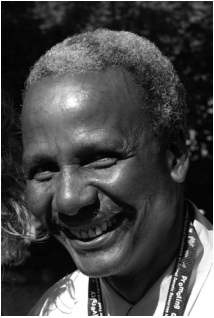


Bouréïma Dodo is an agro-pastoral producer in Niger, executive secretary of the Association for the Re-dynamisation of Livestock in Niger (AREN), a national organisation with about 36,000 members, and part of the Niger Farmers' Platform, which is linked to the Network of Farmers' and Agricultural Producers' Organisations of West Africa (ROPPA).



Rights of passage in Niger

INTERVIEW WITH BOURÉÏMA DODO

What do you produce?

I mainly rear cows. I have around 50, which in Niger is not many, but in an agro-pastoral context it's not bad, since I feed some of the grain I cultivate to the animals, while the animals produce the manure which allows me to work the land. It's a harmonious combination. I have goats and sheep as well, plus some hens for our own consumption. I also produce millet and some rice for us to eat, only giving the residues to the animals.

Are you settled in one place or are you transhumant*?

My animals are transhumant. During the dry season we have to move towards Benin, Burkina Faso and Togo to look for grazing lands. This is particularly common in my area, since all the land has been totally taken over by arable farming and there is hardly any space for animals. After we have harvested the millet, we put the animals on the land to eat the residues and to provide manure, and then we move them. I and my close family are fairly settled nowadays, because it is mainly the younger people who do the transhumance so they can put their children in school. The elders stay at home. Furthermore, as pastoralists don't make much money, we have had to diversify into other activities.

Could you give me some figures about the number of herders in Niger?

It is estimated that in 2000 there were over two million people who make a living exclusively out of herding. That is out of a population of ten

million. There are also a lot of people who combine agriculture with herding. In any case nearly all families in Niger rear something, even if it is only chickens. But the form of herding that is most characteristic of our country is transhumance.

How many different species do you have? Are they mainly local?

Most of our breeds are still local. It's only near the cities, among the ranchers, that you find foreign animals, particularly cows. Often they have to irrigate the pastures so that they survive. Of course, today we are always being told "your animals aren't productive", "you should get animals that produce more milk or meat". But we believe that an animal needs above all to be adapted to its environment, to be resistant to disease. And we have seen that many of the animals that they bring from abroad aren't adapted to our environment. As to diversity of races, we have ecological zones that have typical species. Take cows. There is one in the west of the country that is called Djéli, and in the north you find M'Bororo and l'Azaouak. And towards the east we have the Kouri with their big horns. Some of these races are also crossed. And in the Gouré region you will find camels of a different colour from those in the north. We have at least three different types of camel that are suited to the different ecological regions. We have also a variety of kinds of goats and sheep.

What are the main problems you face as a pastoralist?

The first problem we face is access to land. Now that the concept of individual property has

*Transhumance is the seasonal migration of herds because of changes in the weather. Usually pastoralists take their herds to the mountains in the summer and to the lowlands in the winter.



emerged, the equitable access to resources that we used to have is disappearing. In the old days people could put their animals on the land after harvest but now the owners of the land often refuse to release their fields. Another problem are the new laws. There are two complementary ecological areas in our country. There is the north, which is the pastoral area, where all animals go in winter because there is a lot of grass. During the hot season this land gets parched, so herders go south, to the agricultural area. But new, western-oriented legislation has been progressively introduced. So now we have two different systems, with different rationalities, facing each other: traditional law, which nearly everybody knows; and modern law. The community used to guarantee the balance between pastoralists and farmers, but now to have access to land you have to bring proof of your rights, and most of our farmers are illiterate. This new emphasis on private property makes it difficult for herders to have access to natural resources. Just a few people own most of the resources needed for pastoralism. Transhumance has become more and more difficult because the land along most of the routes has been privatised.

Today herders feel completely powerless when faced with natural disasters such as droughts. There used to be strategies that we could adopt to face such problems and survive. For example, when a drought was predicted, we could change the animals' itinerary. Now that is not possible any more because the paths are closed. And so-called "development projects" have been introduced. They overwork the land, making it fragile. This has led to the real degradation of the environment: trees have disappeared and we are losing a lot of soil. Paths do not belong to us any more. They have become risky, because at any moment herders can find themselves hemmed in, without being able to move, because all the land is privatised. It is a real catastrophe.

Are you also facing competition from imported products?

Yes, particularly from powdered milk and tinned meat. We used to sell our meat to places as far away as Côte d'Ivoire, but we face more and more competition from goods imported from Europe. Even though our meat is better quality, imported meat is cheaper, so we have lost markets.

How do you see the problem of migration?

The rural zones are becoming impoverished, so more and more young people are going to the cities in search of work. But often they can't find work, so they start stealing or getting into bad ways. It's



Herders with camel, Niger

become a serious social problem. Shanty-towns are mushrooming around the cities. Even in the city centres there are hundreds of street hawkers, all trying to earn a living. Many people have had to move to the coast or to other countries, because they just can't make ends meet.

What actions have you taken to defend your rights?

We created our organisation because we realised that, given all the challenges we face, we needed to organise ourselves to defend our rights. And we have achieved things, although there is a lot more to do. To begin with, we have gained recognition. Today in Niger it's no longer possible to pass a law that concerns herding without us being consulted. Of course, that doesn't mean that our positions are always accepted but the fact that we are consulted means that sometimes we can get the government to change its mind. The clearest example of this happened three years ago. We were involved in the process of drawing up a pastoral code, which we thought ought to guarantee herders' access to resources and, above all, to provide herders with the legal means to defend themselves. At the time, there was an absolute frenzy of privatisation and we were in danger of losing our collective lands. But, working with the government, we managed to get our collective lands legally recognised, and get it accepted that these lands could only be used by herders. It was a big step forward, but the struggle continues because there are a lot of other battles that we haven't won yet. Above all, there is the battle to protect our right to transhumance, because the government wants to settle us on the land and give up moving. We are working with other groups to get the government to let us carry on with our traditional way of life, which is so well adapted to our ecosystem, but it is a difficult struggle.



Kouri cow, Niger

