

Constructing Fulani Identity: Historical Continuities and Social Change across the West African Sahel

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ABSTRACT

This manuscript examines the historical construction and transformation of Fulani identity in the Sahel region of West Africa. It integrates anthropological, philanthropic, and historical perspectives on Fulani communities in a single framework. The research examines the aftermath of Islamic influence, migration, colonial intervention, and contemporary socio-economic alterations, which created a paradigm shift in reconfiguring Fulani identity. Subsequently, drawing on archival sources, including oral traditions and secondary literature, the study reflects an interdisciplinary historical-anthropological approach to tracing the development of key cultural institutions in Fulani ethnogenesis. The findings illustrate that Fulani identity altered through adaptation, reflection, retrospect, cultural resilience, courage, and vital external influences. In spite of the disruptive effects of colonial administration, urbanization, and globalization, institutions tantamount to Islamic practices, kinship networks, phonetics of their language, and pastoral traditions survived to draw imperative frameworks for an intrigued identity. Hitherto, this article argues that Fulani identity is articulated as a historically contingent, albeit dynamic, social realm, espoused through a staggering transformation. In conclusion, drawing on collaborative evidence related to the history of the Fulani clan, this study offers a thematic contribution to research on the Sahel, clarifying nuanced considerations of identity formation among West Africa's most influential transnational populations.

1. Introduction

The Fulani (Fulbe, Peul, or Fula) constitute one of the most geographically dispersed ethnocultural populations in Africa, inhabiting territories extending from Senegal and Guinea in the west to Cameroon and Chad in the east [1]. Historically associated with pastoralism and transhumant cattle herding, Fulani communities have played a significant role in the social, economic, religious, and political development of the West African Sahel. Their mobility across ecological zones and political boundaries has facilitated extensive interactions with diverse populations, making the Fulani an important case for understanding processes of migration, cultural adaptation, and identity formation in Africa [2,3].

Pastoralism has long occupied a central place in Fulani society, not only as an economic activity but also as a key element of social organization and cultural identity [4]. Cattle historically served as symbols of wealth, prestige, kinship obligations, and social status. However, contemporary Fulani communities are far from homogeneous. Across the Sahel, many Fulani have adopted agro-pastoralism, settled agriculture, trade, religious scholarship, public administration, and urban occupations [5]. These transformations have emerged through the combined influence of environmental change, state policies, market integration, demographic growth, education, and urbanization. Consequently, Fulani identity cannot be adequately understood through static representations of nomadic pastoralism alone [6].

A substantial body of scholarship has examined various dimensions of Fulani society. Historical studies have focused on questions of ethnogenesis, migration, and regional expansion, while anthropological research has explored pastoral practices, kinship systems, and cultural institutions such as *Pulaaku*, the moral and behavioral code commonly associated with ideals of self-discipline, dignity, restraint, and social responsibility [7,8]. Other scholars have examined the Fulani's role in Islamic reform movements and state formation, particularly during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when Fulani religious leaders helped establish influential Islamic polities, including the Sokoto Caliphate [9]. More recently, research has examined contemporary issues such as pastoral mobility, resource competition, environmental change, conflict, and transnational migration [10,11].

Despite this extensive literature, Fulani studies remain largely fragmented across disciplinary boundaries. Historical research frequently examines migration, political transformation, or Islamic reform independently of contemporary anthropological analyses of identity and cultural change. Similarly, studies of pastoral livelihoods, conflict, and environmental adaptation often pay limited attention to the deeper historical processes through which Fulani collective identity has been constructed and maintained. As a result, scholars have paid insufficient attention to how mobility, pastoralism, religion, cultural institutions, and political transformations have interacted over time to shape Fulani identity across the West African Sahel.

This article addresses this gap by adopting an integrated historical-anthropological approach to studying Fulani communities. Rather than treating identity as a fixed ethnic attribute, the study conceptualizes it as a dynamic social process continually negotiated through changing historical, political, economic, and environmental contexts. The study pays particular attention to the roles of migration, pastoral production, Islamic traditions, and cultural institutions in sustaining collective identity while enabling adaptation to social change.

The central research question guiding this study is: **How has Fulani identity been historically constructed, maintained, and transformed across changing social, political, and environmental contexts in the West African Sahel?** To answer this question, the article draws

upon archival materials, oral traditions, and relevant secondary scholarship to examine the historical evolution of Fulani communities from their early formation and regional expansion to their contemporary experiences of globalization, urbanization, and socio-ecological change.

The article contributes to the literature in three important ways. First, it synthesizes historical and anthropological perspectives that are often treated separately in existing scholarship. Second, it demonstrates how cultural institutions, particularly *Pulaaku*, have functioned as mechanisms of continuity while remaining adaptable to changing conditions. Third, it advances a more nuanced understanding of Fulani identity as a historically contingent and continually evolving phenomenon shaped by both cultural resilience and social transformation. By foregrounding these dynamics, the study contributes to broader debates on ethnicity, mobility, and identity formation in African history and anthropology.

Although the Fulani have attracted scholarly attention across multiple disciplines, existing research has largely focused on specific dimensions of Fulani society, including pastoral livelihoods, ethnogenesis, Islamic reform movements, political history, migration, and contemporary resource conflicts. As a result, the literature has not sufficiently integrated the relationship between these historical and socio-cultural processes in shaping Fulani identity. Addressing this gap, the present study adopts a historical-anthropological approach to examine how Fulani identity has been constructed, maintained, and transformed across changing political, economic, and environmental contexts in the West African Sahel. Specifically, it investigates the role of mobility, pastoralism, kinship, religion, and cultural institutions in sustaining collective identity while adapting to colonial interventions, post-colonial transformations, and contemporary globalization. By bringing together historical and anthropological perspectives, the article contributes a more comprehensive framework for understanding identity formation, cultural resilience, and social change among Fulani communities.

