

**TABBASTAKA: FROM CULTURAL IDENTITY TO SOCIAL COHESION: A CASE STUDY OF SOME WEST AFRICAN COMMUNITIES.**

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**ABSTRACT:** *Researches and writers like Jean-Claude Abbric (1978), Mariko Keletegui (1990), Jean-Godefroy Bidima (2003), and Adamou Barké (2006/2008), Georges Dorlian (2007) have discussed the issue of Tabbastaka or its aspects either as social representations, social structural identity, fictional identity, alliances and relatives' identity, or jesting kinship as a social factor of integration.*

*Tabbastaka is the Hausa appropriate word which defines cousinage à plaisanterie or joking cousinhood. It has different spelling depending on languages and ethnical groups as mentioned by the Nigerienne Adamou Barké (2008):*

*Tabbastaka in Hausa; Bassetarey in Zarma-Songhaï; Dendiragu in Fulani; Taboubza in Tamashek; Tchindi in Gourmantche; N'gui en Kanuri; Al'muzahatu Bil'ukhuati in Arabe; values system translated in French in terms of cousinhood Joking or jesting kinship. It is a system of values which links in a network of bi-Lateral relations local ethnical communities as crossed cousins... (284).*

*Tabbastaka by definition is the use of these bilateral relations in jokes. Joke as something said or done to amuse people and cause laughter, especially a funny story or amusing trick. The objectives in this paper is not to come back to what the above cited researchers have done but, to develop the impact of Tabbastaka on the West African communities in term of social cohesion especially, Gobirawa and Yoruba; Gobirawa and Katsinawa; Gobirawa and Daurawa; Gobirawa and Zamfarawa; Gobirawa and Kabawa; Gobirawa and Zarma/Songhaï; Fulani and Kanuri; Fulani and Arawa/Gubawa, just to limit myself to these binomial or mates. Through effective illustrations I will show how Tabbastaka influences these communities' relations among them up to the point that they no longer fight each other for lands, pasture areas or wells and live hand in hand in harmony.*

**KEY WORDS:** TABBASTAKA, JOKING COUSINHOOD OR JESTING KINSHIP, SOCIAL COHISION, WEST AFRICAN COMMUNITIES.

## **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

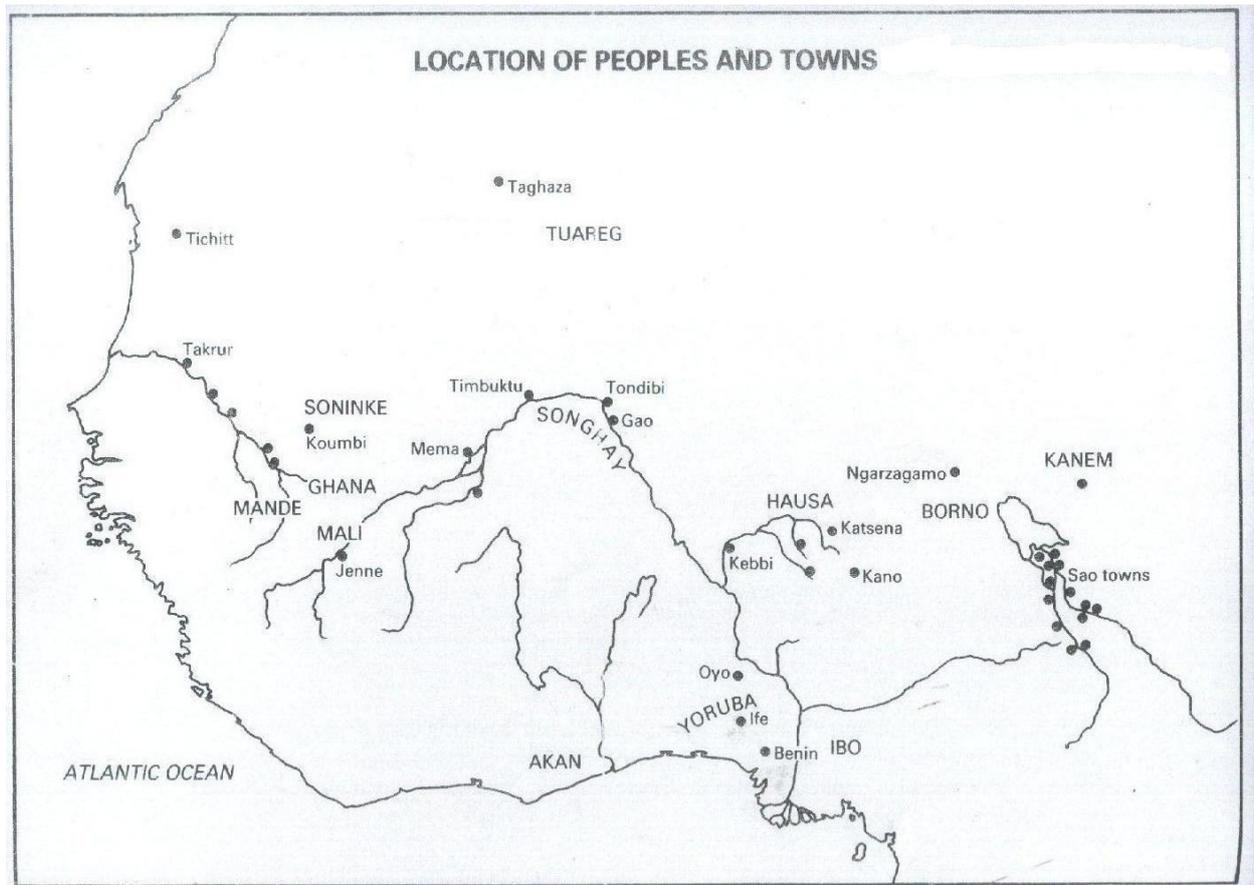
Joking cousinhood has its roots from history. According to the Nigerienne historian Pr. Djibo Hamani (2009)<sup>1</sup> *Tabbastaka- "cousinage à plaisanterie"* in French has started with African communities which have lived together or have shared the same area around the sixteenth century. He has given some three examples: (1) The Zarma-Songhaï who lived with the Gobirawa and the Touareg in the Aïr valley;(2) The Adarawa and the Agadassawa who are descendent of junior and senior brothers since the reign of Sultan Agba in 1720;(3) The Arawa and the Adarawa who had originally a link of marriage. In fact, in the old days their two chiefs had got marriage in both ethnical groups.

