



doi: <https://doi.org/10.20546/ijcrar.2024.1210.007>

## Goja, Intangible Cultural Heritage of the Peulh of Bembéréké in Benin: Issues of Preservation and Transmission of an Identity Practice

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### Abstract

The development advocated by different nations can't be achieved without real consideration of cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible. It's the confirmation of this reality that founds the choice of this study entitled: "Goja, intangible cultural heritage of Fulani of Bembéréké in Benin: issues of preservation and transmission of an identity practice" The objective of this study is to show the importance of *goja* (flogging) as a physical practice with educational value within the Fulani's community. To reach the objectives, 35 subjects made up of resource people, former practitioners of "goja", young actors of the said practice, young non-practitioners and religious authorities were interviewed. Data processing was possible thanks to the verbatim transcription of the audio from the interviews. The results of data analysis showed that the practice of *goja* has an educational vocation for Fulani youth. However, it also appears that the interaction between *goja* and other cultures and the evolution of Fulani's society of Bembéréké have slowed down the scope of this practice which is losing its educational momentum. To ensure its sustainability and convince young people of its importance, it is necessary to set up strategies that can adapt it to changing time and current realities.

### Article Info

Received: 20 August 2024

Accepted: 24 September 2024

Available Online: 20 October 2024

### Keywords

Goja, practice, Cultural identity, Fulani, youth.

### Introduction

In a world that is constantly changing, marked by globalization and technological change, the question of education and its role in preserving cultural identities and

sustainable development is becoming more acute. Margaret Mead, in her book "Culture and Commitment", had already anticipated these issues by emphasizing that "education is our passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs to the people who prepare for it today." (Mead,

1970). While this insightful observation by Mead highlights the intrinsic link between education, culture and the future development of a society, she emphasizes that investment in education and culture today is the key to shaping the innovators, thinkers and leaders of tomorrow who will drive scientific and technological progress. Margaret Mead's observation on the crucial role of education and culture in the development of a society finds a remarkable echo in the words of a Gando patriarch of Ouaké, who wisely states: "A country is not built with roads and wells alone, but with enlightened minds and valiant hearts. By nurturing the education and culture of our people, we sow the seeds that will germinate the progress of tomorrow. For it is the children of today, nourished by knowledge and wisdom, who will invent the tools of the future." This profound reflection of the Gando patriarch corroborates Mead's vision, emphasizing that the true progress of a nation rests not only on its physical infrastructure, but above all on the intellectual and cultural development of its people. The two perspectives converge to highlight the fundamental importance of investment in education and culture as essential drivers of scientific and technological progress, thus shaping the future of a society.

It should also be noted that the scientific and technological progress of a country is based on several fundamental pillars, of which education and culture occupy a prominent place. This reality transcends borders and eras, reminding us that in all human societies, whether traditional or modern, sustainable development and innovation are intrinsically linked to the valorization of knowledge, mainly ancestral heritage and cultural development. Thus, we would have understood that investment in education and culture is not simply an option, but an imperative necessity for any nation aspiring to progress and prosper in a constantly changing world.

This presupposes the definition and implementation of a good educational and cultural policy that takes into account the aspirations of children and young people. In Africa, this aspect is poorly considered, despite its capital importance for the development of the continent. Indeed, many African countries are still struggling to establish educational and cultural systems adapted to local needs and realities, thus limiting their capacity to train a qualified, resilient workforce and to stimulate the innovation necessary for scientific and technological progress. Development in most African countries is designed without truly taking into account the needs of populations and their socio-cultural realities. Before the

colonial period, however, social organization in Africa was based on traditional power, which was based on laws designed to maintain social balance and the respect of which conferred harmony on society. It was a community based on "empires or kingdoms controlled by traditional chiefs" [Gahé-Gohoun \(2020: 227\)](#) adopting the same political and cultural ideology. In this sense, culture appeared as a vector of social progress, a determining element that made it possible to distinguish each ethnic group. Whether tangible or intangible heritage, culture represented the memory of a united African community. It takes various forms and cannot be identical within groups of individuals. Culture in its broadest sense, has a historical scope that contributes to the political liberation, emancipation and development of a people. However, shaken by enormous factors, African culture has suffered serious negative consequences that have led to its denaturation or even desacralization. The African people found themselves without a compass between two worlds: one traditional, based on a traditional ideology, made of ancestral values. The other, inherited from colonization, imposes the language, the culture of the colonizer on the oppressed that is the African. In this momentum, he finds himself inclined to acculturation because of the influence of his colonizing master.

The acculturation of Africa, resulting in the abandonment of cultural and religious practices, has led to deep regrets in the experience of the African. The latter has, in fact, seen his soul taken away, deprived of his authenticity as a black man by the horrors of the slave trade, slavery and colonization. The collateral damage of this acculturation, although shared, [Gahé-Gohoun \(2020\)](#) recognizes that it was in the majority in the African camp. This damage has been amplified by globalization, an international system designed in which less industrialized countries did not have a monopoly in free international trade.

Also, international legal instruments relating to human rights were developed and adopted in a context where Africa was still suffering the misdeeds of Western domination. These texts were submitted to it willingly or by force without taking into account its socio-cultural realities. Faced with such a reality, the bogging down of traditional African values becomes obvious. All ethnic communities have suffered from it. The Fulani community is not the rest of the cultural imbalance that has led to the foundation of its most fearsome practices, those on which the destiny of Fulani youth rests. This is how the Universal Declaration of Human and Peoples'

Rights, on which most constitutions of African countries are modeled, prohibits physical violence against human beings. However, one of the initiatory practices of this community (flogging) is a manifestation of violence consented to by the actors in all conscience and freedom. Faced with this contrast, the future of the cultural identity of this community raises questions. Which also explains the wording in the form of a question in the title of this study. Aware that the development of a people is based on its cultural policy, the heads of state and government of the countries of the Organization of African Unity, in the aftermath of independence, laid the foundations for a revaluation of their culture, which was losing momentum. By defining the Cultural Charter of the OAU countries (now AU), the members of this Organization were "in search of values that legitimize life in society, because they provide the possibility of overcoming its different moments (historical, conceptual)" [Gahé-Gohoun \(2020: 227\)](#). Based on the principle that "every people have the imprescriptible right to organize their cultural life according to their ideals, political, economic, social, philosophical and spiritual", the heads of state and government present in Port-Louis, [Mauritius in 1976](#), attempted to restore African culture to its former glory through a continental "cultural unity". In other words, it was a reorganization of African culture devastated by the balkanization of Africa decided in Berlin between November 1884 and February 1885 ([Gahé-Gohoun, 2020](#)). Unfortunately, the various strategies implemented have still not produced any effects; which pushes African cultural heritage to the abyss.

That of the Fulani community of Benin suffers no less. It is therefore to try to understand the effects of globalization on the cultural practices of the Fulani community of Bembéréké, in this case the goja, that we looked at this study. To address its different contours, we articulated the editorial plan starting from the problem to arrive at the presentation of the results and their analysis through the methodological approach.