Against this background, the present study examines Fulani communities from an integrated historical and anthropological perspective. It focuses on the historical formation and geographical expansion of Fulani populations, the relationship between pastoralism and social organization, the construction of collective identity, patterns of mobility and migration, interactions with states and neighboring populations, and the effects of environmental and climatic transformations. By integrating these dimensions, this research moves beyond fragmented approaches that treat Fulani history, culture, mobility, or politics as isolated phenomena [12].

2. Conceptual Framework

This study examines Fulani identity as a historically evolving social phenomenon shaped by interactions among pastoral mobility, cultural institutions, and transnational social networks. Four interrelated concepts provide the study's analytical framework: the Fulani as an ethnocultural category, pastoralism, transnational identity, and *Pulaaku*. Rather than treating these concepts as isolated variables, the study views them as mutually constitutive processes through which Fulani communities have historically constructed and reproduced collective identity across the West African Sahel.

2.1 The Fulani as an Ethnic and Anthropological Category

The term *Fulani* is commonly used in English-language scholarship to describe a large, geographically dispersed ethnocultural population across West and Central Africa. Depending on regional and linguistic contexts, the same population may be called *Fulbe*, *Fula*, *Peul*, or *Fulani*.

These labels reflect different historical, linguistic, and colonial traditions of classification and identification.

From an anthropological perspective, however, the Fulani should not be understood as a culturally homogeneous ethnic group. Fulani communities show considerable variation in livelihood strategies, mobility, political organization, religious practice, and interaction with neighboring populations. Consequently, ethnicity is approached here not as a fixed biological or cultural essence but as a socially constructed and historically negotiated form of collective identification.

This study therefore conceptualizes the Fulani as a translocal ethnocultural community whose identity has been continuously shaped through migration, pastoral mobility, religious exchange, political incorporation, and interaction with diverse societies across the Sahel. The analytical focus is not on identifying a single defining characteristic of Fulani identity but on understanding the historical processes through which a sense of collective belonging has been maintained despite internal diversity and geographical dispersion.

2.2 Pastoralism as a Social and Cultural System

Pastoralism refers to a livelihood system in which livestock production constitutes a primary basis of economic and social organization. Among Fulani communities, cattle pastoralism has historically been central to economic life, social relations, and cultural values.

In this study, pastoralism is understood as more than an economic activity. It is treated as a social institution that structures mobility patterns, kinship relations, resource management practices, and interactions with neighboring communities. Pastoral mobility, including transhumance and seasonal migration, has historically connected dispersed Fulani populations across extensive geographical areas and facilitated the circulation of people, cultural practices, and social networks.

This broader understanding is important because the study does not assume that all Fulani are pastoralists. Instead, it examines pastoralism as a historically significant social foundation that has influenced identity formation, even as many Fulani communities have increasingly adopted agro-pastoral, commercial, educational, and urban livelihoods. Consequently, pastoralism serves as an analytical lens for understanding how economic practices contribute to both continuity and transformation in Fulani identity.

2.3 Transnational Identity and Cross-Border Belonging

The concept of transnational identity refers to collective belonging that extends beyond the territorial boundaries of individual nation-states. Fulani communities provide a useful example because their historical distribution predates the colonial borders that later divided much of West Africa.

The imposition of state boundaries did not eliminate existing pastoral routes, kinship networks, trading relationships, religious connections, or cultural affiliations. As a result, many Fulani communities continue to maintain cross-border social ties that transcend contemporary political jurisdictions.

In this study, transnational identity helps explain how Fulani communities sustain collective identification across diverse geographical and political settings. The concept highlights the relationship between mobility and identity by demonstrating that ethnic belonging is not necessarily tied to a single territory. Instead, Fulani identity is reproduced through social networks, cultural practices, and shared historical memories that operate across national boundaries.

2.4 *Pulaaku as a Framework of Cultural Reproduction*

Pulaaku is widely described as a Fulani moral and cultural system associated with values such as dignity, self-control, patience, restraint, respect, courage, and social responsibility. Although its precise meanings differ among communities, *Pulaaku* remains one of the most frequently cited cultural principles through which Fulani identity is expressed and recognized.

Rather than treating *Pulaaku* as a timeless or unchanging cultural code, this study conceptualizes it as a dynamic normative framework through which individuals and communities interpret appropriate conduct and negotiate social belonging. Its significance lies not merely in prescribing behavior but in providing a symbolic language through which Fulani identity is reproduced across different social and historical contexts.

Analytically, *Pulaaku* functions as a mechanism linking collective identity to everyday practice. While pastoralism contributes to patterns of mobility and economic organization, *Pulaaku* provides a cultural framework that helps sustain a sense of shared belonging among geographically dispersed communities. The concept therefore offers an important means of understanding how cultural continuity can persist despite migration, urbanization, political change, and globalization.

