay undiscovered for a time, but finally Gado's adversaries tracked them down and Gado had to turn her in. Jemmassu's husband decided to bring her to a different town to avoid further problems with Gado. Nevertheless, the woman managed to run away again and called Gado, who picked her up on the road. However, the couple was tracked down by a group of Jijjiiru men that had been quickly mobilized by Jemmassu's husband. They were caught and handed over to the police, and they had to spend a night in a cell. The Jijjiiru wanted the police to

arrest Gado for a longer period, but he managed to convince the police to drop the case as a matter of cultural custom. Although this time Jemmassu was taken to stay with relatives in the distant Tchintabaraden area, she and Gado still did not abandon their plans to elope again. After about one month, in early 2012, Jemmassu found an occasion to return to Nigeria to visit her father – and she made use of the first opportunity to contact Gado on his phone. He instantly came to help her run away once more, and the couple went back to Zinder, where they stayed at the house of one of Gado's clan mates. Here, the events took a dramatic turn: one day, Jemmassu's relatives called Gado to inform him that they had caught his younger brother in Kano and that they would hold him hostage until Gado returned Jemmassu to them. Gado refused to give in. His clan mate and close friend B., however – apparently distressed about the abduction – informed the Jijjiiru about Gado's whereabouts and told them to come to Zinder and bring Gado's brother in exchange for Jemmassu. Gado and Jemmassu tried to flee to Tanout in the Damergou region in a collective taxi, but upon their arrival they were stopped at the checkpoint by the police, who had in the meantime been informed by the pursuers via mobile phone. The Jijjiiru followed the couple in another taxi and, unable to keep Jemmassu, whom the police handed over to her relatives, Gado had to return to Zinder, stranded – yet not without hope, since Jemmassu was still determined to leave her husband for him.<sup>2</sup>

### 3. *Kooɓgal* and *te'egal* – two contrasting forms of marriage

For a better understanding of the case, it seems pertinent at this point to explain more explicitly the concept of *te'egal* elopement marriage. The Wodaabe practise two principal forms of marriage. The first, called *kooɓgal*, is a generally clan-endogamous union, preferentially between patrilineal parallel cousins (FBDs) or cross-cousins. As in Gado's case, this is arranged between the families of the couple by betrothal, often from early childhood. The second form of marriage, called *te'egal*, is a generally clan-exogamous union arranged by elopement.<sup>3</sup> *Te'egal* is variously translated in the literature as capture, rapt or theft marriage (Dupire 1962, 247ff; 1970, 63ff; Stenning 1959, 143ff; Schareika 2010a), although women are in fact never abducted against their will. However, as Lateiner (1997, 411) points out, elopement and capture are often difficult to distinguish in rather "result-oriented", patriarchal societies. The Wodaabe themselves use the term *nguyka* (theft) to refer to *te'egal* elopement, implying that in the emic perception women are "stolen" – although with their consent – from their husbands and their clans (Boesen 2008, 154; Dupire 1970, 63). Jemmassu's repeated attempts to flee and the equally determined efforts of her husband to get her back make it quite clear that *te'egal* is not about the abduction of women against their will; on the contrary, it is the party of her original husband who uses force to get her back, even though she does not wish to return to him. Since Jemmassu is still officially married to her first husband, his claim is considered perfectly justified – and it is legitimate for his kin to bring the woman back to his home, even forcefully against her will. *Te'egal* could perhaps best be described as a symbolic form of capture marriage in which capture is agreed – and indeed largely decided upon by the woman – and which is realized by mutual consent to the elopement.

A peculiarity of the Wodaabe case is that – in contrast to most examples of marriage by capture or elopement, in which generally unmarried girls are either abducted from their parents or flee from them with their lovers in order to avoid an arranged marriage (e.g. Ayres

