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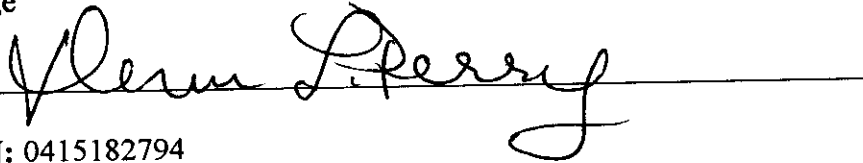
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Chapter 5

Nomadic performance – peculiar culture?

'Exotic' ethnic performances of WoDaaBe nomads of Niger

Mette Bovin

The 'exotic' WoDaaBe'

When *The WoDaaBe* (1988), a film in Granada Television's *Disappearing World* series, was shown to the public for the first time at the National Film Theatre in London, the British media wrote racy reviews about the 'exotic' WoDaaBe men, as illustrated in the following: 'an obsession with male beauty and adornment',² the WoDaaBe are 'obsessively vain and spend hours making themselves up to look (undeniably) beautiful',³ 'joining the WoDaaBe at party-time when it is the menfolk who primp, preen and express their passion for personal adornment',⁴ 'Don't ask "Who is a pretty boy then?" if you're among the WoDaaBe nomads of Africa: they all are and spend more time on their make-up than Michael Jackson!';⁵ 'A strikingly beautiful (and suitably vain) people, they eke out an existence on the West African scrub, cleaving to strong social traditions and vivid courtship, face-painted . . . priming and pouting'.⁶

It became clear to me that in our society people are 'pre-coded' to only see Africa as 'exotic'. The newspapers printed nothing about the dire condition of WoDaaBe after the catastrophic Sahelian droughts of the 1970s and 1980s had killed millions of cattle and thousands of people. All the reviews focused on the beauty of these nomads. I would have liked more balanced reviews, but western media like to meet the needs of western voyeurs in search of exotic differences. As a Danish friend of mine said before I returned to the WoDaaBe in 1985: 'Oh, are you visiting the *décadent* people from the photo in *National Geographic* magazine?'

So who are they, these West African nomads 'obsessed' with male beauty and vanity, striking and shocking the European eye? And what drives WoDaaBe to their extraordinary rituals?

I will answer these questions by arguing that cultural expressions such as ritual performances with deliberately cultivated elements which are recognised as appearing 'exotic' to outsiders are cultural weapons in a struggle for survival. The WoDaaBe are well aware that these exotic dances attract outsiders from Europe and America. I will show how the WoDaaBe deliberately internalise this exoticism in a strategy of what I have called 'cultural archaism' (Bovin 1985) to strengthen the boundaries of their own cultural identity in a region renowned for the complexity of its social structure and its environmental difficulties. In particular, this deliberate strategy of self-presentation is aimed at defining a social identity based on nomadism, in the face of pressures to settle and adopt the lifestyles of their neighbours. As in the case of the Balinese in Indonesia (cf. Hughes-Freeland, this volume) the media complicate this process of identity presentation, and outside interest becomes a resource for local identity politics. WoDaaBe men do not simply 'have' masculinity; they perform masculinity as a protest against state agendas, and intensify their 'exoticness' as a way of foregrounding their difference from sedentary, agrarian Fulani who inhabit the same region.

I call the WoDaaBe 'the nomads who cultivate beauty' (Bovin 1998a), but how do they cultivate beauty, and why do they occupy themselves so much with it? Why do especially *men* (even more than women in the same society) spend enormous amounts of time, energy and money to become pretty, handsome, beautiful, 'exotic', attractive, elegant, refined and symmetrical in poor surroundings?

People of the taboos

WoDaaBe live in the 'middle of nowhere', in the West African desert, in a hot and unpleasant climate. They belong to the greater Fulani people numbering some thirty million in all.⁸ The WoDaaBe, numbering around 125,000 (2-3 per cent of all Fulani), are a minority nomadic people.⁹ They have a tribal system with patrilineal kinship groups, patrilineal descent and virilocality. They are divided into two big 'tribes', the Deggereji and the Alijam, which are sub-divided into clans, sub-clans and extended families. WoDaaBe distinguish themselves strongly from semi-nomadic agro-pastoral Fulani and sedentary Fulani.¹⁰ Pastoral nomadism is not only a form of subsistence for them - it is an entire lifestyle. The majority, about 65,000, live in Niger, but there are also substantial populations in Nigeria, Cameroun and Chad, migrating all year round with their animals.¹¹ Although only a small

ethnic minority, the WoDaaBe travel widely over West Africa, and sometimes to Central Africa. In times of catastrophe, drought, hunger and death, many move into other countries in order to survive. It is possible to meet a few WoDaaBe in Burkina Faso, Mali, Central African Republic or in the Sudan.