2.5 *Conceptual Relationships*

This study's analytical framework rests on the interaction of these four concepts. Fulani identity constitutes the central phenomenon under investigation. Pastoralism provides the historical socio-economic foundation through which mobility and social organization developed. Transnational identity explains how collective belonging has been maintained across territorial boundaries and dispersed settlements. *Pulaaku* functions as a cultural mechanism that reproduces shared values, norms, and social expectations over time.

Taken together, these concepts enable an examination of Fulani identity not as a static ethnic category but as a dynamic, historically contingent process shaped by mobility, cultural reproduction, social interaction, and political transformation. This framework guides the analysis of how Fulani communities have maintained continuity while adapting to changing historical circumstances throughout the West African Sahel.

3. Research Gap

Although scholars have extensively examined the Fulani in historical, anthropological, linguistic, political, and genetic scholarship, existing research remains compartmentalized across disciplinary boundaries. Historical studies have primarily examined migration, Islamic reform movements, political authority, and state formation, while anthropological investigations have focused on pastoral production systems, kinship structures, cultural practices, and mobility patterns. Genetic research, in contrast, has concentrated on ancestry, lineage, and population relationships.[1] While these studies have generated valuable insights, they have rarely been integrated to explain how historical, environmental, political, and cultural processes have jointly shaped the contemporary diversity of Fulani societies.

A major limitation of the literature is the insufficient examination of the long-term relationship between mobility and social transformation. Studies frequently describe Fulani mobility as a cultural characteristic or economic strategy. Yet, they often analyze it independently of broader historical developments such as state formation, colonial territorial restructuring, changing land-tenure systems, environmental pressures, and interactions with neighboring populations.[2] As a

result, the literature provides only a partial understanding of how mobility has contributed to the reconfiguration of Fulani identity, livelihoods, and social organization across different regions and historical periods.

A second gap concerns the persistence of representations that portray the Fulani primarily as "nomadic pastoralists." Such characterizations overlook the considerable socio-economic diversity within Fulani communities. Contemporary Fulani populations engage in a wide range of livelihood strategies, including Agro-pastoralism, sedentary farming, trade, urban occupations, formal education, and participation in state institutions.[3] Existing studies often document these transformations separately but seldom examine how they collectively reshape social identities, community structures, and relationships with wider society.

A third limitation concerns how mobility is treated within nation-state frameworks. Much of the literature examines Fulani communities within the boundaries of individual countries, even though historical migration routes, pastoral corridors, kinship networks, and commercial connections frequently extend across national borders. This methodological focus risks obscuring the transnational dimensions of Fulani social organization and how contemporary borders have altered patterns of movement, resource access, and community interaction.

Consequently, an important gap remains in understanding how historical mobility, environmental adaptation, political incorporation, and socio-economic transformation interact to shape contemporary Fulani identities across different regional contexts. This study addresses that gap through an integrated historical-anthropological approach that examines the interconnected relationships among mobility, pastoral and Agro-pastoral livelihoods, changing political structures, and cross-border social networks. By focusing on these interconnected processes rather than treating them as separate fields of inquiry, the study seeks to provide a more comprehensive explanation of the evolution and contemporary diversity of Fulani societies.

4. Theoretical Framework

This study employs an integrated theoretical framework combining Social Identity Theory, the Anthropology of Pastoralism and Mobility, Political Ecology, and the cultural concept of *Pulaaku*. These perspectives are not used as separate explanatory models but as complementary analytical tools that operate at different levels of analysis. Together, they provide a comprehensive framework for understanding how Fulani identities have been shaped and reproduced through historical mobility, socio-economic adaptation, changing political and environmental conditions, and enduring cultural values.

The framework is organized around the central research problem of explaining how Fulani communities have maintained a recognizable collective identity while simultaneously undergoing significant historical, geographical, economic, and political transformations. Each theoretical perspective addresses a distinct aspect of this process.

4.1 Social Identity Theory: Identity Formation and Boundary Maintenance

Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) serves as the principal framework for examining the construction and maintenance of Fulani collective identity. The theory argues that individuals derive a sense of self from membership in social groups and maintain group identities through social categorization, boundary formation, inclusion, and differentiation.

In this study, Social Identity Theory is used to analyze how Fulani communities maintain a shared identity despite their geographical dispersion and socio-economic diversity. The framework highlights the mechanisms through which collective identity is reproduced, including language, kinship networks, religious affiliation, marriage practices, cultural traditions, and interactions with neighboring populations. Rather than treating Fulani identity as a fixed ethnic category, the study understands it as a dynamic social process continuously negotiated across different historical and regional contexts.

Analytical focus: Identity formation, collective belonging, and boundary maintenance.

4.2 Anthropology of Pastoralism and Mobility: Livelihoods and Adaptation

While Social Identity Theory explains collective identity, the Anthropology of Pastoralism and Mobility explains the social and ecological foundations through which that identity has historically developed. Anthropological scholarship emphasizes that pastoralism is not merely an economic activity but a complex social system involving ecological knowledge, territorial management, social relationships, and cultural practices.

This perspective examines how mobility has functioned as an adaptive strategy in response to environmental variability, seasonal resource distribution, market opportunities, and political constraints. The framework highlights the historical significance of transhumance, migration, and cross-regional movement in shaping both Fulani livelihoods and social networks. It also provides a basis for understanding contemporary transformations from nomadic pastoralism to agro-pastoral, sedentary, urban, and commercial livelihoods.

Analytical focus: Mobility, pastoral adaptation, livelihood transformation, and social organization.