1974; Barnes 1999; Bates 1974; Herzfeld 1985; Lockwood 1974; Yang 2004) – the principle in Wodaabe *te'egal* marriage is that women who are already married within their clans according to the principles of *koobgal*, and who are often already mothers, leave their original husbands to marry a man from a different clan. From the female perspective, *te'egal* is thus an institution that allows women to escape from unhappy arranged marriages in which they do not have the option of divorce. According to Gado, this was also Laadi's motivation: "Laadi said she was not happy with her *koobgal* marriage. She did not love her husband. So I just took her and we got married". Hence, *te'egal*, as opposed to *koobgal*, is a marriage of choice that is concluded by the couple itself rather than being arranged by the families. As it does not involve parties other than the partners themselves or any bride wealth payments between families, *te'egal* is relatively easy to conclude, yet as a consequence also relatively easy to break up. In practice, many *te'egal* unions are rather short-lived (Dupire 1962, 267–8). In this regard, Gado's case exemplifies a pattern that is already described in the classic literature and that can just as well be observed today: although quite happy with Laadi, Gado finally sent her back to her original husband because he fell in love with Jemmassu. This shows that the aspect of romance can indeed be very strong in *te'egal* unions, although it must be said that the motivations can also differ greatly between the man and the woman involved. For men, a series of *te'egal* marriages – even if they are short-lived – can be a source of prestige (Dupire 1962, 248, 267). Lockwood's (1974, 264) term "wife-shopping" seems to describe quite aptly the attitude of many young Wodaabe men looking out for *te'egal* matches. However, the female equivalent – "groom-shopping", so to speak – applies here as well, to a certain extent. For women, although it does not carry prestige in the same way as it does for men, repeated elopement with different men is at least not stigmatizing, although they risk violent punishment from their husbands if they return – or are returned – to them.

There is another aspect that makes Wodaabe *te'egal* particular: although highly conflictual on the individual level, the marriage practice is socially perfectly accepted and ceremonially sanctioned on a bilateral level between two clans in reciprocally organized meetings. These ceremonies, called *ngaanka*, are an arena in which two clans ritually approve of mutual *te'egal* elopement marriage and lay the basis for it by exposing married women and men to each other during male dance contests, for which the Wodaabe are probably best known in the West (Paris 1997). Although considered as acts of aggression in any individual case, *te'egal* marriages translate inter-clan relations into kinship ties, and are therefore seen as ultimately positive for the cohesion of the otherwise fragmented ethnic group (Loncke 2015; Schareika 2007). Participation of a clan in the competition with other clans for women through *te'egal* marriage is crucial in defining ethnic group membership (Köhler 2016a, 2016b; Loncke 2015; Paris 1997).

Even though the *ngaanka* ceremonies remain the prime occasion for the ritual reconfirmation of the approval of *te'egal* marriage between clans, the contractualization of such marriages is not limited to this context. There have always been other occasions for Wodaabe to make contacts with potential *te'egal* partners, for example at local markets. Today, modern infrastructure networks expand the range for such occasions – and the urban space, with its relative anonymity, has become a new arena in this field. The mobile phone in particular is proving to be highly useful in matters of *te'egal* arrangements, as well as in other social contexts.

#### 4. Mobile phone use and translocality among the Wodaabe

The spread of mobile telecommunications in Africa is a relatively recent phenomenon, yet it has had a far-reaching impact that is sometimes characterized as revolutionary (De Bruijn 2008; De Bruijn, Nyamnjoh, and Brinkmann 2009). In 2004 the first networks in Niger existed, but even in some regional capitals the mobile phone was not yet operative. Five years later, it had become an essential means of communication throughout all the strata of society – from white collars to cattle nomads – and new networks continue to mushroom everywhere, now covering the greater part of the more densely populated south of the country and even more and more remote areas in the pastoral zone. In market villages, generator-driven battery chargers supply the rural world with the energy necessary to keep connected. It is remarkable how quickly and how widely the mobile phone was embraced by a society in which, for the vast majority of the people, it was introduced as the first ever communications technology. Here, as in other parts of Africa (Archambault 2011, 2013; McIntosh 2010; Nkwil 2009), most people never had access to landline phones, which had always remained an elitist means of communication.

The Wodaabe have taken an active part in Niger's mobile phone revolution. The example of a young Wodaabe girl may serve as one anecdotal indicator for the degree to which the mobile phone has become an integral part of everyday life. Born in 2008, she was nicknamed "Seluula", from *cellulaire*, the French term for cell phone. Seluula got her name because her father – when it came to arranging her naming ceremony one week after her birth – was unable to be present but passed along all the relevant instructions, including the name she should bear, via mobile phone. His affine relatives were somewhat indignant, and although she was officially given the name Zaara'u which her father had chosen for her, the nickname Seluula stuck.<sup>4</sup>

The success of mobile telephony among Wodaabe pastoralists is not amazing; on the northern fringes of the Sahel region, the location of good pasture land is extremely variable and unpredictable, and the success of any pastoral strategy depends on quick and reliable access to relevant information (Schareika 2003, 125–6). The exchange and diffusion of information on the pastoral conditions in different areas is crucial for the highly mobile pastoral Wodaabe who live in scattered small groups, and arguably this has played an important role for the way in which the mobile phone has been embraced by this society dispersed across a vast space.

