Dance With the Wodaabes

This widely acclaimed and visually stunning ethnographic documentary explores, from the point of view of its participants, the complex cultural significance of one of Africa’s most spectacular but frequently misunderstood and sensationalized ritual celebrations.

In the heart of the Nigerien Sahel (Azawak region), far from any urban center, thousands of Fulbe Wodaabe nomads come together every year to celebrate their cultural identity in a vast ceremonial gathering named the Geerewol. For seven days and seven nights, opposing ancestral lineages take part in a complex ritual courtship competition called the Geerewol.

Under the strict control of their elders, elaborately ornamented young men made up with traditional face paint form lines to dance and sing. At the end of each dance, the young women of the opposing lineage come forward to designate the “most beautiful” male of the group. The ceremony is a ritualization of conflict, which probably replaces ancestral feuds and wars over women from opposing clans, and enables the Wodaabe to break the ceremony in peace after mutually recognizing their cultural uniformity.

Each year, organizing the massive gathering becomes more and more difficult, due to the ongoing Sahel ecological crisis and droughts. But according to the Wodaabes, this traditional ceremony is the only opportunity for the nomadic lineages to gather and forge links despite their geographic dispersion. If the ceremony were to be stopped, it would signal to them the end of their society as a unique cultural entity.

Fearing that the tradition may die out, Ouba Hassane, 40, and his wife Kedi, 39, chose to appear on screen and relate their experiences and understanding of the ritual. The film follows as Ouba teaches his son about Wodaabe traditions, myths, and religious beliefs. The couple’s commentary, along with that of the ceremony participants (dancers, young women, those in charge of the youth, societal elders) provides viewers with deep insight into the full occasion, extending beyond the dance.

The Geerewol ritual has been the subject of several films and “studies” in the West since the 1950s. These have largely fueled a fantasy image of a ceremony in which “effeminate” men allow women the privilege of choosing male lovers for a night during a male beauty contest. Filmmaker and ethnomusicologist Sandrine Loncke, who spent ten years among the Wodaabe researching and filming, offers a compelling and powerful reframing of the events. She enables the Wodaabe themselves to decipher for us the subtext of the ritual, examining the full spectrum of gender, social, political, educational, and religious beliefs that underscore Wodaabe cultural identity and help ensure their survival.

Keenly observed, beautifully filmed, and engagingly edited, the film will richly reward viewing and inspire discussion in a wide range of courses in cultural anthropology, African studies, gender studies, and ethnomusicology. The film is subtitled in English. It was produced and directed by Prof. Sandrine Loncke, of the University of Paris 8.

90 min. Color 2012 #0184
Sale: DVD $295, Rental: DVD $95

What Reviewers Are Saying:

“This is the only film to offer in-depth Wodaabe perspectives on the striking performances of these West African herders. Sandrine Loncke’s compelling and beautiful work is unlike any other film about the Wodaabe of Niger; it provides fresh images and insightful commentary that effectively reframe common stereotypes and misunderstandings about the Wodaabe. This makes the film an invaluable resource for teaching about African Studies, cultural anthropology, performance, pastoralists, music, and dance, letting students learn directly from Wodaabe comments and stories and providing the historical and social context required to understand the performances.”
— Corinne A. Kratz, Prof. of Anthropology and African Studies, Emory Univ.

“As it moves from domestic discussions and children’s play to dramatic and beautiful performance of a central Wodaabe ritual, this wonderful film shows how song and dance can be used to shape identities and to cement relationships between groups. Focusing on a central ritual for adolescents and young men and women, the film engagingly presents different perspectives on the events by elders, women, and youths. The film reveals the Wodaabe to be thoughtful actors in a complex modern world and a shifting ecosystem. By avoiding narration, the ideas presented come from the Wodaabe themselves as the events build to the ritual’s final events. This film would be a tremendous addition to courses in socio-cultural anthropology, ethnomusicology, African studies, and ecology.”
— Anthony Seeger, Distinguished Prof. of Ethnomusicology, Emeritus, UCLA

“A superbly crafted film that educators in anthropology, ethnomusicology, African studies, and cognate disciplines will most certainly find useful for several reasons. Perhaps foremost among them is the filmmaker’s respect for the Wodaabe’s self-representation, and for the validity of multiple perspectives. The stunning camera work depicting the Geerewol dance, engages the viewer from the first scene. We slowly learn the complex meanings of the event — in sustaining lineage and choosing or changing mates, in honoring cows that sustain life, and in mediating potentially difficult social relationships in a peaceful ritual context. We are privy to the lessons of an elder explaining Wodaabe traditions to a younger man, to comments by both men and women on events as they unfold, and to family life both in their home territory and that of other lineages who meet at the ceremony. This award-winning film will be useful in our documentary filmmaking course, and in a variety of anthropology courses including gender studies.”
— Dr. Beverly Diamond, Canada Research Chair in Ethnomusicology, Memorial Univ.
Making Maasai Men: Growing Courage Toward Circumcision

This documentary explores the complex meanings of masculinity and Maasai ethnicity, and the place of circumcision and its attendant rituals in their cultural construction.

The principal events that surround and take place during the operation are shown in detail, including an actual surgery.