According to another Nigérienne historian Dr. Zoumari Issa (2009)<sup>2</sup> the joking cousinhood between the Zarma and the Songhaï dated to the reign of Askia Mohamed and Alpha Mamoudou.

These two Zarma and Songhaï chiefs organized the pilgrimage to Mecca together. Since that day the descendents of the two communities started to joke. And the descendents of Askia Mohamed are nicknamed *Wazi*.

The community in Jean-Godfroy Bidima's mind (2003) is conceived at the same time as a property which adds itself to the nature of subjects and as a substance produced by their union. The community refers to a top, a property that we preserve or to an essence that we can lose and regain. The feeling of behaving establishes the notion of community and appropriation modes of this community constitute what is called the quest of identity<sup>3</sup>.

If we consider this notion of community and the historical location of peoples and towns in West Africa, we will clearly understand the secular relations existing between these specific populations. The *map 1* below is illustrative.



**Map 1:** Location of peoples and towns.

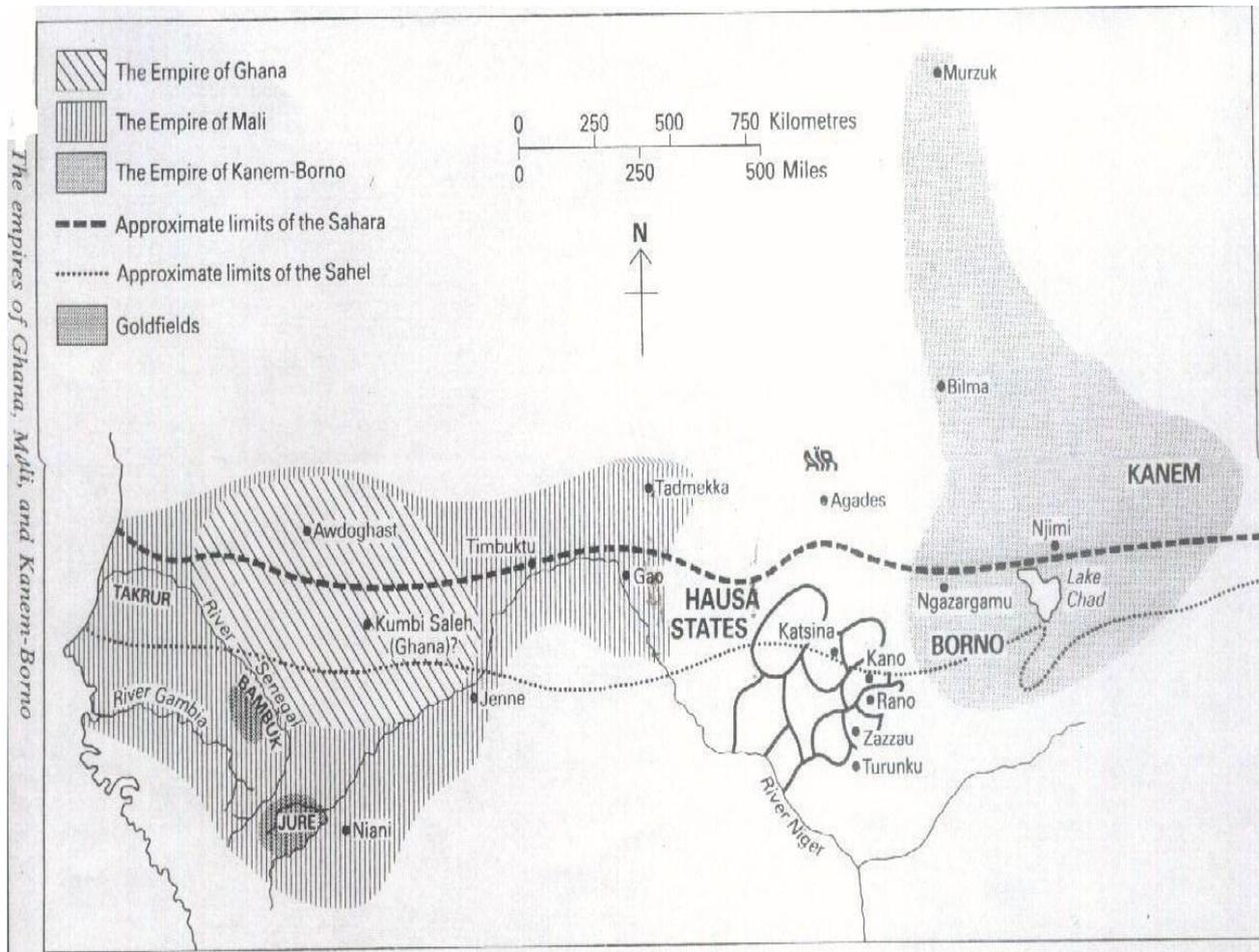
The above recall is useful in the understanding of the origin of *Tabbastaka* or joking cousinhood. In Niger it has a deep and rooted origin. It consists for one ethnical group to joke with another ethnical group. All jokes are allowed between the concerned groups. The jokers must never get angry. They have to accept and support. Each African people have its own history. John Mbiti (1969), for example, stated that conflicts in recent years in Africa are “motivated or influenced by ethnic differences or tribal interests” (100). This assertion can find its solution in the development of *Tabbastaka* as we will see it later. Before than let us go back again to African prehistoric populations.