But under such conditions of translocality, the mobile phone is of no less significance in the social domain; it has the potential to facilitate communication and can thus help maintain social ties over long distances, which is crucial for the construction and reproduction of a translocal community: "Without communication, people lose connection and a community may eventually cease to exist" (De Bruijn and Brinkman 2011, 55). Arguably, translocality is not a modern phenomenon but had been significant in Wodaabe society for a long time (Köhler 2016b).<sup>5</sup> However, in the contemporary conditions of regional urban work migration, translocal kinship networks have taken on new dimensions. Members of kinship-based communities are often situated across different rural and urban spaces that can easily be separated by several hundred kilometres. In this context, the mobile phone is perfectly well adapted to the mobile lifestyle and translocal *habitus* (De Bruijn and Brinkman 2011, 54) of Wodaabe urban migrants. It helps them cope with their isolation from the larger family as it facilitates keeping in touch.<sup>6</sup> The wife of a Wodaabe urban migrant explains that the new



possibilities of mobile telephony played an important role in her acceptance of a life far away from her home community:

When we first came here, if we wanted to send a message to our relatives at home, we first had to ask someone, since we cannot read or write. Then we would give the letter to someone who travelled there. Before we had an answer it would take some time. Nowadays, living here is not as difficult as that any more. We can always talk to our relatives back home on the mobile phone, since there are networks everywhere.<sup>7</sup>

A particular significance of the mobile phone for strengthening contacts to kin living in distant places, which has been found in rural India by Tenhunen (2008), can thus also be confirmed for the Wodaabe. Modern mobile communication is used as a means to cope with the new dimensions of contemporary dispersal.

Of course, telecommunication does not make face-to-face encounters obsolete; the simultaneous improvement of public transport facilities – particularly collective taxis and overland buses – has at the same time given a new dimension to the movements of individuals. To give an example, while, a decade ago, overland buses connected the regional capitals Diffa and Zinder only twice per week, today several different carrier companies compete for the increasing number of travellers and connect the cities on a day-to-day basis. The Wodaabe migrant workers in Zinder, among whom the fieldwork for this paper was predominantly conducted, also profit from fairly good public transport connections to the Damergou region from which most of them come.<sup>8</sup> Many migrants move regularly between the pastoral zone and the city, trying to keep a balance between income-generating activities in the urban space and keeping up the social ties to their pastoral home communities. The urban livelihood strategies that many contemporary Wodaabe are engaged in have thus not generally entailed the end of mobility for these former pastoral nomads, but rather mobility has taken new forms (Boesen 2004, 2007; Köhler 2016b; Loftsdóttir 2004). Inversely, urban-based Wodaabe migrants also serve as hosts for visiting clan members from the pastoral zone. The city and the pastoral realm are thus connected by complex networks of people who are translocally linked. At the same time, these social networks are characterized by new dynamics; even spatially far removed social contacts are today quick and easy to mobilize because the availability of improved facilities for both telecommunications and transport makes it easier to realize the opportunities that the expanded social space offers. What Massey has called “time-space compression” – i.e. the phenomenon of “movement and communication across space, [...] the geographical stretching-out of social relations, and [...] our experience of all this” (1994, 147) – has thus reached even the more remote areas of the Nigerien pastoral zone.

In the case example, Gado profits from this extended translocal social network to facilitate the logistic aspects of his *te'egal* elopement. He can rely on a network of clan mates residing as urban migrant workers in distant areas – Zinder, Kano and Diffa. With *te'egal* following a logic of inter-clan competition, all clan mates are potential accomplices who can help him by offering advice and establishing contacts, while their homes can serve him as logistical bases and refuge in his various endeavours of elopement. Just as helpful as the availability of this social infrastructure is the infrastructure of public transport to move between these bases and, perhaps most importantly, the infrastructure of telecommunications to coordinate these movements.

## 5. Managing elopement marriage on the mobile phone

The extensive mobile phone use in different situations related to the context of *te'egal* marriage is striking in Gado's story – especially in his *te'egal* episode with Jemmassu, where the turbulent course of events was significantly managed with the help of mobile communication. During Jemmassu's several flights from her husband, she was constantly in contact with Gado via phone and they repeatedly coordinated meetings on the road. Gado, for his part, made sure to stay connected by transferring units onto Jemmassu's mobile phone using special service numbers. When tracked down by his pursuers, Gado asked his clan mates for advice over the phone. Even when the Jijjiiru took Gado's brother hostage, he spoke to him – as well as to his abductors – on the phone. And finally, after the “betrayal” by Gado's clan mate – which also took place on the phone – the pursuers went to the police and communicated with the police checkpoint in Tanout in order to stop the collective taxi in which Gado and Jemmassu had fled.