### **State of the Problem**

Between the 12th and the beginning of the 20th century, Africa experienced social, economic, spiritual and psychological upheavals linked to the slave trade, slavery and colonization. Before these tumultuous periods, notably the Balkanization of the continent in Germany, from November 1884 to February 1885, African social organization was based on the [Gahé-Gohoun \(2020\)](#) system of royalties or empires around which society was

governed, built as a single unit. This unity was a determining factor in the political, social and cultural emergence of Africa. Everything was governed by a traditional power whose structuring was centered on the principles of solidarity and sharing. Within each community, a hierarchy therefore reigned based on a cultural policy specific to each people sharing the same values. Thus, the Fulani community of Benin in general and that of the Bembéréké region in particular, led a way of life based on a philosophy called pulaaku. This is the set of ways of "thinking", "acting" and "feeling" voluntarily codified by the community ([Rocher, 1968](#)) and which was governed by rules that contribute to its harmony. This assumes that all social, cultural and religious practices desired and conceived are unanimous and oriented towards ideals of development. In this context, practices inherited from tradition, in this case goja, considered as initiation tests, contribute to the traditional education of young people and are transmitted from one generation to another. [Guéhi \(2021: 41\)](#) considers the practice of initiation as "a quest for mental and spiritual consolidation of the changing spirit, with the intention of arousing" in the initiated being "additional capacities likely to open up to him the path of the fight for freedom". As such, goja, as an initiatory test that partly defines the Fulani ideology, aimed to measure the courage of young people, to instill in them values, especially those relating to the notions of honor, challenge, responsibility and safeguarding human dignity. In addition to these socialization values that develop the psychomotor capacities of initiates, goja promotes the development of intercultural relations, creates contacts facilitating mutual aid. This is what reveals its community dimension, which goes beyond a simple game of distraction. However, as mentioned above, goja's contact with other cultures has led to its transformation and regression. Fulani cultural authenticity has undergone a transformation with the penetration of other cultures that have surpassed endogenous cultures. However, this community will only be able to "assume" its "history and write it correctly" "on condition of knowing it, of knowing that it is that of all humanity" ([Gahé-Gohoun, 2020: 240](#)). Which seems difficult for it, since within it, the transformation has been profound and raises questions. Goja, nomadism and other ancestral values have undergone a shock whose influence has disrupted social organization. Already, sedentarization has taken over nomadism and led the Fulani to integrate another way of life based on livestock breeding coupled with agriculture which now serves as a food base. Most cultural practices have given way to exogenous values such as Islam, which now constitute

the development model and with which the Fulani identify. Thus, Islam symbolizing peace, its coupling with the whip would become unthinkable. As a result, the goja would be considered an initiatory test whose scope does not match the peace and social cohesion advocated by the prescriptions of the Holy Book (the Koran). In such a surge, it loses its initial rhythm and symbol. Addressing the molding of the Peulh in the practice of the Islamic religion, Vieillard (1932:2-3) shows that "they are part of the Islamic community and the pride they feel replaces their ethnic pride". This is to say that Islam has played a role in the mutation and transformation of traditional Peulh values to such an extent that they no longer benefit the rising generations.

Furthermore, the introduction of the classical school in the Fulani community of Bembéréké would have led to another form of education that could be described as formal and modern and which is not favorable to the practice of goja. We will no longer speak in terms of generation but rather of promotion. However, the representations that the Fulani community had of the practice of goja were anchored in its culture and differed from the reading that can be made of it in light of official texts on human rights. For this community, goja has a symbolic meaning and carries noble values. It has nothing alienating or degrading to human dignity and security. Conversely, for those who want to read it in light of the Beninese Constitution, for example, it will have a completely different perspective. Thus, the Constitution of Benin of 1990, through its article 15, provides that: "Every individual has the right to life, liberty, security and integrity of his person" (p.8). Article 18 complements this by stipulating that: "No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment" (p.9).

These articles proclaim the right to life and to the protection of Man in all his dimensions. Faced with the initiatory test of the goja, we perceive the gap that exists between these two logics. It is the case that modern school conveys knowledge and know-how based on fundamental human rights defined in international and national conventions and charters. From then on, education in the Fulani environment is no longer based on traditional values but is explained on the contrary by the notions received at school. It follows that the school has led to a profound transformation of local practices and to the ignorance of some of them by young people due to the lack of teaching of these values to them. As a result, young Fulani abandon goja in favor of other forms of leisure. However, the Cultural Charter of the member

countries of the Organization of African Unity, adopted in Mauritius in 1976, considers culture as an "... effective weapon for the true liberation, effective responsibility and total sovereignty of the people" (art.4: 4). Given the place that culture occupies in maintaining social balance, no people should think of abandoning their own cultural identity under the pretext of any influence.

It is also to prevent cultural alienation that the participants in this meeting in Mauritius expressed their desire to create the conditions that allow young people, the working and peasant classes to participate in a flourishing African cultural life even in their work environment. Which does not seem to have a favorable echo in the psychology of the Fulani youth. In view of this context described, two questions emerge: (1) faced with the decline in the practice of goja, will future generations be able to know and be subjected to this initiatory test? (2) faced with the practice of modern leisure activities, what are the new perspectives for the practice of goja in the Fulani community of Bembéréké in order to make it sustainable? To answer these questions, this research aims generally to show the importance of goja as a bodily practice with educational value within the Fulani community of Bembéréké. As a hypothesis, the research postulates that external pressure as well as modern leisure activities contribute to the decline in the practice of goja.

## **Materials and Methods**

Any scientific work, in order to achieve the expected results, is based on a rigorous methodological approach. As part of this study, documentary research and in-depth field surveys were conducted in order to have the data on the basis of which the results were presented and discussed.

## **Documentary study**

The documentary study was crucial in conducting this research work. Although the subject of goja is poorly documented, we were able to build a relevant database through the consultation of libraries, documentation centers and online resources. This phase made it possible to establish a solid theoretical and conceptual framework to address the subject in depth. 2.2 Ethnographic field survey. The field survey was carried out according to the principles of ethnography, a preferred method in anthropology. It began with a three-month participant observation, allowing for total immersion in the community studied. This approach proved essential to



grasp the subtleties of the cultural practice of goja in its context.

### **Participant observation**

Participant observation was carried out at two levels: • an extended stay with elders and wise men, holders of traditional knowledge related to goja; • monitoring of young actors, particularly transhumant herders, to understand the evolution and adaptation of the practice. This immersion made it possible to document the visible and invisible aspects of goja, the social interactions surrounding it, and its role in the daily life of the community.

### **Ethnographic interviews**

Following the participant observation, in-depth interviews were conducted with 35 informants, selected using reasoned choice and snowball techniques. These semi-directive interviews, conducted in the Fulani language, made it possible to explore in depth the perceptions, experiences and meanings attributed to goja.

### **Collection of life stories**

In addition to the interviews, life stories were collected from former practitioners to trace the history and evolution of goja over generations. This biographical approach made it possible to capture the temporal and intergenerational dimension of the practice, providing valuable insight into the socio-cultural changes that have influenced goja. In addition, these stories revealed personal experiences and subjective meanings attributed to this practice, thus enriching our understanding of its importance in the construction of Fulani identity.

### **Data analysis**

The data collected were analyzed using the thematic content analysis method, enriched by a hermeneutic approach specific to anthropology. This analysis made it possible to identify recurring themes, symbols and deep cultural meanings associated with goja. The interviews conducted were transcribed verbatim in French before being analyzed.

The analysis process took place in several stages, in accordance with the principles of thematic analysis: a familiarization with the data, through a thorough and repeated reading of the transcripts to immerse oneself in the content, was followed by the generation of initial

codes, with the systematic identification and annotation of relevant elements in the data. Then, the codes were grouped into potential themes, during the theme search phase. The revision of the themes allowed to check the coherence of the latter in relation to the coded extracts and to the whole of the data. A precise definition and naming of each theme was then carried out, before the production of the report, which included the selection of convincing extracts, the final analysis of these extracts and their relation to the research question and the literature. This rigorous analytical approach was applied to the data collected from a diverse sample of participants, whose distribution is presented in Table 1 below, thus allowing for an in-depth and nuanced analysis of the varied perspectives on the practice of goja within the Fulani community.