4.3 Political Ecology: Resource Governance and Structural Change

Political Ecology extends the analysis beyond cultural and ecological adaptation by examining how broader political and economic structures shape resource access. From this perspective, environmental challenges and conflicts cannot be understood independently of state policies, land-tenure systems, demographic pressures, market expansion, and unequal power distributions.

This framework analyzes how historical and contemporary political processes have shaped Fulani mobility patterns and access to grazing resources. It provides an analytical basis for examining changing relationships among pastoralists, farming communities, state institutions, and environmental systems. By emphasizing the political dimensions of resource management, Political Ecology helps explain why pastoral mobility increasingly becomes contested within modern territorial and administrative arrangements.

Analytical focus: Resource access, environmental governance, conflict, and political power.

4.4 Pulaaku: Cultural Continuity and Moral Order

The concept of *Pulaaku* provides an emic perspective that complements the broader social-scientific theories employed in this study. Unlike Social Identity Theory, the Anthropology of Pastoralism, and Political Ecology, which are primarily external analytical frameworks, *Pulaaku* represents an indigenous Fulani system of values and social expectations.

Commonly associated with ideals such as dignity, self-restraint, patience, respect, and moral conduct, *Pulaaku* offers insight into how Fulani communities themselves understand appropriate social behavior and collective belonging. The concept is particularly useful for examining how cultural continuity can persist despite significant changes in occupation, settlement patterns, educational attainment, and political participation. Through *Pulaaku*, the study explores the cultural mechanisms that maintain and reinterpret Fulani identity across changing social circumstances.

Analytical focus: Cultural values, moral norms, and the reproduction of collective identity.

4.5 Integration of the Framework

The four perspectives are analytically connected and operate at different but complementary levels of explanation. Social Identity Theory explains **how Fulani identity is formed and maintained**. The Anthropology of Pastoralism and Mobility explains **how historical patterns of movement and livelihood adaptation shape social organization**. Political Ecology explains **how environmental resources, institutions, and power relations influence those adaptive processes**. Finally, *Pulaaku* explains **how cultural values provide continuity and meaning within changing historical and socio-economic contexts**.

Taken together, these theories allow the study to move beyond explanations that focus exclusively on ethnicity, pastoralism, or environmental conflict. Instead, Fulani identity is understood as the outcome of interactions among four interconnected processes:

1. Collective identity formation and boundary maintenance;
2. Mobility and pastoral adaptation;
3. Political and environmental governance;
4. Cultural continuity through *Pulaaku*.

This integrated framework provides the analytical basis for examining how Fulani communities have adapted to changing historical, environmental, and political circumstances while continuing to sustain distinctive forms of social and cultural identity. Consequently, the study is able to address the interdisciplinary research gap identified in the literature and offer a more comprehensive explanation of the evolution and contemporary diversity of Fulani societies.

5. Historical and Geographical Context

5.1 The Sahelian Environment

Understanding Fulani history requires attention to the ecological setting within which pastoral societies emerged and developed. The Sahel forms a transitional zone between the Sahara Desert and the savanna regions of sub-Saharan Africa. Characterized by seasonal rainfall, climatic variability, periodic droughts, and fluctuating ecological conditions, the region presents significant challenges for populations dependent on livestock production.

These environmental conditions historically favored flexible forms of resource management. Rather than relying on permanent access to a single territory, pastoral communities developed systems of seasonal mobility that allowed herders to exploit spatially dispersed pastures and water sources. From the perspective of the Anthropology of Pastoralism and Mobility, movement therefore represents not merely a response to environmental uncertainty but a key social institution through which economic survival, social organization, and ecological adaptation are achieved.

For Fulani communities, mobility became closely linked to processes of identity formation and social interaction. Seasonal movements facilitated contact with farming populations, commercial networks, religious centers, and political authorities. Consequently, the Sahelian environment did not simply shape pastoral livelihoods; it also contributed to the historical development of social relationships and cultural networks that became central components of Fulani society.

5.2 Historical Expansion and Geographic Distribution

The historical expansion of Fulani-speaking populations occurred over a prolonged period and across a vast geographical area extending from Senegambia to the Lake Chad Basin and beyond. Important centers of Fulani settlement and political influence emerged in regions such as Futa Toro, Futa Jallon, Futa Massina, Hausaland, Adamawa, and the Lake Chad Basin. These regions served variously as pastoral zones, commercial hubs, religious centers, and political formations.

However, the distribution of Fulani populations is not adequately explained through a single migration narrative. Consistent with contemporary interpretations of ethnogenesis, Fulani expansion is better understood as a multidirectional historical process involving migration, pastoral mobility, settlement, intermarriage, religious diffusion, commercial exchange, and political incorporation. Through these processes, diverse populations became connected through shared linguistic, cultural, and social practices while retaining significant regional variation.

This pattern of expansion supports the argument advanced in this study that Fulani identity developed through sustained interaction rather than through the simple diffusion of a homogeneous population across space. The broad geographical distribution of Fulani communities demonstrates how mobility facilitated both cultural continuity and adaptation in diverse ecological and political contexts.

Moreover, the transnational distribution of contemporary Fulani populations highlights the limitations of analyses based exclusively on modern state boundaries. Many pastoral routes, kinship ties, religious networks, and commercial relationships predate colonial territorial divisions and continue to extend across multiple countries. Consequently, understanding Fulani identity requires an approach that recognizes mobility and social connectivity as historical processes operating beyond the framework of the nation-state.