Solanke (1982), talking about the international African migrations and the growth of cultures, affirmed that “the spread of iron technology throughout Africa was of crucial importance in the development of cultures” (14). Apart this, as he has also notified, “the desiccation and steady expansion of the Sahara were responsible for the migration of food producers and pastoralists southward into the western Sudan from about the

end of the second millennium B.C...” (17). that migration can explain the present location of West African communities, their social link and also the zonal character of *Tabbastaka*. “Old Ghana grew in the region which is now part of the modern states of Mali...its first rulers were migrants from the north who settled among the Soninke people living in the area...” (loc.Cit.). “The old Kanem Empire grew and developed [also] out of the intermingling of peoples across the heartland of Africa between the Nile and the Niger... The Hausa states of Katsina, Kano, Zaria and Gobir before the mid- fifteenth century...share trade arising at the southern ends of the Saharan caravan routes...Nineteenth century jihads of Uthman Dan- Fodio gathered them into the vast Fulani-Hausa Empire... The non- Islamic states of the southern forests- Oyo, Benin, Dahomey, and Asante- were the products of similar historical factors. The forest had effectively halted the southward spread of the savannah empires, but cultural influences and ideas continued to filter down” (20). In sum, all these cited West African communities constituted areas where *Tabbastaka* has a role to play. With the following *map2*, we

can have an idea of the enumerated empires and the approximate limits of the Sahara and the Sahel because joking cousinhood is mainly taking place in these areas.