### **Reflexivity and positioning of researchers**

In accordance with the principles of modern anthropology, particular attention was paid to the reflexivity of the research team, recognizing the influence of its composition in the field and its role in the co-construction of knowledge with informants. The team was made up of researchers with varied profiles, including one belonging to the Fulani community and others from different ethnic groups. This diversity made it possible to bring both an internal (emic) and external (etic) perspective to the study. The fact that one of the researchers belongs to the Fulani community facilitated access to the field and understanding of the cultural and linguistic subtleties related to goja.

However, this proximity required increased vigilance to maintain a critical distance and avoid interpretation biases. At the same time, the presence of researchers from other cultures provided a valuable external perspective, making it possible to question certain practices or interpretations that might seem obvious to a member of the community.

This complementarity of perspectives enriched the analysis and contributed to a more nuanced and objective understanding of the phenomenon studied. Throughout the research, debriefing and collective reflection sessions were organized to compare points of view, explain each person's presuppositions and refine the interpretation of the data collected. This reflexive approach helped to strengthen the scientific rigor of the study while taking advantage of the wealth of multiple perspectives within the research team.

## **Results and Discussion**

The coupled presentation of the analysis of the results of the field work was organized according to the previously defined themes.

### **History of the practice of goja among the Peulh of the commune of Bembéréké**

Before looking at the origins of goja among the Peulh of the Bembéréké region, it is appropriate to delve back into history by going back to very ancient periods that can help to find the first traces of this practice. Thus, several studies have revealed that flagellation dates back to ancient times. On social, religious and political levels, flagellation has been a means of establishing order within society. From an anthropological perspective, this practice reveals the complex mechanisms by which societies construct and maintain their power structures and belief systems. Flagellation, whether a public or private ritual, has served several important functions: it has reinforced social norms by publicly punishing transgressors, acting as a powerful tool of social control and reaffirming expected values and behaviors within the community; it has expressed hierarchy by reflecting and reinforcing existing power structures, with authorities (religious or secular) exercising their dominance over subordinates; and it has taken the form of a purification ritual, perceived in many religious contexts as a means of expiating sins and purifying the soul, thus illustrating cultural conceptions of guilt and redemption. Flagellation also contributed to the creation of a collective identity, by strengthening social bonds within flagellant groups through a shared practice. In times of crisis, such as during plague epidemics, it acted as a collective coping mechanism, providing a sense of control in the face of adversity. Paradoxically, some flagellant movements also challenged the established order, by questioning power structures, particularly ecclesiastical ones, and by proposing alternative forms of piety and social organization. Thus, flagellation, beyond its apparent role in establishing order, reveals deep dynamics of the construction of meaning, identity, and power within human societies.

### **Religious origins of flagellation**

To discuss the religious origins of flagellation, whether in Christianity, Islam or African endogenous religions, involves going back several centuries, where this practice was part of deeply rooted spiritual rituals. Indeed, several studies report that followers of the

Christian religion considered the practice of flagellation as a method to discipline the gravediggers of the laws within the Catholic community. Thus, to discipline deviant and recalcitrant people in the Catholic community, they were inflicted with involuntary lashes in order to render justice depending on the nature of the offense. Conversely, flagellation was also used as a means of penance. It is difficult to address the religious origins of flagellation without looking at the torture used by the Romans on Jesus Christ before his crucifixion. Following the torture inflicted on Jesus Christ, biblical writings report that groups of flagellants began to form with a view to perpetuating this practice, which they now consider to be a legacy. Indeed, according to the logic of these flagellants, undergoing flagellation in memory of Jesus Christ is a way of doing penance. These are works by the Italian painter della Francesca between 1444 and 1476 that retrace this history. In these films reported by several authors, mention is made of bastinado, flagellation with a tarred rope, and thongs during slavery. However, it would be appropriate to use this information with a scholarly eye given the divergence on the periods mentioned by the reporters.

On the Islamic side, the use of the whip has also been a very ancient practice. It is still used in certain countries with a strong Islamic predominance. Among the Arabs, for example, committing adultery is an act perceived as contrary to moral and Islamic values and severely punished. To be convinced of this, one must resort to the Holy Quran, specifically Surah AN-NUR. In some of its verses, the use of flogging to punish those who commit adultery has been widely developed. In verse 2, it is written as follows: "The fornicator and the fornicator, flog them each with a hundred lashes. And do not have pity for them in the execution of the law of Allah - if you believe in Allah and the Last Day. And let a group of believers witness their punishment" (Holy Quran: 350). Also, verse 4 emphasizes that "those who make accusations against their chaste women without subsequently producing four witnesses, flog them with eighty lashes, and never accept their testimony again. And those are perverts" (ibid.: 350).

It is also because Sharia law is severely practiced among Muslims in cases of fornication that it is considered to be at odds with the classical conception of human rights. In the context of Benin's endogenous religions, flagellation has a complex and nuanced meaning, moving away from the notion of punishment or penance to become an essential element of certain initiatory and purificatory rites.

Within vodun cults, it can be part of initiatory tests, serving to demonstrate the endurance and commitment of initiates to their divinity. Flagellation is also used as a means of ritual purification, to drive out negative influences or prepare the body to receive divine blessings. In cults involving trance and possession, it can facilitate the induction of altered states of consciousness, allowing communication with the spiritual world. Some traditional healers incorporate it into their therapeutic practices, believing in its power to expel diseases.

In addition, ritualized forms of flagellation can be observed during seasonal celebrations, symbolizing renewal or community purification. These practices, varying considerably between communities and cults, have evolved over time, influenced by societal changes and modern ethical considerations.

### **Political and social origins of flagellation**

The political origins of flagellation are questionable. There are divergent points of view when it comes to situating flagellation in relation to events that have marked the history of Africa. Should the introduction of the practice of flagellation be placed before or after the slave trade, slavery or colonization? What should be remembered is that between the 12th and 19th centuries, flagellation was savagely used not as an initiatory cultural practice, but as a means of introducing the African people to another world, teaching them another language or making them respect the instructions of the master (the colonizer). It was mainly on the basis of the whip method that the African people experienced the transatlantic slave trade. Studies of history or ethnology have revealed that the whip was the colonizer's method of recourse for many centuries. Indeed, the purchase of slaves and their sending to Europe and America were the worst events that history will remember from the first contacts between Black and White. This phase of history took away from the African all his sense of humanity because of the barbarities experienced. The colonial era was also a phase of recourse to the whip and its administration to corrupt people or those who opposed the decisions of the colonizer. [Bayart \(2008\)](#) showed that the chicotte was the colonizer's powerful weapon when collecting taxes and duties during the colonial period. This method largely contributed to achieving the results sought by the colonists: indoctrinating the black man by making him despise his ancestral values in order to adopt those of the strongest. This practice has also continued to be useful to the point that after independence, African leaders in the sixties used torture to establish their

fundamentally dictatorial system of governance in order to stay in power. Generally, today, these leaders still use beatings through the defense and security forces to restore order during disturbances orchestrated by a section of the people who do not share their system of governance. The rights to protest are often prohibited in most African countries, and offenders are often subjected to physical violence. In universities too, student demonstrations are harshly reprimanded with belts from the police.

On the social level, in traditional society, beatings were used to raise awareness among deviant populations, social delinquents, in cases of theft, rape or other offences tending to disrespect customary laws. Any breach of the established social order was liable to punishment. The practice of whipping or flogging therefore dates back to ancient times. "The moral economy of flogging is therefore above all of neo-traditional inspiration, which does not exclude its roots in longer-term ethical and political repertoires in which the colonial state has embedded itself" ([Bayart, 2008](#): 144). Its anteriority or posteriority to the colonial era does not in any way remove the fact that it is still the reference method for reestablishing discipline, especially in the political world.