WoDaaBe literally means 'The People of the Taboos'. A person is a BoDaaDo, 'a person observing *mboŋa* [taboo]'. The ethnic term WoDaaBe refers to their many taboos or forbidden things they observe. There are taboos in time, and taboos in space. There are taboos of names, and tabooed behaviour towards certain family members. They follow *laawol pulaaku*, 'The FulBe way' (Stenning 1959; Riesman 1977; Bovin 1998a), which stresses self-control or reserve, patience, and intelligence. WoDaaBe consider that sedentary urban Fulani have lost the most important parts of *pulaaku*, which only cattle- and sheep-herding nomads can maintain. This way is also the moral way, a spiritual as well as a physical 'path'. It is thought of as a straight line in space, with no side-paths, not bending or turning to the right or the left. The way should always be consistent and harmonious.

The cult of beauty

To WoDaaBe pastoral nomads, aesthetics is present the whole time, in everyday as well as ritual life. People talk a great deal about beauty. In fact WoDaaBe use the word every single day: '*boŋum, boŋum, boŋum*', 'pretty, pretty, pretty' (as in the films by Bovin and Woodhead, and Herzog).¹² The WoDaaBe say of themselves that they do not want the ugly. 'We, the WoDaaBe, dislike ugly people very strongly! It is shameful to be ugly!' A WoDaaBe proverb says 'The ugly are not forgiven.' The ideal for young men and women is much the same. They should be 'red-skinned' (light-skinned), slim and narrow, with a long narrow face and limbs, 'aristocratic' aquiline nose, thin fine lips, long, thick braided hair, have wide, beautiful eyes, wear good mascara, and be clean, though neither boys nor girls should wash their whole body too often as this makes the 'power' of bodily liquids disappear. They should smell nicely of perfume or incense. A young woman should be less tall and slim than a young man - a 'round' woman is valued more highly than a skinny one.

Young men in particular invest enormous amounts of time, energy, and money in order to live up to the ideal of male beauty. And they are allowed to use time, energy and money on making themselves beautiful,

as it is categorised as 'work', especially for young men. Young women spend less time, energy and money on their bodily appearance than their brothers and boyfriends do, but spend a lot of time embroidering clothes - for themselves, and for their favourite men.

There is hope even for the less beautiful. As the WoDaaBe say, 'To be *beautiful* is good, but to have *roggu* [charm] is *even better!*' A person who is not physically perfect can make up for it by having charm. You can increase personal charm by using magic. The use of leather-bag amulets worn around the neck, in the hair and on the skin under the clothes is common. Blue tattoos on the cheeks are known as 'charm tattoos'.

The mirror and male identity

In the bush of eastern Niger, north of Diffa town, there is less than one person per square kilometre. Most days you can walk without meeting other human beings (Bovin 1991b). Yet the first thing a young man of the WoDaaBe does in the morning is to look into his small mirror, to check and tidy up his face. He will not even go out among the cows without this morning ritual. Men put on mascara every day, in the form of kohl or antimony. They also wear jewellery and sweet perfume. They spend hours every day on their appearance, and the mirror is essential.

Apart from striving for an ideal beauty, a young WoDaaBe man should wear elegant clothes (in the right colours and latest fashion of the year), wear lots of jewellery and amulets, know the right postures of the body and move elegantly. A young WoDaaBe man has even better chances of success with women (and success in society in general) if he is a good dancer who moves correctly during all dance forms with graceful and elegant movements. If he cannot dance well, he is perhaps a good singer, which adds to the attraction of a person. A young man should also smell pleasantly of perfume or nice herbs, which he rubs on his chest, arms and neck before every performance. Charm - expressivity and charisma - is also highly valued in a young man, as are intelligence and mastery of controlled language. However, appearance and the aesthetic are central. WoDaaBe men who do not use a mirror regularly are scorned and commented on negatively. They are called lazy and not a real BoDaaDo, i.e. not a good member of the WoDaaBe.

Ethnic performance and courtship

Ethnic performance is

a public performance involving a number of ritualized (and non-ritualized) activities - such as dancing, singing, shouting, handclapping, playing music, playing games, fighting, flirting, joking, making gestures, etc. - on a single stage at a specific time by an ethnic team of actors, in front of an audience.