**Map2:** The Empires of Ghana, Mali, and Kanem- Borno.



Political leaders and Rulers have to do their best in order to strengthen *Tabbastaka* for a better social cohesion.

### **RULERS AND *TABBASTAKA***

By rulers understand all officials and traditional chiefs in charge of administering people. They all agree that *Tabbastaka* is a means of social cohesion; But how to translate it into a fruitful means of mutual comprehensive tool? During the first Nigerienne President's regime (Diori Hamani) he used to settle social incomprehension through the joking cousinhood; As soon as a conflict broke out in an area, he automatically sent their joking cousinhood as a

scapegoat to solve the matter; Most of the time the mediator succeeded in settling the problem.

Even the traditional rulers use the strategy to keep social cohesion among persons under their administration. The example of a primary school teacher in one of Maradi area is illustrative. The so-called teacher, a badawrayi has been charged for having a love affair with the wife of a bagobiri who is his joking cousinhood; once in front of the traditional chief-who is also a bagobiri, the protagonists have told what has happened. In order to settle the matter, the chief said: "Is it true

bagobiri that your wife is a bagobira? You headmaster is it true that you are a badawrayi? Ok since both of you answer positively, there is no judgement, you headmaster consider as if you have made sex with your own wife. You are free, go to your work". The audience applauded, everybody burst into laugh. Instead of going to his office, the headmaster ashamed went directly to Maradi and asked for a new post.

Another example is that of a village populated by some Zamfarawa in a local government. They refuse to pay their annual taxes. Many chairmen of their local government have tried in vain to collect their taxes. When a bagobiri was posted in their area as the chairman of the local government, he went to the village with the total amount that they are supposed to pay. When all the zanfarawa are gathered, the chairman started to speak: "I am your new chairman, I have heard that you are extremely poor that you cannot pay you taxes; That is why I bring the necessary amount to pay all your taxes since you are my *slaves*; In compensation I will take five of your best women." Straight forward these villagers understood that they are in front of their joking cousinhood and decided to pay their taxes on the spot and even the arrears.

The above examples are used to support that joking cousinhood is a real way of social linkage especially in areas populated by communities linked by *Tabbastaka*.

### INTER-ETHNICAL MARRIAGE

The inter-ethnic marriage is a marriage between persons belonging to different ethnic groups. In West African communities people traditionally refuse inter-ethnic marriage. They think that it is a way of losing certain traditional values. But most of the time they are bound to accept it because of the influence of the *tabbastaka*. A *Bagobiri*- a man from *Gobir*- can ask for a *Zarma/Songhai*, a *Badawraya*- a woman from *Dawra*- or a *Bayarraba*'s- a woman belonging to the *Yoruba* tribe- hand in term of marriage; and these ethnic groups will hardly refuse their daughters' hands to a joking cousinhood because they think they are linked by a secular and historical rope. Niger Republic