After the interview with Gado had aroused my interest in the topic, I discussed the role of the telephone in *te'egal* elopement with other Wodaabe. These discussions quickly confirmed that, although perhaps particularly dramatic, Gado's case is far from being unique in terms of phone usage. One young woman explained a major reason why the phone is extensively used in elopement cases:

You know the Wodaabe, don't you? You know that they move their camps all the time. Of course people who want to make *te'egal* use the phone whenever possible. It is much easier to meet the other if he can tell you at the phone where exactly he is.<sup>9</sup>

Such a statement also indicates that the phone is used not only in the city but increasingly also in the pastoral sphere to facilitate elopement. Nevertheless, it should be said that the possibility of arranging *te'egal* marriages on the phone has originated as a rather urban phenomenon, and even today it is predominantly men who own mobile phones among Wodaabe in the pastoral setting. However, as with so many other things in relation to mobile telephony, this is rapidly changing. In town, as the examples of Laadi, Mobappa and Jemmassu show, even young girls have had access to mobile telephony for years.

Another reason why the phone is particularly attractive is related to the criterion of geographic distance for choosing a *te'egal* mate. In order to avoid vengeance and punishment from a woman's original husband, and in order to prevent him from getting his wife back, a *te'egal* couple has to flee. In the case of Gado's *te'egal* marriage with Laadi, the necessary distance was given and the elopement was, from this perspective, successful. One reason why Gado and Jemmassu were tracked down, on the other hand, was the fact that they decided in the end to settle in the same town in which Jemmassu's husband lived. The possibility to connect to potential *te'egal* partners at a distance, which is much facilitated by the availability of the mobile phone, is thus particularly relevant – it is not surprising that the new device is much appreciated by men and women, and used accordingly.

The case of Gado and Laadi also makes it quite clear that the significance of the phone goes far beyond purely logistic aspects. It is, after all, a romantic relationship which emerged from encounters via telecommunication alone. The two never met in person before their elopement, and “everything was arranged on the phone” (“*Dum fuu dum nder seluula min siri koome*”).<sup>10</sup> The first phase of Gado's relationship with Laadi could effectively be called a mobile phone relationship in the sense that “the phone is instrumental to the relationship and not just incidental to it” (Miller 2009, 25). Initiating and developing relationships



translocally to the point of arranging elopement is today possible with the help of the phone. Young urban Wodaabe – men and women alike – entertain extensive social networks above the range of their immediate social landscape through telephone contacts. The way in which numbers are accumulated in phone-book lists recalls what has been observed elsewhere. Among low-income Jamaicans, for example, such “linking-up” has been found to be an important tool for establishing intimate relationships (Horst and Miller 2005, 2006). This is comparable to the case of Wodaabe urban migrants, and more generally teenagers and young adults in urban Niger. Even superficial contacts are used to secure mobile phone numbers. Such potential for later relationships is maintained through occasional short calls and, when an occasion arises, developed further. Numbers can also be shared with interested friends. The way Gado made contact with Laadi gives an idea of how this may look; he obtained her phone number from a clan mate who knew Laadi’s sister through a Diffa-based relative. When Gado was looking for a wife, the clan mate established the contact for him. The networks of such phone-book lists thus offer new ways to get in touch with potential new partners beyond the possibilities that local markets and festivities offer. At the same time, the example points once more to the significance of kinship networks being reinforced with the possibilities of the new communication media.

Mobile telephony thus facilitates clandestine communication between potential *te’egal* partners. The phone helps to avoid face-to-face encounters, which are potentially dangerous for secret lovers (see Archambault 2013, 88). In particular for women willing to leave their husbands, this is an important advantage. It has been pointed out that telecommunications can also potentially be dangerous, because jealous partners may find suspicious traces of it in the form of text messages (Archambault 2011). Due to prevailing illiteracy, most Wodaabe do not make much use of text messaging, which does reduce this risk.<sup>11</sup> For the same reason, names in phone-book lists are often not spelled out but represented by symbols or emoticons, an option that most phones provide. Without arousing much suspicion, a woman can thus codify certain names in her phone-book list. Nevertheless, as one woman complained, jealous husbands make attempts to control their wives’ access to telephones – an obvious fact that is doubtlessly just as true for many jealous wives in regard to their husbands’ phone contacts, merely underlining the potential of the phone for entertaining clandestine relationships at a distance.