In African traditions, particularly in Benin, flagellation had political and social origins as a tool of social control and justice to punish deviant behavior. Traditional leaders ordered it to maintain order, and it was considered an effective deterrent. Although it evolved over time, including after colonization, this practice has endured as a legitimate mechanism of correction, illustrating the continuity of traditional values in modern governance and state structures in Benin and elsewhere in Africa.

### **Origin of flagellation among the Fulani of the Bembéréké region**

Writings on the origin of goja among the Fulani (Peulani) of Bembéréké have escaped history, ethnology or anthropology, due to lack of documentation. No trace of writings exists attempting to evoke the source of this initiatory practice. This leads to resorting to oral tradition in order to understand the version of those who still believe they have information. Here again, the absence of griots capable of tracing the origin of the practice arises. However, the Peulh community of the Bembéréké region has inherited cultural practices that they try to preserve even if they undergo transformations due to the

evolution of time. This lack of writings to prove the origins of goja led Nakou and Abalot (2000) to argue that the origin of flagellation among the Peulh is questionable. The version given on the history of flagellation among the Peulh of Bembéréké states that this practice was born from a deep reflection of two young Peulh who, seeing themselves in extreme poverty, wanted to draw the attention of the community to them. Thus, in the market place, they wanted to enhance their value by measuring their strength and courage.

The accounts of our respondents report that after defining the rules and principles of the practice, these young people considered the number of whip lashes and the type of whip that should be used. Dressed in palmyra leaves from the hip to the lower limbs, they entered the crowd dancing. The first stopped with both arms raised upwards, his torso exposed and was whipped by the second who, in turn, did the same thing. They then gave each other three whip lashes in a rotating manner. This spectacle impressed the crowd who cheered them and praised their courage. To imitate them, the young people began to whip each other to amuse themselves and especially to measure their courage. As this practice tended to gain the support of the young people of the community, it was necessary to give it a regulatory content.

Wanting to define the origin of flagellation among the Peulh of the Bembéréké region involves revisiting the past. However, as indicated above, there are no writings that clearly and precisely trace the history of this practice in the regions where it is celebrated, even outside the borders of Benin. It is therefore appropriate to keep this version that was given to us by the wise men, veterans who have proven themselves and have incontestable reputations. It is also appropriate to approve the veracity of this version insofar as it joins the conclusions reached by Nakou and Abalot (2000: 3).

Indeed, in a study conducted by these authors in the Alibori region, another region of northern Benin, mention is made of two young people who, "feeling somewhat marginalized, began to hit each other with sticks when they returned from grazing. When questioned, they replied that they were measuring their strength and endurance". These two versions present a few differences that do not discredit either one. Although defining the history of goja is a difficult equation to solve, it is practiced in all the Peulh localities of the Bembéréké commune. Like any competition, its organization follows steps that must be respected.

### **Organization, progress and management of the practice of goja among the Peulh of the Bembéréké region**

The practice of goja, like imported sports disciplines, including football, boxing, athletics, wrestling, is governed by rules that contribute to its harmonization. It is done according to a well-defined organization.

### **Preliminaries and occasions for the practice of goja**

The preliminaries are assimilated here to all the preparations that precede the day of the whipping ceremonies. Goja being a cultural practice that contributes to measuring the strengths between adversaries, its celebration cannot come from chance. The organization of the initiatory tests of goja is planned and supervised from start to finish by the wise men of various localities. The results of our investigations reveal that it all begins when a person feels the need to invite one of his friends of the same generation to whip at a specific time and in a given place. It should be noted that the ordeal of flagellation is held on specific occasions: enthronement ceremonies of traditional Fulani chiefs (jonwuroobe). The ordeal also takes place on the occasion of weddings upon the decision of young people of the same age group (generation) to flagellate or at harvest time, during the harmattan period. The harvest period (sorghum, millet) represents an important moment for the Fulani community.

Traditionally, this is when transhumance movements were prepared. Our investigations indicate that the goja also takes place during the enthronement ceremonies of traditional Wasangari chiefs (indigenous Bariba), the two communities being culturally linked. Any organization of flagellation ceremonies is taken with the assistance of the elders. Then, according to our investigators, in the old practice, a goal (pile of earth similar to yam goals) is erected by the initiator in which a whip is planted that he asks his guest or guests of the same generation (the adversaries of circumstance) to come and pull out the day before the start of the flagellation.

This is a kind of challenge thrown at the adversary that the latter is required to take up. At this stage, colas are bought and distributed in the villages to announce the ceremony, especially to the old wise men. Nowadays, with the advent of the media, communication goes through community radios or even by phone calls or social networks. However, word of mouth remains the most appropriate channel to pass on information to the



entire community, which is mostly illiterate. An undated study conducted on the practice of soro in Cameroon reveals these means of propaganda.

For Oumarou Dalil (n.d., 205)"Generally, all the other participants, through the "telephone", are aware of the organization of a soro as soon as a marriage of this type is celebrated; however, to spare their susceptibility, friends and relatives of the young groom still take the precaution of warning them by word of mouth". If at the level of the various competitions organized throughout the world, training sessions constitute a mechanism to boost one's form in order to face one's opponent, the preparations for the flagellation reside in contact with supernatural powers. Upon confirmation of the holding of the goja, while the general staff is concerned with the success of the ceremony, the young people enter into contact with the bush to obtain bark, leaves or roots. According to the information drawn from our interviews, several objectives are pursued through this form of preparation. First, it contributes to attracting attention to oneself through the positive energy that emanates from the effects of the plants. Secondly, it aims to counter the mystical forces prepared by the adversaries. Finally, it aims to protect the body against the violence of the adversaries' whips. These leaves, roots and barks are used for various purposes: preparation of porridge, herbal teas for cleansing, amulets to cover with animal skins, antimony to pass on the eyes. In this vein, Nakou and Abalot (2000: 3) wrote: "the good or bad performance of an individual during a flagellation test is always attributed to the effectiveness of the supernatural powers that these different plants generate". Further, they hammered home that "If all these precautions are taken before the flagellation tests, it is because in the Fulani collective consciousness, physical strength and experience are not enough on their own to calm the anxiety and worry of the practitioners" (ibid.: 3). The use of supernatural powers thus aims to annihilate internal and external hemorrhages that could occur from the blows received. Wild plants therefore play an undeniable role in the practice of flagellation due to their multiple virtues. These will only cease to intervene at the end of the ceremonies. These are therefore training techniques that each actor applies as he wishes to succeed in his competition.

### **The highlights of goja**

The goja ceremonies are held in a public square, clear of any clutter and in front of a human tide in the afternoons. The actors' entry on stage is preceded by a stage where

the young actors, in the company of their various delegations, are well embellished, encouraged and called upon to take porridge prepared for the occasion. Each actor is surrounded by his family who provide him with the necessary care. Alongside them, there are young girls whose role is to control and take care of the calabashes of porridge intended for the actors. These girls provide all the necessary support to the practitioners through songs of praise, encouragement and make-up and embellishments with magical objects that can strengthen them. This porridge taken collectively by the actors testifies to the solidarity that reigns among the Peulh. The survey data show that this precious phase which is a prerequisite for entering the stage is now abandoned because of the crisis of confidence that reigns within the community. This is where the practice of goja is similar to modern sports such as wrestling, football, boxing, rugby. It has characteristics similar to those of these modern international leisure activities. At each level of practice of goja, there is its counterpart in the aforementioned sports. Its organization is similar to an international competition where supporters and spectators welcome the players in the stands. Pulaaku being the embodiment of art and beauty, the actors enter the crowd with dance steps to the sounds of tam-tams accompanied by violin and flute. It is time to go around the audience who receive their greetings, in this case the old wise men and initiated people to whom they express all respect by prostrating themselves before them. This entry into the crowd is made in the company of young girls without whom goja has no meaning. A target of the investigation confides in these terms: "women do not practice goja because they are considered a weaker sex and it is because of them that goja has its meaning. Their presence enhances the event and mobilizes enough people".

