

Mission impossible?

Rachel van Veen, *April 2007*

It is hot and dusty and once again I find myself stuck in traffic. It is rather uncomfortable sitting squashed between my husband and a rather large African lady. There is a goat in the rear which keeps peering over my shoulder. He has that look in his eyes which says 'I'm going to start chewing your hair!' The taxi that we are all travelling in has just ground to a halt as a [Fulani](#) herder tries to drive his cows across the road. It is the end of another long day of language study. I am tired, hot, dirty and I ask myself once more 'what am I doing here?'. . .



I arrived in Niger, West Africa in January 2004. I joined a development programme, where we tried in vain to move Niger from the bottom of the UN's league table for the world's least developed countries. In October 2005 I married Sjoerd and relocated to Niamey — the hottest capital city in the world. We now work together in church planting among the Fulani of West Niger. Hudson Taylor once said that there are three stages to any great work of God. First it is impossible, then it is hard and finally it is done. We have many plans and high hope of seeing a great work of God but as yet we seem to be stuck in the 'impossible' phase! We often find ourselves asking the question 'how will these people ever become Christians?'

The Fulani are a nomadic people group spread across Africa from Senegal to Cameroon. 99.9% of the Fulani are Muslim. "To be Fulani is to be Muslim". The Fulani first came into contact with Islam in West Africa and proceeded to spread the religion as they travelled across the Sahel. The Fulani are very proud of their Islamic heritage. They are also very proud of their cattle for whom they live and move. However, in recent years famine and drought have changed the way of life for many and forced some to settle in cities and find an alternative way of living. Until recently the Western Fulani of Niger were a totally unreached people group. But now, with Fulani settling in cities like Niamey they are coming into contact with the gospel.

In an attempt to reach the Fulani we are learning their language and trying to gain an understanding of their culture. The Fulani are governed by a code of behaviour known as Pulaaku. Pulaaku demands the mastery of human needs. Therefore hunger, thirst, pain, grief and affection are all emotions that must be ruthlessly controlled. Shame also has a huge role to play in the Fulani culture as it must be avoided at all costs. The family's honour comes first. It is a very serious thing to bring shame on the family. The Fulani are a proud people who long to be praised and will even go into debt in order to pay professional 'flatterers!' The more we peer into their culture the more we realise what a huge transformation must take place for Fulani to become Christians. How will they ever 'hunger and thirst for righteousness'(Matt 5:6) or 'love the Lord with all their heart' (Mark 12:30) when all emotions must be mastered? How will a Fulani ever leave his father and mother and follow Jesus (Matt 10:37), when family is everything to them? How can a Fulani ever turn his back on Islam when it will bring such shame on the family? How can a Fulani ever humble himself in the sight of the Lord, (1 Peter 5:6) when it is so important to be proud? How will we ever reach these people with the gospel? Will they ever be attracted to Jesus, who lived in poverty, was mocked, showed emotion and finally died a humiliating death on a cross?

Reaching the Fulani with the gospel really does seem like mission impossible. However as someone once wrote 'let us be more impressed with the greatness of God than the size of the task'. The task of reaching the Fulani with the gospel is huge and yet our God is bigger! We need to lift our eyes from the difficulties around us, to our great God who is able. We need to believe his Word when it says that he has 'purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation' (Rev 5:9). For with Him nothing is impossible (Luke 1:37).

Much is being written today about Church planting methods; How many hours a day to spend in prayer, how large a bible study group should be, which stories to tell and in which order. It is all good stuff, written by wise and experienced people. However if we were to sum up our 'method' then we would turn to the example of Churchill who famously said 'never, never give up!!'

So we keep on keeping on. Learning the language, understanding the culture, praying for God to intervene and spending time with the Fulani. When I look at the life of Jesus to see if he followed any method, I find that he just 'hung out' with people. He was in their homes, in their synagogues, on their streets and at their parties. He loved them, he met their needs and he taught them the Word of God. Over the past few months as we have 'hung out' on the market, making friends and practising our language, God has begun to open doors. We have spent many afternoons, sat on a prayer mat behind the petrol station, answering 'Mr Tamoil's' questions. He is a middle aged man who called us over one day and asked for a bible because he wanted to compare Islam and Christianity. He works as a night guard and spends his time reading the bible and writing down questions for us. God seems to be at work. We have another friend Mohammad who had a nasty abscess on his arm. Adhering to 'Pulaaku' he did not want to admit any pain or weakness so he hid it away until his arm was almost dropping off! Traditional medicine failed to work and finally he asked us if we knew how to help him. We were able to teach him how to clean it and which antibiotics to take and after hard work and much prayer his arm is finally healed.

A Church full of Fulani believers still seems like Mission impossible, but at the end of the day when we're tired, hot and stuck in another traffic jam we need to remind ourselves that salvation is a work of God. We are here because God called us here. We are in partnership with him and thankfully he is able to open the doors and to do immeasurably more than we could ask or imagine!

0 comments

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Urgent Prayer Need

Bingham Academy in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, urgently needs a [French teacher](#) to join their staff team in August. Pray that God will provide the right person to meet this need.