



Beautiful Feet Bringing Sweet News

By **JON BANKE**

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Outside of God's Love?

God has always had a heart for the foreigner, the stranger, those on the fringes (Exod. 23:2; Lev. 1:33–34; Jer. 22:3, ESV). To those for whom we care very little, whether forgotten and innocent (Deut. 10:18) or blatantly guilty of great evil (Dan. 4), He extends care and offers mercy. God seeks to bestow good on those we hate, such as the nation of Nineveh (Jonah) and the account of Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1–7). He recognizes their evil and calls His people to do good to them anyway (Matt. 5:43–47; Luke 6:27–36).

In West and Central African society, the Fulani people fit this description well. Their pastoralist lifestyle naturally causes them to live on the fringe, and their nomadic culture sets them distinctly apart from most proximate people groups. The actions of certain groups of the Fulani are not endearing themselves to others. Perspectives on Fulani run the full spectrum from hated enemies to useful milk sellers, from “Oh, they're not from here” to kind neighbors.

To be fair, Christians who have not had their hard-worked fields intentionally decimated by herds of cattle, or who have not seen loved ones murdered by long-time neighbors, cannot likely understand the fear and hatred engendered by a passing shepherd and his animals. Such emotions are normal responses.

Situations like these typically result in prejudiced classification of the Fulani. Like Jonah, multitudes of African followers of Jesus do not believe the Fulani worthy of the mercy and love of God or see them as incapable of coming to Jesus for salvation. If we somehow believe that anyone is unworthy of the Gospel, then we grossly misunderstand the Gospel itself. What did any of us ever do to deserve salvation (Eph. 2:8–9)? Nothing—that is the essence of grace. How can we reject someone when we ourselves are so undeserving? Jesus' parable of the unforgiving servant (Matt. 18:21–35) makes crystal clear the foolishness of such an attitude.

What Is to Be Done?

The Fulani are very frequently feared, hated, labeled a “national problem”¹ and unengaged by those called to be ambassadors of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:18–20). For years, I have heard the miserable refrain that the Fulani are “hard to reach.” These words are typically spoken by well-intended brothers and sisters who have invested very little time to listen to and get to know Fulani—those they rightly see as lost apart from the Gospel.

¹ Numerous such references and writings exist (e.g., www.vanguardngr.com/2021/02/the-fulani-problem/).

I believe that some of this hardness relates directly to the use of approaches anti-cultural to the Fulani. Sincere and mature believers from other peoples often seek in vain to engage Fulani, assuming that they are not that different from themselves. The notion that proximity equals likeness becomes an obstacle in presenting truth. The Fulani may have a semblance of the same worldview, but this is uniquely not the case.

What is to be done? Engagement and ministry strategies are useful in charting a way forward. Informed by careful research, they help us avoid past errors and present pitfalls. But a strategy is only as good as the attitudes at its foundation. Paul asserts in 1 Corinthians 13 that exceptional actions go precisely nowhere if not underpinned by love.

Borrowing from Malcolm Hunter, senior missionary and elder statesman of ministry to nomads, “the problem is in our concept and communication of what the Christian church is. To be a Muslim, all you need is a prayer mat; but to be a Christian, you have to settle down.”² Any significant movement among the Fulani will require the persistent and flexible application of our best cross-cultural principles, accomplished through “time on the mat,” listening and seeking to understand. It will take long-term commitment and sacrifice to “get inside the head” of one’s Fulani friend to see the world as she sees it and then communicate the *habaru beldum* (sweet news) in a way that makes sense to her.

I know of no single approach—no silver bullet—to reach the Fulani. Given the challenges of working with a mobile, reserved, feared, sometimes violent people, an utter dependence on God is absolutely critical. Nevertheless, a handful of underlying principles may be useful:

- **Relational Focus**—The most enduring work we can do among Fulani is to form relationships built on trust, love, and respect as a basis for anything else we do. Let us refrain from “ministering to” Fulani (or anyone, for that matter) and adopt an approach of “ministry with” them. In other terms, any person is not to be an object of ministry, but one worthy of

knowing and befriending. This is especially true if the person is not interested in the Gospel.