5.3 Historical Context and the Study's Analytical Framework

The historical and geographical context presented above provides the foundation for the study's broader analytical argument. The ecological conditions of the Sahel help explain the emergence of pastoral mobility as an adaptive strategy. The historical expansion of Fulani communities illustrates how mobility facilitated processes of ethnogenesis and identity formation. At the same time, the transregional distribution of Fulani populations demonstrates the importance of examining cultural continuity, political adaptation, and social networks across multiple spatial scales.

Accordingly, the Sahel should not be viewed simply as the physical setting of Fulani history. Rather, it constitutes an active historical environment within which mobility, identity, political

organization, and cultural transformation developed in mutually reinforcing ways. This perspective provides the basis for understanding the subsequent evolution of Fulani societies and the contemporary challenges associated with mobility, resource governance, and identity in the wider Sahelian region

6. Ethnogenesis and the Question of Fulani Origins

The origins of the Fulani constitute one of the most extensively debated issues in African historical anthropology. Scholarly discussions have produced a range of competing hypotheses that variously associate Fulani ancestry with West African, Saharan, North African, and, in some interpretations, West Eurasian populations. Debates concerning origin have been shaped by evidence drawn from archaeology, linguistics, historical narratives, physical anthropology, and, more recently, population genetics. Despite considerable research, no single explanatory model has gained universal acceptance.

Earlier interpretations frequently relied on physical appearance, pastoral traditions, cultural similarities, and oral traditions to infer possible ancestral connections. Some scholars proposed links between the Fulani and populations of the Nile Valley or the Near East, while others suggested associations with groups represented in Saharan prehistoric rock art traditions, particularly those documented in regions such as Tassili n'Ajjer.[1] These interpretations reflected broader attempts to explain the distinctive cultural and phenotypic diversity observed among Fulani populations.

However, many of these earlier origin theories have been subject to substantial methodological criticism. Similarities in physical characteristics, pastoral practices, or artistic representations do not in themselves constitute evidence of shared ancestry or direct migration pathways. Consequently, efforts to establish a direct genealogical connection between contemporary Fulani populations and specific prehistoric communities represented in Saharan rock art remain speculative and insufficiently supported by empirical evidence.[2]

Linguistic research offers a more robust foundation for understanding Fulani historical development. The Fulfulde-Pulaar language belongs to the Atlantic branch of the Niger-Congo language family, placing Fulani linguistic history firmly within the wider West African cultural and linguistic landscape. Linguistic relationships and patterns of historical interaction with neighboring populations suggest that processes occurring within West Africa played a central role in the emergence and expansion of Fulani-speaking communities.

Contemporary scholarship increasingly approaches Fulani origins through the concept of **ethnogenesis**, emphasizing the formation of ethnic identities through long-term processes of migration, interaction, incorporation, and cultural adaptation rather than through descent from a single ancestral population. From this perspective, Fulani identity is understood as the outcome of centuries of social integration among diverse populations inhabiting the western Sahel and adjacent regions. Population movement, intermarriage, economic exchange, religious diffusion, and pastoral adaptation contributed to the gradual emergence of a distinctive Fulani cultural identity while simultaneously producing significant internal diversity.

Accordingly, the most convincing interpretation is not one that seeks a single point of origin but one that recognizes Fulani ethnogenesis as a historically dynamic process. Fulani communities emerged through complex interactions among local West African populations, trans-Saharan contacts, patterns of mobility, cultural transmission, and varying degrees of biological

admixture.[4] This perspective shifts the analytical focus from identifying a singular ancestral homeland to examining the historical processes through which a distinctive Fulani identity was formed, maintained, and transformed across time and space.

7. Linguistic Diversity and Cultural Integration

Language represents one of the most important mechanisms through which Fulani identity has been maintained across geographically dispersed communities. Fulfulde and Pulaar constitute a wide linguistic continuum, with substantial regional differentiation.

Western phonetics are often associated with Pulaar, whereas Fulfulde phonetics are widespread farther east. The linguistic continuum contains multiple dialect groups and reflects extensive historical interaction with neighboring languages [30].

Fulani linguistic practices also show that ethnic identity and language do not always coincide. Bilingualism, multilingualism, cultural assimilation, and *Fulanization* have enabled individuals and communities to adopt Fulani linguistic or cultural identities without necessarily sharing identical genealogical histories [31].

The concept of Fulanization is particularly significant because it demonstrates that ethnicity can be transmitted culturally as well as biologically. Individuals or communities may adopt elements of Fulani language, social organization, religion, or identity through prolonged interaction and integration [32].

8. Ethnographic Characteristics of Fulani Communities

8.1 Livelihood and Everyday Life

Fulani communities display considerable variation in everyday economic practices. While cattle remain culturally and economically important, contemporary livelihoods may include crop cultivation, livestock trading, wage labor, commerce, transport, religious education, and urban employment.

Among mobile pastoralists, daily activities center on livestock management, water access, pasture availability, herd protection, and seasonal mobility. Knowledge of landscapes, vegetation, water sources, animal behavior, and climatic conditions constitutes an important form of accumulated ecological expertise.

8.2 Family and Kinship

Kinship remains an important organizational principle within many Fulani communities. Extended family relationships can structure residence, marriage, inheritance, pastoral cooperation, and mutual assistance. However, kinship organization varies substantially across regions. Urbanization, formal education, labor migration, intermarriage, and state institutions have increasingly altered traditional patterns of social organization [33].