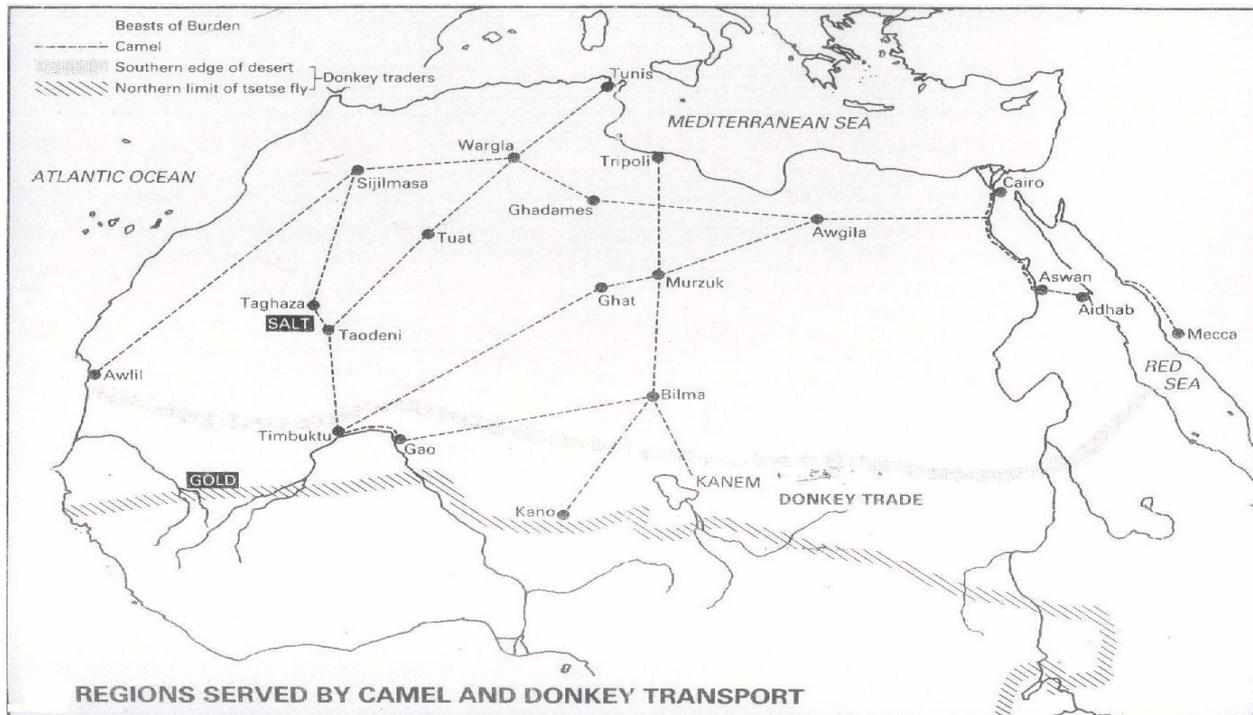
Government is right to develop joking cousinhood. But the actors should put an accent on the cultural phenomenon as a means of peace making and social cohesion, not as an enjoyment route through the art for art sake, where young women and men are gathered a whole week dancing and singing without any fruitful impact or income for the development of African traditions. My comprehension of the *Tabbastaka* week of Niger Republic is a cultural meeting where important resolutions will be taken in order to render them useful tools of development. I am thinking about how to use *Tabbastaka* in the settlement of inter- communities conflicts such as the Hutu/ Tutsi disagreement in Rwanda and Burundi; or the recent trouble in Plateau State(Federal Republic of Nigeria) between Hausa- Fulani and the others. Unfortunately the riot turns into the eternal problem of religion (Islam and Christianity). With this example I want people understand that with inter- ethnic marriage, inter- tribal war can be resolved because step by step most of the communities will be directly or indirectly linked by the wedding rope. And at the end you can no longer fight your in- laws. That is the case in Niger Republic where the majority of the tribes have marriage relationship. Even if you take the so- called Tuareg rebellion, it is not lead exclusively by these Tuareg. There are also persons from other races. And they are claiming for more social justice and equality.

In sum, the inter-ethnic marriage through *Tabbastaka* is helpful and useful in the "eradication" of inter- communities oppositions since we know that commercial transactions are beyond boundaries as we will see it in the inter-community transactions.

### INTER-COMMUNITY TRANSACTIONS

Through *Tabbastaka* many West African communities established trade relationships. Bobo Dioulasso (Burkina-Fasso) is an edifiant example with the colanuts trade; so is Bilma (Niger) with salt; Kano (Nigeria) with cothes; Ghana with gold; etc. With map 3 we can have an idea of the transactions.