Further, whether collaborating in ministry with a Fulani believer or engaging with a non-Christian Fulani, both can be seen as “ministry with,” as the latter informs and improves the worker’s communication. Simultaneously, the non-Christian is increasingly exposed to the humility of Christ in one of His followers and his inherent value as a child of God.

- **Humility**—More than one Fulani leader has stated clearly that outsiders (of any color) coming into their camps/villages with an attitude of helping “these poor people” will be neither truly trusted nor accepted. This remains true in spite of a gracious welcome. A Fulani proverb states that “your visitor is your god,” inherent to their own social code, requiring gracious, generous hospitality. The unsuspecting visitor may feel he has entered in more deeply than he truly has. The Fulani hold humility in high regard.
- **Learn Fulfulde**—For practical reasons, Fulani almost always use (outside of their own community) the dominant language of the area in which they live. Yet, it is extremely rare for a non-Fulani to speak Fulfulde. As a result, it is very tempting for workers among Fulani to use the lingua franca. (“I don’t have to learn another language since the Fulani in my area already speak Hausa.”)

² Hunter, Malcolm. November-December 1989/December 1990 “Tracking the Gospel Among the Nomadic Pastoralists” *World Evangelization*.

Yet, when a non-Fulani makes the sacrifice of time and energy to learn Fulfulde, it speaks powerfully to Fulani. They recognize that one must care deeply for the Fulani to learn their language.

- **Learn from them**—Everything I ever learned about Fulani I learned from Fulani. It may seem simpler to rely on information about Fulani from fellow workers, but the best understanding comes through direct experience and appropriate questions and verification.

Ministry With

The sheer magnitude of the Fulani people (estimates run as high as 50 million) compared to the minuscule percentage (less than 1%)³ believed to be Jesus followers underscores the great need for Gospel work to advance and be strengthened among the Fulani. This massive nation remains unreached by any standard.

While Western missionaries can still contribute and invest, outreach and the spiritual growth of the Fulani Church cannot (nor need not) depend on Western endeavor. A powerful force for missions exists and is growing within the Fulani Church. The participation of these brothers and sisters is critical for the overall task. God is also bringing forward key leaders for Himself from among the Fulani. A number of highly mature and wise leaders are scattered across the region.

³ This figure is admittedly an estimation, as hard numbers are not available for a variety of reasons.

Engaging with, listening to, learning from, and collaborating with these men and women are essential to ensure relevance and sustainability in ministry approaches. Successful engagement will recognize that many Fulani Christian workers lack the means to advance this work. Consequently, adequate attention needs to be given to developing creative approaches and tools to equip these workers, being careful to acknowledge and incorporate Fulani cultural values.

Relevant training and wise assistance from external partners can be fruitful contributions and will be particularly enduring if the principles mentioned above are carefully applied.

Additionally, the non-Fulani African Church in regions where Fulani are found has a significant role to play in bringing Jesus to the Fulani. But faced with the unfortunate reputation of the Fulani for religious radicalism and violence, the Church fears and frequently hates the Fulani. Addressing and correcting this dynamic depends foremost on the work of the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, advocacy for Fulani by those who know them and whom they trust can create understanding and encourage sincere engagement of Fulani neighbors. Mobilization of the West African Church is a task whose time has come.

What if?

It is widely known that the Fulani, particularly under the Fulani Muslim cleric Usman dan Fodio, spread Islam across much of Nigeria and portions of Niger during a period generally equivalent to the 19th century.⁴ As is often the case, Islam was spread by the sword—a jihad.

A long-held vision sees the Fulani reversing history, acting as a wind that carries the *habaru beldum* across the Sahel region. What if God moved mightily among Fulani across West and Central Africa? What if, instead of being met with fear and hatred, the Fulani were shown unconditional, sacrificial love by Christians? 

⁴ Johnston, H.A.S. 1967 *The Fulani Empire of Sokoto*. London. Ibadan. Nairobi: Oxford University Press.