8.3 Social Norms and Pulaaku

Pulaaku provides a culturally significant framework through which individuals are evaluated according to standards of dignity, restraint, patience, courage, and appropriate conduct. These

values are especially visible in discussions of self-control and interpersonal behavior. Yet Pulaaku should not be treated as a uniform code applicable identically to every Fulani community. Local history, social class, gender, age, religion, and contemporary socioeconomic circumstances shape its interpretation [34].

8.4 Religion

Islam has played a major role in the historical development of many Fulani communities, particularly from the period of Islamic expansion and scholarly networks in West Africa onward. Fulani religious scholars participated in Islamic education and reform movements, and Islamic institutions subsequently became important components of political organization in several regions. The relationship between Fulani identity and Islam, however, should not be interpreted as completely synonymous, since historical and contemporary Fulani communities exhibit differences in religious practice and social organization [35].

9. Mobility and Migration Patterns

Mobility constitutes one of the defining historical features of many Fulani pastoral communities. However, mobility exists along a continuum ranging from short seasonal movements to long-distance transhumance and cross-border migration.

9.1 Seasonal Pastoral Mobility

Seasonal mobility is closely associated with fluctuations in rainfall, pasture, and water resources. Pastoralists may move livestock between dry-season and wet-season grazing areas according to ecological conditions.

Such movements require detailed environmental knowledge and social negotiation. Access to corridors, wells, grazing areas, and markets frequently depends upon relationships with local communities and authorities.

9.2 Cross-Border Mobility

Modern international borders have created an important contradiction for Fulani pastoralism. Pastoral systems often predate the establishment of contemporary states, meaning that historically established movement corridors may cross present-day national boundaries.

Consequently, pastoralists may face restrictions that do not align with traditional ecological mobility. Border regulations, security policies, livestock controls, and immigration requirements can therefore reshape established movement patterns.

9.3 Sedentarization and Urbanization

Not all Fulani remain mobile. Economic opportunities, educational institutions, agricultural expansion, insecurity, environmental pressures, and government settlement policies have encouraged greater sedentarization.

Urban Fulani communities have also expanded significantly. This shows that Fulani identity does not depend on pastoral mobility alone. Instead, identity may persist through language, kinship, cultural norms, religion, marriage networks, and collective memory.

10. Fulani Political History and State Formation

The Fulani historical role extends beyond pastoralism. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Fulani scholars and political leaders became central actors in Islamic reform movements across West Africa.

The establishment of the Sokoto Caliphate represented a particularly consequential political transformation. Led by Usman dan Fodio and his successors, the movement produced a large political and religious system that reshaped governance, scholarship, taxation, military organization, and Islamic education across substantial parts of present-day northern Nigeria and neighboring territories.

Other Fulani-led or Fulani-associated political formations emerged in regions including Futa Jallon, Futa Toro, Macina, and Adamawa. These political formations demonstrate the diversity of Fulani historical experiences and challenge representations of the group as exclusively pastoral or politically marginal.

The relationship between pastoralism, Islam, scholarship, and political authority was complex. In some settings, religious reform facilitated political consolidation; in others, Fulani communities were incorporated into existing political systems or interacted with neighboring states through trade and pastoral exchange [36].

11. Relations with the Post-Modern State and Conflict

Incorporating pastoral populations into modern nation-states has created significant institutional challenges. State boundaries, land laws, agricultural policies, protected areas, and administrative regulations have frequently altered access to pastoral resources [37].

11.1 Land and Water Competition

Competition over land and water has become increasingly significant in parts of the Sahel and West Africa. Agricultural expansion may reduce access to traditional grazing areas, while pastoral mobility can generate tensions when livestock enter cultivated land. However, resource conflict should not automatically be interpreted as a primordial ethnic conflict between Fulani and non-Fulani populations. In many cases, conflict emerges from institutional failures, weak land governance, demographic pressures, unclear property rights, environmental stress, and unequal political representation [38].

11.2 State Policies

Government policies toward pastoralism vary substantially among African states. Some governments have sought to regulate or restrict mobility, while others have established livestock corridors, grazing reserves, pastoral development programs, or conflict-mediation mechanisms.

The effectiveness of such policies depends heavily on implementation, local legitimacy, institutional capacity, and the degree to which pastoral communities participate in decision-making [39].

11.3 Securitization and Political Marginalization

In some contemporary contexts, Fulani populations have become associated in public discourse with insecurity and armed groups. Such generalizations are analytically problematic because they risk conflating an enormous and internally diverse population with the actions of particular individuals or armed organizations. A historically and anthropologically grounded approach requires distinguishing between pastoral communities, political actors, armed groups, and broader processes of insecurity. Failing to make these distinctions can contribute to stigmatization and may contribute to political marginalization [40].

12. Climate Change and Environmental Transformation

Climate change represents one of the most significant emerging challenges for pastoral societies in the Sahel. Increasing climatic variability, recurrent drought, changing rainfall patterns, land degradation, and pressure on water resources can directly affect pastoral production. For Fulani pastoralists, environmental change may reduce the availability or predictability of grazing resources. When traditional pasture becomes less reliable, pastoralists may be compelled to travel farther, alter migration routes, intensify livestock movements, or diversify livelihoods. However, it would be misleading to portray climate change as an automatic cause of conflict or migration. Environmental pressures interact with political institutions, demographic changes, land tenure systems, market conditions, and security environments. Indeed, pastoral mobility can itself be an adaptive mechanism. Mobile livestock production allows pastoralists to respond flexibly to spatial differences in rainfall and vegetation. The central challenge is therefore not mobility itself, but the growing constraints on mobility imposed by land-use change, political boundaries, insecurity, and resource competition [41].