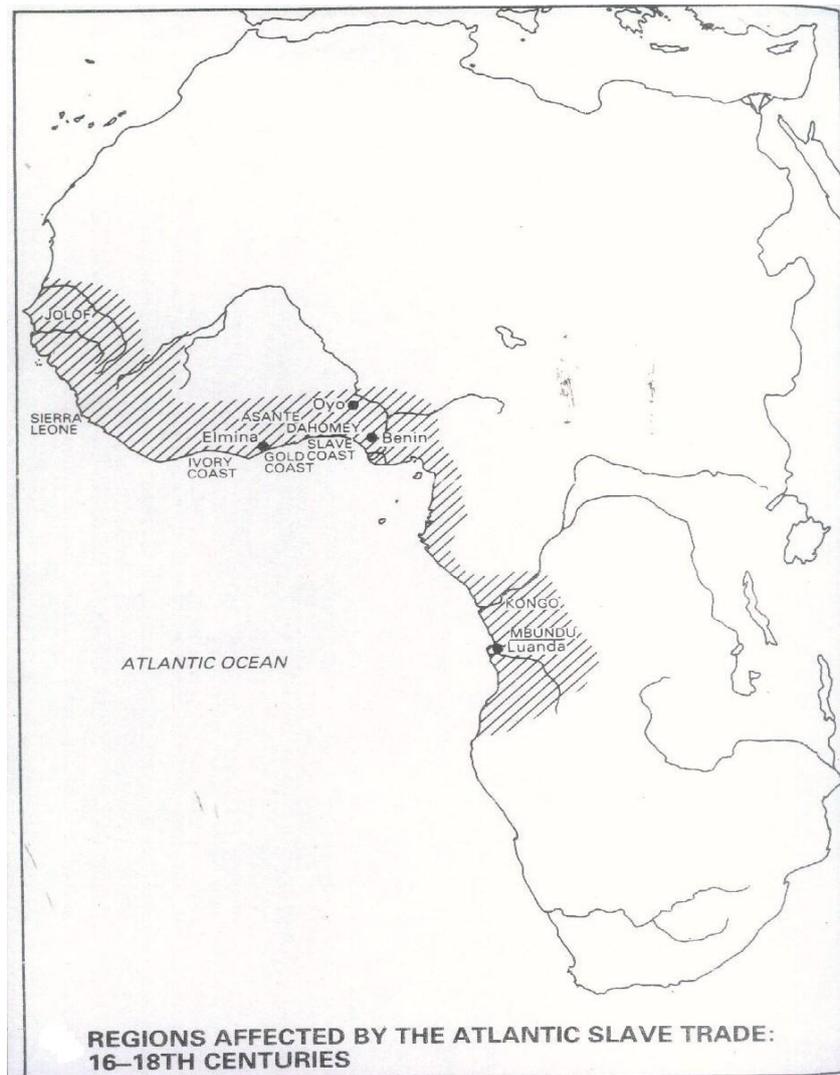
**Map 3:** Regions served by camel and donkey traders.



In the old days in Africa most of the transactions were done by means of donkey and camel. Traders had specific roads which linked all the places merchants were leading their activities. Since trading activities had no limit, the actors spent months from cities to cities proposing their goods. Sometimes they succeeded to get marriage with local women and to have children, creating *de facto* a social link. These *colporteurs* became a kind of *trait d'union* between communities and facilitated racial mix for a better peace-making among different ethnical groups. Through this type of regional integration, communities learn to develop parental linkage

which allows them to know and to understand each other's way of life. And step by step joking cousins' number grows for the betterment of populations. If we look at *map 3* carefully, we will notice that donkey and camel traders are located mainly in West Africa and Maghreb up to Mediterranean (Tunis, Tripoli) and Red (Cairo, Aswan, Aidhab, Mecca) Seas. In most areas where this kind of trade has existed, people succeeded to entertain a climate of friendship and brotherhood in opposition to regions affected by the Atlantic slave trade between the 16<sup>th</sup> and the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries mainly around Sierra Leon, Kongo and Mbundu-Luanda.

**Map 4:** Regions affected by the Atlantic slave trade.



In sum, trade played an important role in West African countries in the old days. It allowed regional integration and the settlement of peace among societies. Donkey and camel traders were actors of this unification. They have got children who became joking cousins to local progenitors. This relationship between donkey and camel traders reduced considerably inter- ethnic conflicts.

## CONCLUSION

*Tabbastaka* is an effective means of strengthening social cohesion. The joking cousinhood encompasses cultural values and avoids culture barriers. As a traditional heritage which reinforces national unity it will not be really benefit only if the actors in charge of conducting it, stand up and cultivate it in people's mind and populations' day to day life. A large sensitization must be done on all levels ranking from rulers, traditional chiefs, politicians, traders and all communities. Inter- ethnical weddings, regional and inter- regional trading can be encouraged for an adequate and durable peace making which is bedrock of any effective development.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> A conversation with Pr Djibo Hamani on *Tabbastaka* held on Wednesday, April 21<sup>st</sup>, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> A conversation with Dr Zoumari Issa on *Tabbastaka* on Wednesday, April 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> ...*La notion de communauté est conçue à la fois comme une substance produite par l'union de ceux- ci. La communauté renvoie...à un plein, à un bien que nous pouvions perdre et retrouver. Le sentiment d'appartenance fonde la notion de*

*communauté et les modes d'appropriation de cette communauté constituent ce qu'on appelle la quête d'identité.*

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