Recent anthropological research on the role of the mobile phone in intimate relationships argues that it can have ambiguous effects, not only facilitating such relationships by making it easier for partners to get in touch but also in some contexts contributing to their breaking up (Archambault 2011). The case example supports such a view on the fraught potential of the mobile phone; it facilitated Gado’s romantic relationship with Laadi and helped Jemmassu coordinate her repeated escapes with Gado, but it also helped their pursuers get hold of the fugitive couple by enabling them to call the police, who stopped their taxi at the checkpoint. Given the overall usefulness of mobile telephony in arranging and managing elopement, it is only consistent that aggrieved husbands aim to make use of the same potential in their own interest, i.e. to counter elopement and get their fugitive wives back. The phone is thus strategically and effectively used by both sides to support their causes and achieve their ends. This leads to complex consequences and, ultimately, as the interests of the two sides are diametrically opposed and the effects balance each other out, to a stalemate situation. Although Gado made effective use of the new communicative opportunities, he did not easily get away with it in the end. One reason is certainly that he took the risk of staying with

his new wife in the same town in which her original husband lived; but he was caught each time because his adversaries had the same knowledge and mastery of the modern devices as Gado himself – they used mobile phone communications, and also public transport, just as effectively as Gado did, and had the means and skills necessary to do so because they are from the same urban milieu of Wodaaɓe migrant workers. The impact of the phone as a tool facilitating the cause for those using it works both ways, and things remain complicated for both sides.

The case example suggests that rather than inducing radical change, the use of the mobile phone first of all supports cultural patterns of interaction. With regard to mobile phone use among the Wodaaɓe in Niger, I argue that what has been remarked about the landline telephone in the United States (US) applies here, too: it did not radically alter people's ways of life – rather, people “used it to more vigorously pursue their characteristic ways of life” (Fischer 1992, 5). This confirms de Bruijn and Brinkman's observation among Fulɓe in Cameroon that “the new forms of communication [...] continue the relational styles of the mobile community that they have been part of for generations” (2011, 53). The mobile phone has not completely revolutionized social relations, since in mobile societies “[r]elating at a distance is nothing new and is just a normal part of being a community” (53). Rather, the new medium is used to support and facilitate established patterns of social communication and interaction across space, and it has had a significant impact on their scope and rhythm.

## 6. Competing normative and legal frameworks in the urban space

Gado's case is more complex and rather ambiguous with regard to questions of continuity and change. Through the following examination of Gado's *te'egal* marriage with Jemmassu. I suggest that it is the wider context of urbanity and modernity – of which mobile telephony is only a part – which, despite the reinforcement of cultural patterns of interaction through the phone, has an impact in terms of not gradual but rather qualitative change that ultimately puts the cultural legitimacy of the practice of *te'egal* into question.

As I have shown, the new devices of connectivity have opened up new options for arranging *te'egal* marriages – and the urban space, which offers privileged access to these devices, has become a new arena for this cultural practice. However, this also constitutes a considerable new challenge to the established normative framework of *te'egal*, which, as explained above, is based on politico-ceremonial agreements among Wodaaɓe clans. Gado's reflexions, commentaries and explanations give a good idea of emic conceptualizations of Wodaaɓe elopement marriage and its rules, and at the same time the example shows how *te'egal* is often practically dealt with in the contemporary condition: today, the legal institutions of the state tend to get involved in cases of conflicts evolving from *te'egal* marriage, and they increasingly interfere with customary institutions and practices.

In principle, there are different culturally appropriate ways of dealing with cases of *te'egal* elopement marriage. The original husband will generally try to get his wife back – if necessary with violent means, which is legitimate. More often, conflicts evolving from *te'egal* become the object of negotiations in which conventional rules play a significant role. If an eloped woman's relatives have traced her location, they can formally ask for her return, and at a first occurrence such a query is generally responded to positively. If the woman continually flees her husband to rejoin the other man, however, her family generally abandons the effort to get her back (see also Loncke 2015, 300). Both violence and negotiations between elders

are thus culturally accepted ways of dealing with conflicts evolving around *te'egal* marriage. Involvement of the police, on the other hand does not qualify as such. In fact, *te'egal* cases should by principle remain an internal affair between clans; they are not supposed to be settled by external actors (see Schareika 2007, 154, 186f). Intervention by external actors is regarded by the elders as contrary to established custom ("*dum walaa nder ndonu meeden*") and against the political interests of the Wodaabe. Gado made the same point with regard to how Jemmassu's relatives handled his case: "Do you see what they did? They put me into the hands of the police twice: the first time in Nigeria, and then in Tanout. [...] That is not done. *Te'egal* is not an affair for the police."<sup>12</sup>