13. Genetic and Population-History Perspectives

The demographic history of the Fulani has attracted increasing interest in population genetics. Genetic research has examined mitochondrial DNA, Y-chromosome variation, and, more recently, genome-wide variation among Fulani and neighboring populations [42].

Available evidence indicates that Fulani populations have predominantly African genetic ancestry, combined in varying proportions with genetic components associated with North African and West Eurasian populations. Maternal and paternal lineages show different diversity patterns, suggesting that sex-biased migration, intermarriage, and population interactions may have shaped the demographic history of particular Fulani communities.

Some studies of mitochondrial variation have reported substantial representation of lineages associated with West African and broader African populations alongside a smaller but significant representation of West Eurasian or North African-associated lineages. These findings have contributed to hypotheses concerning historical population contact across the Sahara and Sahel.

Importantly, genetic evidence does not provide a simple answer to the question of Fulani origins. Genetic admixture reflects population interactions and gene flow rather than necessarily identifying a single ancestral homeland. Furthermore, substantial genetic variation exists among Fulani communities, and conclusions from one pastoral population should not automatically generalize to all Fulani populations across Africa [43].

Comparative studies have also identified genetic relationships between Fulani and neighboring African populations, emphasizing that the Sahel has historically functioned as a zone of interaction rather than a region of sharply isolated populations [44].

14. Lactase Persistence and Pastoral Adaptation

The relationship between pastoralism and human biological adaptation provides another important dimension of Fulani population history. The ability to digest lactose into adulthood, known as lactase persistence, is particularly relevant in populations with long-standing traditions of milk consumption [45].

Fulani populations have attracted considerable scientific attention because some communities exhibit relatively high frequencies of genetic variants associated with lactase persistence. These variants are not necessarily identical to those found in European populations, illustrating the possibility of convergent evolutionary adaptation among populations with different histories of pastoralism and milk consumption [46].

This case demonstrates the importance of integrating cultural and biological anthropology. Dietary practices, pastoral economies, population movement, and natural selection may interact over long periods to shape human biological variation [47].

Nevertheless, genetic adaptation should not be interpreted as evidence that all Fulani communities share the same biological history. Contemporary Fulani populations are diverse, and patterns of lactase persistence vary among populations and regions [48].

15. Comparative Analysis: Fulani, Tuareg, and Other Pastoral Communities

Comparative analysis provides a broader perspective on the relationship between pastoralism, mobility, ethnicity, and environmental adaptation. The Fulani and Tuareg represent two important pastoral populations of the Sahel, yet their historical trajectories differ significantly. The Tuareg have traditionally been associated with camel pastoralism and desert and semi-desert environments, whereas many Fulani pastoral systems have been more strongly associated with cattle and savanna environments.

The bi-populations, however, demonstrate how pastoral mobility can function as an adaptive strategy within highly variable ecological systems. Both have also experienced the disruption of traditional mobility systems by colonial and postcolonial state boundaries.

The comparison further demonstrates that pastoralism does not necessarily produce political marginality. Both Fulani and Tuareg communities have historically established political institutions, trading networks, religious structures, and systems of territorial organization.

Other African pastoral societies similarly demonstrate that mobility can coexist with sophisticated social organization and extensive ecological knowledge. Comparative analysis therefore challenges sedentary assumptions that equate mobility with social instability or underdevelopment.

16. Discussion

The findings of this study support the argument that Fulani identity is best understood as a historically dynamic social formation rather than a fixed ethnic category. The evidence suggests that the continuity and transformation of Fulani communities have been shaped through the interaction of three closely related processes: mobility, cultural continuity, and political adaptation. Interpreted through the integrated theoretical framework adopted in this study, these findings contribute to ongoing debates concerning ethnogenesis, pastoral adaptation, and identity formation in Africa.

16.1 Mobility as a Mechanism of Adaptation and Identity Formation

The historical evidence indicates that mobility has been more than a strategy for accessing pasture and water resources. Consistent with anthropological theories of pastoralism and mobility, movement functioned as an adaptive response to environmental variability while simultaneously creating channels for social interaction, economic exchange, and cultural diffusion. Seasonal migration routes connected different ecological zones and facilitated sustained contact between Fulani groups and neighboring populations.

This finding extends existing interpretations that primarily view pastoral mobility as an economic or ecological practice. The evidence suggests that mobility also contributed to processes of ethnogenesis by enabling the circulation of cultural practices, language varieties, religious ideas, and social networks across wide geographical areas. From this perspective, Fulani mobility should be understood not simply as movement through space but as a mechanism through which collective identity was reproduced and transformed over time.

The findings therefore support the argument of the Anthropology of Pastoralism and Mobility that movement constitutes a central organizing principle of social life rather than merely a response to environmental constraints. At the same time, they challenge static portrayals of Fulani communities as exclusively nomadic populations by demonstrating the historical diversity of settlement patterns and livelihood strategies.

16.2 Cultural Continuity Beyond Pastoralism

A second important finding concerns the persistence of collective identity despite significant socio-economic transformation. Historical and contemporary evidence indicates that cultural continuity has not depended exclusively on the preservation of pastoral livelihoods. Many Fulani communities have adopted agro-pastoral, sedentary, commercial, urban, educational, and professional occupations while continuing to identify as Fulani.