This phase is that of the let off steam of the actors who have not yet started the whip. The flip-flap, another practice in which the Fulani youth excel, dominates the podium. Like mollusks, the young people bend into small spaces, demonstrating their mastery of their bodies. The haraka, a dance to the sound of a violin accompanied by calabashes and flutes, also occupies the stage. At the end of the audience's greetings, the native detaches himself from the others and stands in the middle of the circle, his bust well exposed, his arms raised, waiting for his opponent who is already known. The latter joins him, touches him everywhere, pretends to strike but holds back each time. All these antics aim to gauge the courage of the opponent and explore the ideal place to inflict the blows. Thus, the administration of the blows will follow

according to the rules laid down by the referees and which are known by all the actors. From the advent of Jesus Christ to the period of colonization, many are the means used to beat. Bayart (2008:138), mentions to this effect that at the time of colonization, in East Africa, in the Congo in particular, "the palmatoria, the menino de cincosolhos, a thick wooden bat, pierced with five conical holes..., the simple strap, the "tongues" cut from tires, the "palmatoire", the wooden board, the broom handle, the ruler, the shoe or the slipper" were used for beating. The particularity among goja followers is the use of young branches of the jabbi tree (*Tamarindis indica*) which is naturally tender and easy to handle without breaking. These chicottes carefully prepared and buried under the ashes to make them more tender or under the toilet pits to destroy the harmful effects of the mystical forces prepared by the actors, are given to the latter at the start of the ceremonies. A documentary study conducted by Bio (2020) showed that the practice of goja was prohibited for left-handed people. This principle takes into account the violence that characterizes this category of people and the tradition. The rules and principles that govern the organization of a goja event among the Peulh of Bembéréké highlight the different characteristic elements of the culture mentioned by Rocher (1968). According to him, culture is "a linked set of more or less formalized ways of thinking, feeling and acting which, being learned and shared by a plurality of people, serve, in a way that is both objective and symbolic, to constitute by these people a particular and distinct community" (Rocher, 1968: 111).

It is therefore a social construct of a group of individuals or a community, based on rules, principles and laws coded by the latter.

### **Goja, an initiatory test with an educational and relational vocation**

Initiatory rites in African society, particularly in Benin, are of major interest. They respond to the need for respect for cultural and religious values transmitted from one generation to another with the possibility that they may undergo modifications according to the context of the evolution of humanity. Submission to any initiatory test opens the initiate to membership in a higher circle. Not only do initiatory tests shape the personality of the initiate, but they also participate in his training in the cultural values of his society. It is a kind of apprenticeship for which the future man capable of making decisions and defending noble societal causes with active maturity is prepared. Initiation to events such

as goja thus appears as a formidable weapon used to heal wounds, the barbarities of a colonial past having left traces in African psychology, particularly the Fulani, that only a return to the cultural source could erase. It must be recognized at first glance that goja is an initiatory practice accepted and shared by the Fulani collective consciousness of the Bembéréké region. This rite, as we have emphasized earlier, takes on a multitude of dimensions: it is both culture and sport. Culture, because it allows the passage from one class to another and has a historical significance. It aims to prepare young Fulani to safeguard the values characteristic of the Pulaaku philosophy based on courage, bravery, the challenge of facing any situation regardless of its scale and seriousness. Sport, by the world it brings together, the rules that channel it and the actors who confront each other. Vieillard (1932) already noted this dual aspect by showing that the soro is an initiation rite that represents a strong symbol for the initiate and his society. It is both a "rite of passage" and embodies the "sacred". Sometimes, it also turns into "sport, entertainment, or even the exhibition of professional champions" Vieillard (1932: 85).

In the Peulh tradition of the Bembéréké region, agreeing to submit one's body to violent whippings is a form of consent. The ordeal has no binding aspect; which explains why not all Peulh youth are likely to submit to it. However, in the quest for cultural fame, each young person decides to go through this rite.

Before the changes that occurred within the Peulh community, three whippings were inflicted on each initiate at the end of each ceremony. According to the accounts of our respondents, the host, the convener of the event, opens the ball. He is the one who receives the blows of his stranger, the summoned, first. It is after them that the young people of the same generation also engage in this ordeal two by two. The first blow inflicted allows the striker to position himself well to then admit the two remaining ones. He positions himself in turn to receive three blows from his host. His inability to return the blows to his opponent refers to another goja session where he will be called upon to take revenge. For the consideration of the guest, the host saves him the third blow. However, the host raises the chicotte, pretends to give the last blow but finally lets it fall. A gesture that moves the audience who, with all their strength, applaud the actors. It is a question, by this act, of proving the uniqueness that surrounds the practice of goja, the solidarity that characterizes it. History teaches that the definition of the three knocks is not ex nihilo. It takes

into account social norms and practices that should be aligned with the goja. Each of the three knocks therefore has a precise meaning. A study by [Djodi and Ciavoella \(2013\)](#) clarified the meaning of each of these three knocks:

- the first blow is a representation of the pain felt by the actors on the day their navels were cut at birth;
- the second blow translates the pain of the ordeal of their circumcision;
- the third blow represents the pain of the struggle on the day of wearing the loincloth. The chronology of these whippings sufficiently demonstrates the meaning attributed to the initiation to goja.

Let us say that the education based on the initiation rites of a child within the community is made up of successive stages that contribute to the formation of the moral, spiritual and psychological values of the child. Already from early childhood, any damage caused by a child is punishable according to its seriousness. For example, a child who fails to take care of the calves by tying them up before the cows return in the evening is punished if these calves alert and prevent the milk from being extracted that evening. Also, any damage caused by a domestic animal supervised by a child is punished even if this punishment does not fall under coercion. These are all practices that contribute to the mental formation of the child. This proves [Guéhi \(2021: 44\)](#) right, who asserts: "whips, visible coercive objects, but also the generally harsh language that accompanies them simultaneously, are not useless. They contribute to the physical and mental consolidation of the initiate". Regarding the importance of initiatory tests, he asked: "How do initiatory rites offer the child the weapons of combat for the recovery of his society?" Before finding the answer to his own question in these terms: "It appears that the initiatory context predisposes the child to the acquisition of knowledge, natural and spiritual phenomena participate in the practical initiation of the young person by the mobilization of his psychological possibilities, source of awareness of his role within his society" (ibid.: 41).

As an initiation practice, the meaning of goja is not limited to the courage to face the blows of opponents. It has an educational scope, a vector of safeguarding and sharing a cultural philosophy linked to the type of activity practiced by the Fulani community. The practice of livestock breeding in ancient times required courage and perseverance. This activity which gives the Fulani all their dignity requires that the child be prepared to face

the challenges of transhumance, a long daily march, races sometimes caused by animals and nights in the bush that nomadism requires. Moreover, to confirm the knot, any actor who has demonstrated all the feats of bravery is rewarded by the wise men or elders. The rewards are of various nature: it can be cows or women who are offered to the valiant courageous. A good performance is synonymous with the ability to maintain a house, manage a community. The comments collected from an actor corroborate this logic: "Goja advances pulaaku. If you practice goja with honor, you win a woman. She will target you and declare all her love and subsequently choose you. If you are famous, you never lack friends wherever you go. Like this, everyone invites you to flog and this strengthens knowledge and relationships with your friends." The importance of flogging extends beyond the borders of the Fulani community and covers other neighboring communities. Holding a flogging ceremony is a moment of joy that brings together several people. During this period, resellers of all kinds take advantage of it to increase their turnover. [Bocquené \(1986: 190\)](#) agrees by saying that "the soro moves a lot of people. There are problems with accommodation and supplies for the village where it is held; This is why it can only take place in major centers."