Wodaabe stress their political will of keeping the settlement of *te'egal* disputes within the framework of their own customary institutions because they have an interest, as Schareika puts it, to "stay united under a pact of disregard for state law and authority [...] beneath notice and, hence, interference of state authorities" (2010a, 207). This is thought to strengthen the power of the Wodaabe leaders and the position of the Wodaabe in general, since they keep a certain autonomy vis-à-vis the state. Today, however, the actual practice often looks quite different. Actors are likely to turn to the institutions of state law if they feel that this might be in their own interests. Gado's case is impressive evidence for the following observation:

Individuals fight each other by denouncing each other to state authorities, who in turn operate by imposing fines. [...] Thus, the Wodaabe regard state authorities not as guarantors of peace and order but as a weapon in a [...] condition of war where corrupt policemen and judges are used to best one's opponent. (Schareika 2010, 223)

The instrumentalization of the police as a "weapon" has in fact become a regular means of reacting to *te'egal* elopement – particularly in the urban context. The involvement of state authorities in *te'egal* cases is possible through the fact that the Nigerien criminal code provides a penalty of between fifteen days and three months in prison and a fine of 10,000FCFA to 100,000FCFA (ca. 15€ to 150€) for adultery (République du Niger [1961] 2003, par. 286–9). The evidence of a woman caught in the company of a man other than her husband and denounced to the police by the latter is sufficient to put the accused couple into custody while the situation is being clarified.

Gado and Jemmassu are by no means an isolated case of a *te'egal* couple who ended up in police custody. Settlement by the police has not replaced customary ways of dealing with conflicts around *te'egal*, but rather exists simultaneously. In particular, young urban adults, for reason of their socialization in a modern urban context and their exposure to alternative moral values and legal systems, seem to be inclined to make use of state authority, particularly in situations where elders as the "guardians of the tradition" are absent. The influence of the indigenous authorities, which in the pastoral realm function as a controlling force, tends to be weaker in the city. In Gado's case too, they were absent when Jemmassu's kin tracked him down in Kano:

Had it been at home, for example at my father's place [...] there would have been a number of elders [...]. But in Kano there was only me, so I had to deal myself with the Jijjiiru elders. Of course there are people from our clan there, but they were not available. [...] But they all knew the Jijjiiru had come, they called me on the phone and told me: "Since they have come to get her, just give them the woman." So I turned her in to them.<sup>13</sup>

This suggests that there is still, however reduced, some control exerted by the elders even in the urban context – and even via mobile phone. Their authority in negotiations of *te'egal* cases is still considerable and they can act as moral advisors for young men.

Many Wodaabe with whom I have discussed the matter agreed that the urban realm has its own rules and that *te'egal* is not tolerated in this setting as it is in the pastoral setting. As one young man put it, “[t]he bush and the town are not the same. *Te'egal* in the city provokes conflicts. You cannot just take somebody’s wife in the city, because there are the institutions of the state that would prosecute you.”<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, *te'egal* is anything but uncommon in the urban context. Several cases encountered during the fieldwork for this paper suggest that one reason for this is that many urban-based and young adult Wodaabe increasingly fall out of the principal system of *koobgal* betrothal marriage. Often, their fathers do not own significant numbers of animals and thus cannot easily fulfil the demanding ritual obligations of *koobgal* marriage for their children. The fact that *te'egal* exists as a socially established alternative marriage practice – which is at the same time easy to establish, economically affordable and supportive of individual preferences rather than being imposed – makes it attractive for young urbanites. However, the social significance of *te'egal* marriage is changing, to a certain extent, from a prestigious secondary marriage in the pastoral context to a less costly alternative marriage for the less well-off in the urban migrant context.