This finding supports the core proposition of Social Identity Theory that collective identities persist through shared systems of meaning and social boundaries rather than through uniform economic practices. The evidence suggests that language, kinship networks, religious traditions, collective memory, and cultural values associated with *Pulaaku* have served as important mechanisms of identity reproduction across diverse social contexts.

The continuing significance of *Pulaaku* is particularly important. Rather than functioning as a relic of a pastoral past, *Pulaaku* appears to provide a flexible cultural framework through which individuals negotiate changing social realities while maintaining a sense of collective belonging. This finding extends previous research by suggesting that cultural continuity is not dependent upon the maintenance of traditional economic systems. Instead, identity can be reconstructed and adapted while remaining culturally meaningful.

16.3 Political Adaptation and Historical Agency

A third finding concerns the political adaptability of Fulani communities across different historical periods. Existing public and academic discourse often presents Fulani populations primarily through contemporary security concerns or pastoral conflicts. However, the historical evidence examined in this study demonstrates a far more complex pattern of political engagement.

Fulani communities have occupied diverse political positions, including pastoral groups, Islamic scholars, commercial actors, regional elites, military leaders, and state-builders. The emergence of the Sokoto Caliphate and related Islamic political formations illustrates the extent to which Fulani actors actively shaped political institutions rather than merely responding to them.

This finding contributes to Political Ecology by highlighting the importance of power relations and institutional structures in understanding Fulani history. It suggests that contemporary challenges involving mobility, resource management, and conflict cannot be adequately interpreted as purely ethnic disputes. Rather, they reflect broader historical processes involving state formation, land governance, environmental change, and unequal access to political resources.

Consequently, the findings challenge reductionist representations that portray Fulani communities either as passive victims of environmental pressures or as homogeneous actors within contemporary conflicts. Instead, the evidence demonstrates that Fulani societies have historically exercised significant agency while continuously adapting to changing political environments.

16.4 Implications for Contemporary Policy

The findings also generate important policy implications. Because mobility emerged historically as a rational adaptive strategy rather than a sign of underdevelopment, policies based exclusively on sedentarization are unlikely to address the structural challenges facing pastoral communities. The evidence suggests that mobility remains an important mechanism for managing environmental variability and resource uncertainty.

From a Political Ecology perspective, many contemporary conflicts associated with pastoralism are linked not simply to population movement itself but to changing patterns of land tenure, agricultural expansion, demographic growth, and restricted access to traditional grazing routes. Therefore, policies aimed at reducing conflict should focus on institutional arrangements governing resource access rather than solely attempting to transform pastoral livelihoods.

The historical evidence reviewed in this study supports policy approaches that recognize pastoral mobility corridors, strengthen negotiated access to grazing and water resources, improve participatory land-governance mechanisms, and promote conflict-resolution institutions capable of mediating relations between pastoral and agricultural communities. Such measures are more consistent with the historical realities of pastoral adaptation than policies that assume a universal transition toward permanent settlement.

16.5 Contribution to Knowledge

Taken together, the findings contribute to the literature in three ways. First, they support an understanding of Fulani identity as a process of ethnogenesis and ongoing social construction rather than a fixed ethnic essence. Second, they demonstrate that mobility, culture, and political organization should be analyzed as interconnected rather than separate dimensions of Fulani history. Third, they show how an integrated framework combining Social Identity Theory, the Anthropology of Mobility, Political Ecology, and *Pulaaku* can provide a more comprehensive

explanation of Fulani continuity and change than approaches grounded in a single disciplinary perspective.

Ultimately, the study argues that the contemporary diversity of Fulani societies is not evidence of cultural fragmentation but rather the outcome of long-term historical processes through which communities have adapted to changing ecological, political, and social environments while maintaining distinctive forms of collective identity.

17. Conclusion

This study examined the historical development and contemporary transformation of Fulani communities through an integrated historical-anthropological framework. The findings demonstrate that Fulani identity is best understood not as a fixed ethnic essence but as a dynamic social formation shaped by the interaction of mobility, cultural continuity, and political adaptation across different historical periods and geographical settings.

The analysis shows that mobility has played a central role in the formation and expansion of Fulani societies, functioning not only as an economic strategy but also as a mechanism for social interaction and identity formation. At the same time, the persistence of Fulani identity cannot be explained solely through pastoralism. Cultural institutions, including language, kinship networks, religious traditions, collective memory, and the values associated with *Pulaaku*, have enabled continuity despite significant transformations in livelihood, settlement patterns, and socio-economic organization.

The study further demonstrates that Fulani communities have historically adapted to changing political and environmental conditions. Rather than occupying a single social or political position, Fulani populations have participated in diverse roles as pastoralists, scholars, traders, community leaders, and state-builders. Contemporary challenges associated with resource access, mobility, and conflict therefore need to be understood within broader historical processes rather than through simplified ethnic explanations.

The principal contribution of this study is to demonstrate that contemporary Fulani diversity is not evidence of cultural fragmentation but the outcome of long-term processes of ethnogenesis, adaptation, and social transformation. By integrating historical, anthropological, and political-ecological perspectives, the study provides a more comprehensive explanation of how Fulani identity has been maintained, negotiated, and reconfigured across time and space, contributing to broader debates on identity, mobility, and pastoral societies in Africa.

Ethical Considerations

Not applicable. This study did not require ethical approval because it does not include human or animal subjects and does not involve any personal or sensitive data.

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