In a broader sense, the application of the whipping method, long practiced throughout the world, helps to seek discipline, establish order or make decisions in a dictatorial manner. [Bayart \(2008\)](#) has shown that in most African countries, this method is still relevant and is presented as a means of repression par excellence. He states in this regard that "a rich documentation attests that flogging is today a banal technique of social control and repression of the population by the "clothed corps" or armed movements" [Bayart \(2008: 139\)](#). Indeed, faced with riots often orchestrated by the taking of positions by citizens linked to the poor governance of leaders in many countries, the whip is often the weapon of dispersal of protesters.

By hitting them with belts, the defense and security forces manage to dissuade troublemakers. In the school environment, the practice of whipping learners is also still in place despite national and international conventions that strongly prohibit corporal punishment in learning centers. It is used to rein in unruly students or serves as a means to get learners to memorize their lessons. The position of some educators on the issue is also the opposite of what international instruments prescribe. For them, the carrot and stick method is needed to better prepare future citizens, namely children

and young people. Which therefore excludes the abandonment of the whip in schools.

When we talk about goja as an initiation rite, some may seem to understand that it is submitted to the initiate only once. However, this logic is only that of those who are unaware of the contours of this practice. On this parameter, it is again difficult to dissociate goja from elite sports, since it is a journey that begins in adolescence and extends to the age of wearing a hat. Wearing a hat is a post-goja stage that prepares practitioners of a given age for retirement and integration into the adult world, that of wisdom and arbitration.

### **Age groups among the Peulhs of the Bembéréké region**

The practice of certain elite sports disciplines is done according to the delimitation of ages or by weight. Thus, in judo, we will speak of heavyweights, featherweights. In football, we will speak of cadets and professionals. The same principles are observed in the practice of goja in the Fulani community, which has a categorization called the principle of generations or age classes. These age classes, which are very significant in the Fulani language, give the right only to young people belonging to the same generation to flog. They vary from one geographical region to another or may be identical and vary depending on the dialects. Whether distinct or identical, these generations number fourteen classes. "All the Fulani of Benin have the same age designation. It is the number of years separating one generation from the same generation that differs from one region to another" [Djodi and Ciavolella \(2013: 13\)](#). [Nakou and Abalot \(2000\)](#) also noted among the Fulani of Alibori, the possibility for a generation to perpetually change class while maintaining its designation. According to the data from our investigations, these fourteen generations are as follows:

This table, which is read vertically and in the Fulani language, summarizes all age groups. The particularity of reading this table lies in the level of certain letters of the Fulani alphabet.

Thus, the "EE" at the end of a word is read "è" by drawing on the sound. "U" is read as in the English alphabet "ou". The letter "C" is pronounced "TCH". "NY" means "GN". Diphthongs are pronounced as written. In Fulani, they require that the pronunciation be drawn when they represent the same vowel (aa), (ee), (ii), (oo), (uu). From this table, we can see that there is,

on the one hand, an alliance of joking relationship between certain generations and, on the other hand, a relationship of birthright. This highlights the importance of certain cultural practices found among the Fulani of Bembéréké, particularly between grandfathers and grandsons. This joking alliance breaks down generational distances and causes mixing between age groups.

This is the meaning given to the word sannasaaku. Young people of each generation stay together according to their age category, socialize and help each other, always relying on the elders. Such a social practice develops the sense of sharing and transforms the community into a united family.

### **Methods and judges of determining the winners**

From the results of our investigations, the primary meaning of the practice of goja is not the search for the winner and the loser but the sharing of common cultural values accepted by the entire community. A vision that reflects the meaning that Rocher (1965) gives to culture by speaking of ways of "thinking", "feeling" and "acting". However, certain sources from our investigations note that, if we stick to its sporting aspect, all competition contributes to an ultimate goal: victory.

As a result, the result is necessarily rewarding. "The practice of goja is sanctioned by a victory even if it is not the primary objective among the Peulh. At the end, there are volunteers, young natives and wise men who give gifts to the most deserving", hammered one of our interviewees.

It is therefore worth noting a victorious aspect that aims to give the winners fame within the community. Not supporting the blows of one's opponent is a sign of cowardice not tolerated in the Peulh logic. But whether one is the winner or the loser, this does not change the order of the age groups or generations.

On the other hand, the choice of the winners is decided on the basis of the rules that govern this event. Several parameters contribute to this choice: the power of the blows whistled to the opponent, the grimaces after receiving the blows, the trembling of fear, the fall to the ground and the fainting. "After the confrontation of two actors, it is the judges, that is to say the former practitioners, with the support of the public, who determine the winner through the analysis of the behavior of the actors and the power of the blows administered to the opponent", suggested a former glory



of this practice with a smile reminding him of the highlights of his successful youth. It is at this stage that the competition of supernatural forces is requested by the actors. They greatly influence certain choices if the power of the blows admitted by one to the other is proportional and vice versa. So prepared and embellished by the magical forces cocoted from the announcement of

the event, some actors, according to the respondents, "transform"; hence the famous Fulani formula: "pihowogjalaatiwajanjargal". Some practitioners are declared winners as soon as they appear on stage through applause from the audience. Such gestures can be explained by the notoriety of the actors or the power of their unanimously recognized supernatural powers.

**Table.1** Distribution of survey targets

Order no.	Targets	Techniques used	Number
1	Resource persons/former practitioners	By reasoned choice and snowball effect	10
2	Young actors in practice	Reasoned choice and snowball	15
3	Non-practising youth	By reasoned choice	6
4	Religious authorities	Reasoned choice	4
<b>TOTAL</b>			<b>35</b>

**Table.2**

Age groups among Peulh of Bembéréké region													
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
D	B	J	K	C	D	W	F	B	D	S	N	G	E
I	U	E	E	O	O	A	I	A	A	E	Y	A	L
M	K	N	L	O	Y	A	B	M	Y	W	A	Y	E
U	K	G	L	K	U	K	I	I	M	N	K	R	W
U	I	A	I	U	U	A	I	I	A	E	I	E	N
R	R	R	R	R	R	A	R	R	A	R	I		E
E	E	E	E	E	E	R	E	E	R	E	R		E

Source: field data, December 2023

But it should be noted that this victory attributed to an actor before the confrontation can be withdrawn by the referees and the crowd if at the end of the confrontation, the said actor is unable to shake his rival with violent blows of the whip. Others, on the other hand, are recognized as brave like the best athletes in the world that the public always takes pleasure in seeing at work. They are thus undefeated wherever the practice takes place. Such actors often lack opponents to confront them; hence their name laamugoja (king of goja). It is especially at this stage that the actors attract the attention of young girls who do not delay in choosing the best by

offering them a precious object like a new loincloth, a scarf, a necklace, a ring, symbol of declaration of love. It is also the place where the old wise men declare their love to the valiant courageous by offering them gifts (an ox or a cow or a sheep or even a girl).

Such an organization of goja recalls the third characteristic of culture mentioned by [Rocher \(1968\)](#). Through this characteristic, Rocher shows that what makes culture first and foremost is that the ways of thinking, feeling and acting are accepted and shared by the entire community.