The most astonishing and perhaps the telling aspect in Gado’s case is the fact that in the end it was a clan mate and close relative of Gado’s, B., who gave out the relevant information and thus enabled the Jijjiiru to track him down with Jemmassu. Although this “betrayal”, which was fervently criticized by the elders, might be surprising as the relation between Gado and B. had until this point been excellent, it can be explained if one takes into account that a hostage had been taken, which is definitely an unsettling circumstance, as Gado confirmed: “They caught my younger brother. They told me they would not let him go before I brought them their woman. I swear, what they did was contrary to the tradition! Take someone hostage? Unheard of!”<sup>15</sup> Presumably, for B., this fact was an indicator that the case had left the framework of customary rules and taken on another dimension. Had the Jijjiiru attacked Gado with swords and sticks, there is little doubt that B. would have defended him without hesitation. All this suggests that the contemporary condition of urbanity, increasing state incorporation and legal pluralism creates a high potential for uncertainty, in which the limits between “traditional” and “modern” situations become blurred and in which it is no longer clear which rules should be applied and which institutions should be appealed to. This uncertainty is symptomatic of the situation of this society at the brink of change, characterized by the conflicting frameworks of customary practice on the one hand, and the Nigerien state and its institutions – with which the Wodaabe are more and more confronted – on the other. The normative grey area that this situation of ambiguity causes can be used strategically by some. They situationally and sometimes opportunistically refer to the competing normative frameworks in what might be characterized as an attitude of normative forum shopping. The same individuals who might challenge the cultural normative framework by involving the institutions of the state in one situation might, in another, rhetorically refer to the same framework to argue against others whom they accuse of betraying it. Such interpretations, however, are no longer sanctioned by the elders but may rather be subjected to the principle that the ends justify the means.

In view of these contradictions, the practice of *te'egal*, which has always been ambivalent, runs the risk of changing its character by degree from being an, however conflictive, element

of ethnic cohesion towards being merely destructive. The increasing implication of external authorities in *te'egal* cases threatens to render the institution of *ngaanka* with its inter-clan agreements about mutual *te'egal* marriage obsolete – and thus ultimately to delegitimize this cultural practice.

## 7. Conclusion

Wodaaabe in Niger today live in a rapidly changing world. Their pastoral society – which formerly existed through vivid interactions with other local communities but with clear-cut boundaries, following its own normative logics and applying its own legal principles, sanctioned by its own institutions of decision-making – is more and more confronted with the institutions of the modern nation state, but without becoming integrated in a positive sense. Urban migration has exposed many Wodaaabe to new concepts of morality and law, and with the emergence and rapid spread of the modern devices of mobile communication and the improvement of public transport infrastructure, these new concepts have begun to reach even remote areas. The ethnographic material discussed here impressively demonstrates the mobile phone's penetration into many social contexts and contributes to an understanding of how the introduction of new information and communication technology can impact developing societies. Gado's use of the mobile phone in his efforts to find a spouse recalls observations of Tenhunen about the role of the mobile phone in accentuating the "dynamism of the marriage market" (2008, 524) in rural India. The phone is used by young people for getting into contact with potential marriage partners, for maintaining relationships at a distance and, as the case example shows, for coordinating the logistic aspects of *te'egal* marriage.

The ethnographic case presented here points to the growing importance of mobile phone use in the context of *te'egal* marriage. Although the present material does not allow for an assessment of the quantitative importance of the mobile phone in arranging and managing *te'egal*, testimonies of similar cases suggest that Gado's case is far from unique. The fast-growing importance of mobile communication in practically all spheres of life also points to a still growing relevance in the domain of elopement marriage and intimate relationships more generally. Since the time of Gado's elopement with Laadi, the possibilities of mobile communication have developed a great deal; today, young Wodaaabe of both sexes are beginning to make use of mobile Internet devices. They send each other pictures and videos with messenger services that are at the same time pushing the possibilities of low cost telephony even further. It is clear that this highly dynamic situation invites further research, not only to further substantiate the qualitative findings of this paper but also to cover recent developments.

It has been argued that the mobile phone has "an impact on logistics, but not directly on cultural meanings" (Tenhunen 2008, 530). The Wodaaabe case example presented here similarly suggests that the new medium is first of all used to support established patterns of social communication and interaction. It amplifies cultural patterns and can thus be understood as supporting continuity rather than change. The new communication devices expand the options for, and facilitate the logistics of, *te'egal* marriage; they increase opportunities for women and men for arranging elopement while also increasing the logistic opportunities for aggrieved husbands to get their wives back, thus acting as a catalyst making the logistics of elopement generally more dynamic.