(Bovin 1974/5: 459)

Ethnic performances of the WoDaaBe are situations of making-up, dancing, singing, clapping, flirting and showing your best - of vanity, charm and humanness, by performers in front of an audience. This audience is often multi-ethnic in nature, and includes spectators from different ethnic groups of the region as well as Europeans and North Americans, eager to watch WoDaaBe perform. To this audience, WoDaaBe are 'exotic'. The performers know this and they play on it. They deliberately use 'strange' movements and 'cultural' outfits - but always within the 'style' of WoDaaBe material culture. Hats, feathers, clothes, shoes, jewellery and amulets should be 'WoDaaBe style' and preferably also 'à la mode' - trendy for this year's WoDaaBe style in that particular region of the Sahel.¹³

WoDaaBe themselves are often passive spectators to performances by other ethnic groups such as Kanuri, Hausa, Zerma or Tuareg, but WoDaaBe never participate in these dances or other performances. Likewise, people from other ethnic groups are not allowed to dance with WoDaaBe, and hardly ever do. Hausa-speaking peasants in Niger say of the WoDaaBe '*Babu hankali!*' ('They are not sane!'). They are believed to have a lot of *magani* (medicine and magic) and are highly feared for their powers.

There is so much involved in a WoDaaBe dance that if we were to compare it with events in Western Europe, it would comprise dance, opera, beauty contest, lovemaking or flirting, and social gathering. Some performances are very serious, others are taken more lightly by the performers and their spectators. Sometimes dance is called *fijjo* (play), but *fijjo* has several meanings: shooting arrows from a bow when you go out in the bush hunting antelope or other game; shooting arrows at an enemy, when there is a war; playing like children do; and playing games for adults: dance, or performance in general. Dance is a serious business. Performers look forward to it and fear it at

transformed and twisted. This trance dance differs from other dances. It is very expressive, and people 'let loose'. People from other ethnic groups watching *moosi* say 'It is not sane. Not safe', so the audience keeps its distance from the WoDaaBe dancers.

Moosi is sometimes done in connection with other dances, for instance the *ruume* dance. The *ruume* is the dance most often performed in eastern Niger. *Ruume* means 'spending the rainy season' and takes place ideally between July and September, which is the most fertile and happy of the eight seasons of the year. It is a lucky time, when the rains fall, giving food (grass) for the cattle and other animals. This eventually means that humans are well nourished and blessed with drinking milk every day. That is why many large gatherings take place directly after the rainy season between October and November, when there is a surplus. *Ruume* includes a lot of singing, both solo and in unison, and is a circular dance. The young men dance in the inner circle and the young women dance outside in a bigger circle, behind the men. Everybody faces the centre of the concentric circles. *Ruume* is always danced anti-clockwise, the dancers stepping to their right side. Men and women dance in the same direction, but at different speeds. The women often dance more slowly than the men, and as they hesitate in moving to the right, they have time to see many young men pass by them. This gives a better chance for each girl to make her choice. During the *ruume* every young girl can choose a young man by touching his back with a light movement of her hand. It is elegantly done while the women dance two-by-two in the outer circle. This movement signals: 'You are the most handsome and I'm choosing you as my lover.' Later the same evening, when the dancing has finished, the couple may disappear discreetly into the dark bush and spend the night together.

Male WoDaaBe performers are often mistaken for homosexuals by Europeans and North Americans. Some outsiders think they are transvestites. In reality this is not the case. Young WoDaaBe men perform for the sake of the *young women* of their own society, who are potential lovers or brides. They dress up and use their mirrors and fancy make-up in order to win, or steal, women from other WoDaaBe clans or lineages who are present in the same market place or at the same well at a particular time. The performances are therefore aimed at heterosexual courtship and marriage.

Dances and performances are also wife-stealing competitions, which encourages men to be attractive. Cousin – both patrilineal and cross-cousin – marriage is common. It is important to 'keep the women – and cattle – within the clan', reproduce and get children. The artistic

the same time. Dances are big gatherings with collective obligations. Sometimes several WoDaaBe lineages perform together, and on such occasions the famous and feared 'wife-stealing' can take place (see below).