Important commentary is provided by David Kamapace Odeinyor, an elderly elder who discusses the experiences of Maasai boys that grow their courage until they are ready for the ultimate test of the knife. A Maasai man, he says, must be fearless and always ready to confront danger in whatever form it may present itself. Proud of his culture and its traditions, David also acknowledges that Maasai life is changing at Western cultural influences enter, desires, and practices.

This is the second in a series of ongoing films (see also: Womanhood and Circumcision: Three Maasai Women Have Their Say, Left) on contemporary culture change among the Maasai of Kenya. The film clearly demonstrates how the Maasai divide life into stages that mark the progression from child to young man to elderly male to widowed woman; she remembers her surgery and it is— we hear and watch Maasai women discuss their own feelings and experiences, without layers of scholarly interpretation and judgment. The multi-generational perspectives, and the comparisons the women make between the past and present contribute to the debate in insightful ways.” — Dorothy L. Hodgson, Assoc. Prof. of Anthropology, Rutgers Uni,

“A very much enjoyed seeing this new version of the film. This longer version makes the film even better than it was originally since it sheds additional light on some of the key issues it addresses. It is a wonderful film that provides a great deal of insight for nuanced classroom discussions of personality, identity, cultural meaning and change, and consent, and I hope many others use it as a classroom resource.” — Prof. of Psychology, Uta Bitter-Schloss Director, Department of Psychology and Public Health, Uppsala University, Washington, co-director of Female Circumcision in Africa: Culture, Controversy, and Change,

46 min. (plus 29 min. of “extras”) Color 2014 #0082

Sale: DVD $225, Rental: $95

Dakar to Port Loko: Perspectives from West Africa

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Lorang’s Way (Newly Restored, Digitally Remastered Version)

This is a misunderstanding portrait of Lorang, the head of the homestead and one of the important persons of the Turkana. Because they are relatively isolated and self-sufficient, most Turkana (including Lorang’s own son) see their way of life continuing unchanged into the future. But Lorang thinks that the Turkana need to adapt to the modern world.

Lorang’s Way is an extraordinary study of a man who has come to see his society as vulnerable and fears that the Turkana will soon find themselves isolated from the rest of the world. This film follows the story of a marriage and shows the hardships and trials that the Turkana face in their daily lives.

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The Wedding Cames

One of Lorang’s daughters, Akis, is going to marry one of his friends and age-mates, Konru. Because of the close ties between the two men everyone in the community knows, but the pressures within the two families are such that the wedding negotiations over the bridewealth become increasingly tense.

Arranging the number and type of animals to be given as bridewealth demands an intricate balance between psychology and economics. Konru must offer enough animals to please Lorang and his relations, but not so many that he appears weak or foolish, or depletes his own family’s herds.

This delightful film on the Jie of Uganda was produced by Larry Johnson and Glenn Micallef. The video documents an important Guineo-River, a ritual ceremony featuring dancing, singing, praying, and drum beating, and in which the participants of the ceremonies involve the marquis and the African elements — primarily mask and dance. The film offers a rare glimpse of the spirit of the celebration and explore its major events and aspects. The video features an explanation of the history and culture of the Masquerade and masquerade, and comes with a printed glossary of Carnival terms.

Mas Fever

This classic, widely acclaimed film on the Jie of Uganda explores life in a traditionally bridewealth dominated culture. Among the Jie, women are the main providers of cattle and carry great social weight.

To Live with Herds

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The theme of this film is in part laid in the foundation that has been maintained through the ages. Connections with the African cosmology are clearly inherent in pre-Caribbean communities that have been influenced by African traditions. The film captures this cultural energy through remarkable footage of musical performances, dance, religious manifestations, and street celebrations.

At the same time, Carnaval reflects the racial and social tensions of Brazil's heterogeneous society. At first glance there appear to be two million people chaotically mixed on the streets, but a more detailed look reveals how patterns of segregation driven by racial, social, and economic differences continue in Carnaval.

This engaging documentary examines one of the largest and most popular events in the world. The film clearly reveals the complexity of the festival. The film captures this cultural energy through remarkable footage of musical performances, dance, religious manifestations, and street celebrations.

To reinforce classroom discussions concerning the aesthetics of violence, the popular as political, and the cre-ative variety within the African Diaspora, the film will engage students and encourage analysis and discussion in a variety of classes in African and African Diaspora studies, Latin American studies, travel and tourism, and social studies. It was produced by Julie Pichet and Richard Wright.

The Toured: The Other Side of Tourism in Barbados

This provocative documentary explores the experience of tourism from the point of view of those who are “toured,” in this case on the Caribbean island of Barbados. The film examines the realities of making a living in a tourist-

The Tourist: The Other Side of Tourism in Barbados

This remarkable documentary will stimulate classroom discussion in African and Caribbean studies, cultural anthropology, Latin American studies, travel, and tourism, and social studies. It was produced by Carol Morris-Lima.

Our titles were formerly distributed by Berkeley Media and Independent Learning. The closure of that organization and the dispersal of its archives continues in Carnaval. The film clearly reveals the complexity of the festival. The film captures this cultural energy through remarkable footage of musical performances, dance, religious manifestations, and street celebrations.

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