## **Goja, a practice under the influence of external pressure**

We will never cease to remember the changes that have occurred in the world following the unfortunate consequences linked to the slave trade, colonization and the two most atrocious wars that humanity has known. The events that have marked the history of Africa have led to profound changes within its civilization. The events that followed one another before the 20th century have introduced into African collective thought ways that are not authentic to its culture or its development model. The ways of thinking and acting that constitute a means of safeguarding cultural identity have undergone transformations, which gradually pushes towards acculturation. This cultural alienation has not spared any community in Africa, especially Beninese. Thus, goja, as a cultural practice, continues to suffer the consequences of a society in the midst of industrial transformation where only the most industrialized have the power to make decisions and impose the model of their development on the rest. In this context, changes in mentalities remain inevitable. By deciding to divide Africa, the colonizer erased the unity of the African people. The introduction of foreign languages, particularly English, French and Portuguese in the educational systems of the colonies very quickly swept away the national languages wrongly and wrongly described as vernacular. This disqualification sufficiently proves the depth of the devaluation of the highest cultural identity of a people that is language.

The data collected as part of this study show that nowadays, goja has taken on a much more recreational dimension. The educational component that gave it its true meaning has lost its momentum and has been replaced by relaxation and entertainment. This state of affairs, which does not please the older generations, has its source in contact with other foreign cultural practices. The results of our investigations place the responsibilities at various levels. First of all, the contact of the Fulani community with the Western world was a market where this community came out the loser. Suffice to say that the misdeeds of foreign penetration (Western and Asian) have not spared any ethnic group, even those who were not directly involved in mixing with the colonizers. The integration of the formal education system, particularly French, to the detriment of traditional education where tales and stories instilled in children the notions of respect for traditional societal norms, was seen as the main cause of the transformation of goja. As an illustration, no actor is whipped three times anymore.

The blows are now limited to two or at the very least to one. A carefully conducted documentary study in the commune of Tchaourou but undated, the aim of which is to radically transform this initiatory ordeal by eliminating the blows, corroborates this idea of negative metamorphosis that the goja is undergoing. From now on, the formal school, a vector of basic education par excellence, has led to the elimination of the notion of age groups in the Fulani community, which is also faced with the difficulties of schooling and retaining children; which proves right the actors investigated who note another salient factor: the Islamic religion.

It would be injustice to turn to the factors that lead to the gradual disappearance of the goja without mentioning the very advanced Islamization of the Fulani community of Bembéréké and even of Benin. The ideology defended by this religion is sacred. In this context, the flagellation bringing together a large crowd and exposing the bodies of the actors would be poorly perceived by the followers of this religion. Certainly, flagellation has long resisted Islam, but the current momentum of relations between the two tends towards distancing. [Bocquené \(1986: 191\)](#) already noted that "... each time a Koranic school opens, a little bit of soro disappears. It is not fitting, in fact, for a Koranic schoolboy to indulge in this game which, more than any other, is forbidden by the Holy Book." Haraamu (sin, diabolical), such is the name that the Peulh give to anything that opposes the prescriptions of the Holy Book. Our investigations revealed that the practice of goja, contrary to what is noted today, was a matter for the entire Peulh community of the northern region of Benin. Distance or lack of means of transport was not the thing that constitutes a blockage to participation in a whipping test. One of our targets states on this subject: "When we were children, our parents traveled to Kpanné on foot, sometimes without shoes, to practice goja. In our turn, we did it too, because the means of transport did not exist".

This verbatim highlights the greatness of this practice in the past of pulaaku and the place it occupied within this ethnic group. Another factor in the destructuring of goja lies in the behavior of the Fulani youth. The analysis of the older generation on the lifestyle that the young lead is very acerbic. For the people we met, the current Fulani youth have "sold the cultural identity once known for its values of nobility. The youth no longer have a compass and no longer cares about the heritage to bequeath to them. It's like this everywhere, you must know. Even on the livestock side, there is nothing left, they have eaten everything. Their worries are taking drugs and creating

problems everywhere. Today, we are the most numerous in prisons because our children no longer follow anything normal." This statement raises the trends relating to the behavioral problems of the juvenile layer within the Fulani community in the commune of Bembéréké. Indeed, the changes that have occurred within the culture of this ethnic group have introduced the seeds of delinquency that have led to the rout of the youth.

The facts are obvious and demonstrate the ignominious acts in which this youth is steeped: armed robbery, alcoholism, drugs, rape. A shift in customs and habits that suggests a dark future for the goja. The stories from our fieldwork report that to escape the violence of the blows, some actors sign a "non-powerful blows pact" before entering the scene. The players must define the degree of power of the blows they will inflict on each other and that they will be able to contain.

Still faced with the decline of this initiatory practice, very few young actors devote their time to the preparation of mystical forces, which, it must be remembered, were an enriching element of the moments of the celebration of the goja tests. Rules of the game have been modified at the will of the actors. We are thus witnessing the destructuring within the organization; which does not allow us to glimpse the true face of the goja. According to the old generation, the youth is no longer interested in the preservation and perpetuation of cultural riches.

In fact, the practices that today replace the occult forces are drugs, alcohol, cigarettes as attested by a wise man, a former practitioner. "Today, young Fulani indulge in the consumption of dissolution while it is intended to glue bicycles and motorcycles. We had never experienced that. The prohibitions of yesterday have become the values of today. Renown is no longer sought by the Fulani youth. Thefts and robberies are the characteristic traits of our young children."

Faced with this evidence, mechanisms will have to be found to rebuild the cultural bases of this ethnic group. There is a problem of cultural dynamism coming from a decline and which will not persist in the future. Which therefore raises questions: can the Fulani community build a development model without its own identity? The role of a culture in the development process of a community or even the industrial emergence of a nation does not need to be recalled. UNESCO (1998) already underlined the urgent need for any nation to rely on its

culture to build its development model by recalling that any development that is not based on a cultural identity base is a "growth without a soul". There is therefore an urgent need to act to maintain the stability of the beliefs and initiatory practices of the Fulani community, a guarantee of their preservation.

In summary, goja has undergone enormous changes due to multiple factors. These changes can be explained according to Rocher (1968) by the possibility that a generation has to modify and adapt a culture in relation to its evolutionary context. According to him, no aspect of culture is inherited "biologically". It is therefore revealed as a social construct that each person can incorporate to give it meaning through supervision, through laws, ritual formulas, rules (ibid.).

### **Strategies for Preserving and Revitalizing Goja: Towards A Sustainable Perpetuation of the Practice in Bembereke**

#### **Actions recommended by the people surveyed**

Since culture is a social construct, any policy that devotes its emergence must work towards the development of its people in order to perpetuate the values it carries. This is the path to follow in order to claim the preservation of cultural heritage, since culture will only have historical significance when it remains profitable for its people. And for it to fulfill this function, it should be oriented towards dimensions that are beneficial to the people.

In assessing the interest of goja for the Fulani community, it becomes essential to undertake measures to make this initiation rite a vector of development and a parameter for defining the identity of the ethnic group. To do this, it will be necessary to act on both the individual and collective levels. This promises to be a difficult task but of absolute priority. According to the people who agreed to our interview, "it would be difficult to find a consensus, ways and means around the practice of goja so that it remains what it was in the past". However, some recognize the importance of laying the foundations for awareness-raising through channels that are conducive to the community. The community must invest itself through different strategies, to make young people aware of the danger they are running with the disappearance of goja. In the ranks of the older generation, many believe that the responsibilities fall more on young people. One of them therefore suggests that "to prevent the disappearance of goja, we have

nothing to say. It is the young people themselves who must agree to revive the practice. The old people had the privilege of asking for the practice of goja if they wanted to. Now, if you do it, you will be the author of the disappointments, because the young people end up insulting each other and even hitting and hurting each other." However, strong in the wisdom of the elders, they are available to support the actions of the young people. In this wake, another affirms: "we will never stop advising them even if they do not listen to us." For their part, the young people believe that maintaining the balance of the Fulani community requires their awareness through the reintegration of goja into their cultural identity by returning to its true meaning but by introducing dimensions likely to evolve this intangible cultural heritage and maintain it in contact with other cultures. However, it would be difficult to hope for a bright future especially since the language of the youth itself is not reassuring. These words from one of them speak volumes: "It's true, we have our share of responsibility. But we know what we are doing. There are not many of us who practice goja today. Now, what are we going to do to interest others in the practice? That's our problem. Some go to school; others learn the Koran. It's difficult to talk about it. However, we will find ways to attract the majority. We will try."