There are several different categories of dance. They can be ranked in order of importance. The 'highest' dance is the *geerwol*, the war dance, the 'best' and 'most true' of all WoDaaBe dances and only performed by male warriors. Second in the ranking of dances is the *yauke*, the ancient magical dance. Again this is performed by men, but also involves women. It comprises a kind of 'beauty contest' in which women 'choose' the most beautiful male performer. After these two male dances come other dances like *ruume*, *bornu* and *moosi*, which are performed by both men and women and play important roles in the process of social reproduction. They are opportunities to initiate courtship and marriage, as well as to celebrate births and namings. Lowest on the ranking scale come the dances which are exclusively girls' and women's dances, the *jooyde* and *jihere*, the 'squirrel' dance. This ranking corresponds to gender hierarchy, as women are seen as 'followers' of men.

Hirride describes any dancing event or social gathering involving a group of young people. *Hirride* comes from WoDaaBe 'to wake, to spend the evening, to be (in evening time)'. 'Dance' is thus always an 'evening event', even if it takes place during the daytime.

The *worso* is the greatest ritual of the year and is often a week long. It takes place when pastures are rich and abundant, so cows are well fed and people can leave home to gather in big groups of performers and spectators. It is a feast of unity, but also involves fear of separation. It combines gathering of kin with collective celebrations of naming ceremonies and marriages during the year since the last *worso*. Often between ten and thirty kin units come together for a *worso*. They camp in a special order in space for about a week, and then they each go their own way for another year. The *worso* is also an occasion for dances performed by young people of both sexes. Circles and lines of beautiful youngsters are formed. The dances take place in the bush, in a market place, or near a well, since drinking water for all the dancers is more important than a good flat stage.

Male and female dancers are expected to have an 'inner flame' and a controlled exterior during their performances. Despite experiencing deep feelings they must control their emotions in public. This discipline and self-control is required in all except the *moosi* or 'smile' dance, so called because when dancers fall into trance their faces are

feathers and hair-pins are exhibited openly in the social gatherings. There is sometimes 'clicking' with the beads and cowrie shells hanging from the special mirrors, part of the seduction game between the sexes. The mirror, decorated with leather and beads, is used many times a day for checking one's own face and beauty. This ceremonial mirror can cost a man the price of a young cow or an ox (Bovin 1998a). Dancers also have small bottles of perfume for personal use, which can also be discreetly offered as a gift to a special lover, mistress or desired person. The eye make-up made from antimony, which can shine as silver, or the pitch-black kohl, which gives a *regard de mystère*, also attracts spectators to the rituals. Black eye make-up and black lipstick stress the whiteness of the eyes and teeth, both of which are highly valued.

Flirting between women and men often takes place during dance ceremonies. Both men and women are active and take initiatives. Young women direct sharp, scrutinising glances at the young male dancers and choose from a distance who is the most handsome among the men. Young men deliver equally scrutinising glances at all the girls present. A young man who wishes to seduce and win a young woman must never be too direct. He must develop a non-aggressive, refined language. This special poetic language is called a 'sweet tongue'. This polite conversation is an art that young men learn. The seducer talks in metaphors and in poetry. If a young man is too direct or too fast, the girl may run away and listen to a more polite suitor. After a dance performance young couples may disappear into the bush in the cool of the night. The man carries a palm-leaf mat on his shoulder, and the girl walks by his side, or after him. They go into the bush to spend the night together on his mat. Young lovers (who are often also joking partners and cousins) openly show their emotions. They can hold hands no matter how many people may see them. Once married, however, there is no public show of affection. From this time on, a reserved and controlled behaviour replaces teenage manners.

'Mr WoDaaBe', not 'Miss WoDaaBe'

Beauty contests such as 'Miss Denmark' and 'Miss Universe' are often criticised for portraying women as unintelligent sex objects. But beauty contests are not degrading in WoDaaBe society. On the contrary, here in the desert it is men, not women, who are exposed in the beauty contest. To the WoDaaBe these performances are expressions of ethnic identity, and they represent pride. To the WoDaaBe, to have beauty and to expose it to the surrounding world, to exhibit the beautiful

performances are related to the 'doubleness' of the marriage system: there is *koobgal* marriage and *regal* marriage. The first is the arranged marriage, the second is a marriage of free choice. Most WoDaaBe would like to have both a practical and a love marriage; or several of these during their lifetimes. Some people prefer the two types simultaneously, if possible, although this is easier for a man than for a woman. WoDaaBe society is one of the only societies in the world where not only men, but also women can in principle be married to two persons simultaneously. This is called *sigtibeism*, a very rare marriage form in human society. In order to win an extra wife, a man is obliged to be beautiful. He should be handsome, pretty, attractive, well-proportioned, slim, long-limbed, charming, symmetrical, perfect in body and appearance, in movements of the body, and in 'performance' – in short have *style*. He should have elegance, wakefulness, a gentleman-like quality, and be generous and unselfish.