The urban condition, with a stronger presence of the legal institutions of the state and reduced control on the part of customary institutions, blurs the normative framework of *te'egal*, which is nevertheless flourishing as a form of marriage that is at once easy to accomplish and economically affordable, as well as satisfying individualistic desires. However, it is questionable whether, if taken out of its cultural context of inter-clan politics, *te'egal* can maintain its legitimate place in Wodaabe marriage practices. The fact that actors are today inclined to instrumentalize both the phone and the institutions of the state as “weapons” seems to be a reaction to the new dynamism just outlined. Both are symptoms of the same condition of modernity and urbanity, yet with quite different implications for continuity and change. Mobile phone use has a transformative impact on *te'egal* elopement but does not in itself put the legitimacy of the practice into question. Involvement of the police, on the other hand, although they are manipulatively used with the same intention to achieve “traditional” ends, ultimately constitutes a much more substantial challenge.

Sociocultural change is neither monocausal nor one-dimensional; the transformational processes of modernization are not linear but complex and multi-stranded. The social impacts of mobile telephony on cultural continuity and change in African societies should therefore be analysed with a “contingent rather than a totalizing view of technology” (Orlove 2005, 700), understanding it in a more comprehensive way as part of a wider framework of complex transformations. The phone does not exist in isolation in otherwise “traditional” cultures facing change, but is part and parcel of a more encompassing condition of modernity, urbanization and globalization that induces multiple and complex transformation processes.

## Notes

1. Another issue that is of significance here is Islamic religion. The Wodaabe in Niger live in a predominantly Muslim environment and the neighbouring groups regard *te'egal* as an horrifically pagan practice. Although most Wodaabe would also consider themselves Muslims and a gradual adoption of a trend towards a more rigid variant of Islam can be observed among Wodaabe today, this has so far not led to a significant decrease in the practice of elopement marriage. A detailed analysis of this aspect, which certainly merits scrutiny, is beyond the scope of this paper but will be the object of a later publication.
2. Interview conducted with Gado from the Gojanko'en clan of the Wodaabe, Zinder, 7 January 2012.
3. For 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), Köhler (2016a), Maliki (1981, 124f), Paris (1997, 74ff), Schareika (2007, 150ff, 2010b, 109ff), and 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 include the elopement element of Wodaabe *te'egal*. Although exact figures are unknown, it can be reliably posited that the prevalence of *te'egal* remains significant to the present day. With regard to the Wodaabe Gojanko'en in east-central Niger, among whom the fieldwork for this paper was predominantly conducted, an informed estimate is that between one third and one half of the community members at one point or other in their lives make at least one attempt at *te'egal*.
4. Informal information obtained from a woman of the Gojanko'en clan of the Wodaabe, Zinder, October 2008.
5. For nomads in general, see also Freitag and von Oppen (2005, 2). De Bruijn and Brinkman (2012, 47) express similar ideas with their concept of networked “spaces of social relating”, and with their observation in another study that Fulbe communities are defined less in geographical



space than in “social relations that expand to cover large geographical areas” (De Bruijn and Brinkman 2011, 52).

6. The phenomena of urbanity and high mobility have been found to be determining factors for the embracing of the mobile phone in many geographical contexts (see Fortunati 2002, 46). On the role of the mobile phone in migration or diaspora contexts, see Donner (2006) and Paragas (2005).
7. Interview conducted with a woman from the Gojanko'en clan of the Wodaaabe, Diffa, 30 March 2011.
8. The 150-km trip in a collective taxi from Zinder to Tanout, the main town in the Damergou region, costs 2000FCFA (ca. 3€) and takes between two and three hours.
9. Interview conducted with a woman from the Gojanko'en clan of the Wodaaabe, Ganatcha, 29 January 2014.
10. Interview conducted with Gado from the Gojanko'en clan of the Wodaaabe, Zinder, 7 January 2012.
11. In this regard, the situation is in striking contrast to what Kibora (2009) reports in regard to rural Burkina Faso, where text messages are apparently frequently used, despite a low literacy rate. This is not the case among the Wodaaabe in Niger and has changed only recently to a certain extent with the introduction of mobile Internet-based messenger services.
12. Interview conducted with Gado from the Gojanko'en clan of the Wodaaabe, Zinder, 7 January 2012.
13. Interview conducted with Gado from the Gojanko'en clan of the Wodaaabe, Zinder, 7 January 2012.
14. Interview conducted with a young man from the Gojanko'en clan of the Wodaaabe, Zinder, 6 June 2011.
15. Interview conducted with Gado from the Gojanko'en clan of the Wodaaabe, Zinder, 7 January 2012.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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