### **Mechanisms to be put in place for the preservation of goja and its sustainability for future generations in the municipality of Bembéréké**

In view of the transformations that have occurred within the Pulaaku culture in its entirety, the search for solutions at various levels is becoming imminent. We must start from this decline of goja to begin the search for solutions to all the cultural dimensions of the Fulani community. Such an approach could revive most of the cultural practices unknown to children. Faced with the current global configuration where everyone seeks to assert their identity by imposing their language on others, pulaaku would benefit from promoting its cultural strengths which are already tending to become globalized. This is evidenced by the program of the newspaper spoken in Peulh on Radio France Internationale (RFI). This progress is revealed as a motivating factor which pushes for the media coverage of everything related to this community. The return to ancestral values could also be presented as an alternative to the fight against the evils with which Peulh youth are associated: armed robbery, terrorism, early and forced marriages, exploitation of child labor, moral misery. To do this, actions aimed at revitalizing goja must be carried

out at four levels: with parents, young people, the local community and the Nonsina FM Community Radio of Bembéréké.

### **Towards parents (former practitioners)**

To safeguard goja and ensure its transmission to future generations, parents must teach the importance of this value to children through bedtime stories as in the past. Parents, elders and former practitioners should also think about redefining the practice of goja by implementing a mechanism that contributes to reducing the violence of the blows and their number. They should also think about resizing the chicottes used as whips by reducing their size. This action aims to avoid violating the provisions of national and international legal instruments that prohibit physical, human and degrading violence. One of the provisions is that of Article 5 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights which stipulates that "all forms of exploitation and degradation of man, in particular slavery, trafficking in persons, physical or moral torture, and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment are prohibited" (pp 45-46).

In order to bring young people to adhere to the practice of goja, parents must also make it in the form of theater without breaking with its original state of the past. Tchaourou's experiences must set a precedent and be generalized for the happiness of the community. However, it should be mentioned that the practice of goja although based on the chicotte, it is not as violent as elite sports such as wrestling, boxing, taekwondo that humanity takes the pleasure of broadcasting on television channels and which are dearly rewarded. It is not uncommon to see that during the confrontations of the actors in these sports, some lose consciousness, their limbs or even their life. Which seems to make them more diabolical than goja. Thus, the authentic character of goja can be readjusted without undergoing modifications provided that the actors consent. By anchoring it to other practices at the international level, we avoid the monotony of goja that influences the resistance of any culture. This is the place to emphasize the importance of openness to others in cultural evolution. No culture can flourish in isolation. Intercultural encounters offer opportunities for mutual enrichment, provided that otherness is approached with an open and receptive mind. By embracing diversity and engaging in constructive dialogue with other traditions, goja can not only preserve its authenticity, but also enrich and renew itself, thus ensuring its relevance and vitality in a constantly changing world.



### **For young people**

The contribution of the Fulani youth as the main actors in the initiation test of the goja is undeniable in the safeguarding of this intangible cultural heritage. For them, awareness is the first strategy. Significant psychological work will have to be carried out to restore irreproachable morality to the youth class who are losing their bearings. Teaching the values of the Fulani community will help these young people to recognize that they maintain the balance of their community, give young people a sense of responsibility, courage and predispose them to the effective management of a future life. Initiation to cultural tests such as the goja sometimes constitutes a passport to access greater responsibility in the future. In this logic, Adiaffi (1997) quoted by Guéhi (2021) confesses: "In the past, it was an obligation to be initiated if one is a candidate for the throne". In the context of this study, such a statement is not only of royal significance. It also finds its meaning in livestock farming which requires initiation. Since livestock farming is perceived as a priesthood for the Fulani community, initiation into certain values contributes to its success. It requires endurance, courage and perseverance, a sum of values that is required with the initiation rite of goja.

For young people, from an anthropological point of view, it is essential that they understand that education and culture, embodied by the initiation rite of goja, play a fundamental role in the construction of their identity and the preservation of Fulani traditions. Goja, much more than a simple custom, is a powerful vector for transmitting values, strengthening resilience in the face of contemporary challenges and preparing young people to assume future responsibilities within the community. By actively engaging in this rite, they will preserve a precious heritage while investing in their future and that of society, the community.

### **For the Nonsina FM community radio**

The use of local radio stations, such as the Nonsina FM community radio in Bembéréké, to promote goja is a crucial strategy for the Fulani community. These radios, as powerful vectors of communication in areas with high illiteracy rates, offer an ideal platform to broadcast programs in Fulfulde (Foulfouldé) on the importance of goja and the richness of Fulani culture. By multiplying these programs and targeting them particularly at young people, the community can not only preserve and transmit its traditions, but also strengthen its collective

identity. In the current context of security crisis, terrorist threat and violent extremism, where the Fulani are often unfairly stigmatized, these radio programs play a crucial role. They will help to counter prejudices, promote a positive image of the community, and position the Fulani as constructive actors in society. Thus, community radio will become a powerful tool to combat marginalization, promote social integration and cultivate a sense of belonging and cultural pride, particularly among young Fulani.

### **To the authorities of the local community of Bembéréké**

The role of the local community in the restoration of cultural values such as goja will involve the contribution of local and municipal elected officials through the organization of periodic cultural events that will be a crossroads of sharing. It will be a question of creating a cultural mix that will contribute to strengthening the social cohesion of the populations of the commune. Municipal officials must work to facilitate the cultural emergence of all components of the Peulh society without exclusion. This orientation will give Peulh cultural values the opportunity to globalize, to find through each of its sons, a "radiant and attractive" identity in the eyes of other peoples. In short, many challenges must be met to encourage young people to engage in the practice of goja in order to safeguard the Peulh identity. This implies the awareness of the different layers of the Peulh community and especially the involvement of the local community.

### **Conclusion**

This study of goja reveals its crucial role in the intergenerational transmission of values and the identity construction of Fulani youth. An initiatory practice rooted in Fulani history and culture, goja works to holistically prepare young people - psychological, physical and moral - by instilling in them a set of values essential to strengthening their citizenship and community belonging. Comparative research shows that flagellation, of which goja is a culturally specific variation, is an ancient practice with diverse origins, observed in many societies. This study highlights the successive transformations of goja, resulting from various factors, while retaining its fundamental social function. Faced with the challenges of acculturation, it is imperative to implement strategies for the preservation and revitalization of goja, in order to counter the cultural alienation of the Fulani community and reconnect with

its rich heritage. Education and culture, the true pillars of this process, play an essential role in the transmission of traditional knowledge and the formation of a strong Fulani identity, adapted to contemporary realities. By promoting goja through educational and cultural programs, young Fulani are given the tools to navigate between tradition and modernity, while preserving their cultural specificity. This approach emphasizes that goja, far from being a simple survival of the past, is a dynamic vector of social cohesion and cultural resilience, whose preservation and adaptation to contemporary contexts are essential to ensure the continuity and renewal of Fulani identity in a constantly changing world.

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### How to cite this article:

Hamadou Bani, Hospice Bienvenu Hounyoton, Adolphe Ahonnon, Alassane Boukary Biga and Sounon Adam Nakou. 2024. Goja, Intangible Cultural Heritage of the Peulh of Bembéréké in Benin: Issues of Preservation and Transmission of an Identity Practice. *Int.J.Curr.Res.Aca.Rev.* 12(10), 58-75.  
doi: <https://doi.org/10.20546/ijcrar.2024.1210.007>