The cult of beauty among the WoDaaBe is mainly a cult of youth. As we have seen, ugliness should be counteracted by the acquisition of charm and other virtues. Bad dancing is also socially condemned, as in the proverbs 'A clumsy dancer deserves no porridge' and 'A bad dancer is never called a brother or sister'. Nobody wishes to be close to a bad dancer. To have beauty and symmetry is necessary, but not sufficient to become a performer. Further qualifications are required. Ideally you must be a good dancer: that is an energetic and lively person. Thus a dancer should have 'scenic presence' like a good actor on a stage (Barba and Savarese 1991, Barba 1995). All young WoDaaBe men who appear in rituals are expected to be excellent dancers and clappers. They must have rhythm. During WoDaaBe dances, rhythm is majestic, and the voices are many and clear. The dancers' heads are held high, and their eyes are transformed, while they look, seek, explore, scout after beautiful young people of the opposite sex.

Body ornamentation is always symmetrical. Tattoos in particular are oriented to the vertical line in 'the middle of the face'. People say 'the middle is the best'. The ostrich feather on the hat or turban of the young male BoDaaDo is carefully placed on the axis of symmetry of his body. In the 1990s WoDaaBe men often wear one ostrich feather only, in the centre of the turban in front.¹⁴ No matter how many ostrich feathers the youngsters wear, the feathers sway gently in the evening breezes during the dance performances. All agree proudly that the ostrich feather is a clear male, phallic symbol. No shyness or shame is expressed by young men when talking about their graceful feathers. The female pendants, the cowrie shell and the hair-pin, are two female sex symbols. Ostrich

way is obtained from the power of the big long-legged bird, whose magic he must 'steal' or capture. Black lipstick for *yauke* is not just any black lipstick. Use of black powder from old radio batteries, (as in Herzog's film) for example, will not result in the same delicate vibrations of the dancer's mouth. WoDaaBe believe that those who cheat will not get the right magical result: unless the young man uses the special black 'bird lipstick' with its supernatural powers, he cannot dance the *yauke* properly.

The WoDaaBe *yauke* dancers' eyes are the most important part of the dancing body. They are used in a manner similar to that of Balinese dancers, who have a technique of widening the eyes, opening them to the maximum width and staring for some seconds before changing in direction.¹⁵ This dramatic effect is achieved by the *yauke* performing in a line in front of the young women who stand in another long line facing them. Male dancers compete for the attention of favoured girls, and their eyes, as well as focusing in space, are used expressively and to display personal charm. The formal 'jury' of three girls considers the eyes first and foremost when choosing the winner of the annual *yauke* dance. The blinking of the eyes, and the showing of the whiteness of the eyes and teeth, are the most important things to be mastered by a male dancer. The movements of the entire body, its grace and elegance, and its capacity to go up on tiptoe in the right way, are of course also important. The judges also attend carefully to the shape of the body, which ideally should be long and slim, but not skinny.

Dance is like war

WoDaaBe say 'Dance is like war!' ('*Fijjo kamma habre!*'). It is a serious matter. Male dancers are not just 'showing their beauty in a long line', as articles in popular western women's magazines state (*Elle* 1989). Performers often push their neighbouring dancers backwards in order to be seen better by spectators, as they move forward on elegant tiptoes. 'It is a war-like situation', participants have told me afterwards, 'Very tiring indeed!' One woman referred to making-up and dance as 'work' for the men of the clan.¹⁶

Yauke dancers all try to be best at impressing the young women. The women stand in a crowd at a distance. They look shy, but they are in fact active and important spectators. The special jury, or *subboyki* (the choosers) is a ritual office with fixed sets of behaviour, and is always composed of three especially beautiful and important young women who will choose not 'Miss' but 'Mr WoDaaBe' of the year. The

young body and soul, is a spiritual act, full of honour and dignity. It is the duty of a young man, if he is handsome, to participate in beauty competitions, and winning a competition gives great prestige. The names of male beauty contest winners are remembered for several generations by the WoDaaBe.

The WoDaaBe 'beauty contest' is *yauke* – 'the ancient dance', and the most 'magical' of all WoDaaBe dance forms (see Bovin and Woodhead 1988). The young male *yauke* stand in a long line facing the west as the evening sun goes down. They are aware of the girls who stand and watch them. The performers go up on tiptoe and move their ankles during the dance, forming a long male parade. They use special, very precise movements, especially of the feet and spinal column (Barba and Savarese 1991), and show the whiteness of their eyes and teeth through fantastic movements of the face.

Yauke involves magic, especially love-magic. *Yauke* performers dance with small movements of the body, very different from the styles performed by peasants of the same area. Whilst they move their energy down to the earth, the *yauke* dancers stretch upwards into the air, imitating long, slim, elegant birds leaving the ground. This style is not unlike European ballet dancers' depictions of 'flying' like a bird. The dancers' eyes are wide open, and roll at certain moments, and they move their throat and lips with particular vibrations, like those of a big crane or heron. The 'pre-expressivity' (Barba 1995) comes into being through the power to vibrate the throat and the lips. The magical power of large bush birds is obtained by shooting and roasting a white cattle egret (buff-backed heron), taking the blackened bones from the fire, grinding and mixing them with butter, and applying the resulting black substance to the lips. Thereby the young dancer obtains the power of expressivity. No BoDaaDo dancer believes he can perform the extremely difficult vibrations without the help of magic.

The *yauke* dance is for young men only, and it is about mastering vibrations of the throat and the lips to create a state of transformation. A really good *yauke* knows how to 'stand' on his feet in the special manner: on his toes, shifting balance as he moves from one foot to the other. He is elegantly 'flying' up into the air, as he tilts very slightly forwards while showing all his charm: the whites of his rolling eyes and flashing teeth. At the same time he turns his head from right to left, balancing the two directions in space. He remembers the three important rules for a young BoDaaDo: to unfold beauty, energy and charm – the scenic presence so valued in a dancer/performer. It requires magic as well as mere 'technique'. His ability to vibrate his lips in the right

jury always performs its ritual in the same manner. The three girls walk in a line, one after the other, with the girl of highest status – the daughter of a male champion, for example – in front. Girls from one clan walk slowly up to the dancers of the opposite clan and choose the winner. Then it is the turn of the opposite clan. Another three *sukboyki* girls walk ritually across the same arena and make their choice among the male dancers of their ‘enemy’ clan (competitors). As they walk they look down at the sand, but not before taking a sharp look from a distance before moving close to the line of men. They walk along the ranks of male dancers, the first girl swinging her right arm. The whole audience shouts with joy (as at a football match) as she stops in front of the most handsome man. He is the winner and gets a prestigious title.

He does not, however, sleep with the girls from the jury during the night, as is claimed in the *Elle* article. Other women’s magazines tell of love-orgies, of a real-life ‘Sodom and Gomorrah’, while journalists paint a paradise-like image of WoDaaBe nomads. These popular articles are superficial, and often factually incorrect. The beauty parades during *yaaake* dances do not usually end in sex, though some of the dancers may find partners.¹⁷

During other dances, performers are forbidden to have sex, which does not fit with the strict rules of self-discipline and of energy which must be used instead for making oneself pretty and charming. These are the more serious dances, which take from three days to a week to perform. The most famous of them is the *jeerewol* or *jeerewol*: the war dance. The dance takes the form of a competition between two opposing clans. In the Diffa region these are the Suudu-Suka’el and Jijjiru clans. Because of droughts and political conflicts in the area, the *jeerewol* was not performed from 1969 to 1993, but in the autumn of 1994 it was taken up again. The two clans alternately ‘host’ the dance, and the men from each clan take turns in ‘stealing’ women from the opposite clan. As WoDaaBe often say, ‘the women always follow after the men’.¹⁸ In eastern Niger, Suudu-Suka’el men steal women from the Jijjiru, and vice-versa. In western Niger Yamanko’en men steal wives from the Kassawsawa clan, and vice-versa. The male dancers, who must be handsome ‘warriors’ (although they do not go to actual war), appear with red-painted bodies, or red faces, necks and torsos, for the dance. Red is the colour of war and death. Dancers wear white beads over their red torsos. Each dancer wears a white ostrich feather in the turban, and carries a ceremonial ‘axe’ in the right hand. This is a light axe

with a rectangular head and wooden handle, but not one which could be used in real war, since it is too light and not at all sharp.

Performance and identity

Ethnic identity is formed, reproduced and strengthened during dance performances in Niger. Dancing is not ‘just for fun’, as is often the case in western dancing. As Hughes-Freeland, writing on Javanese performances, expresses it,

dancing is more than physical activity. . . . As in many societies, dancing is a serious activity. . . . Dancing is a visual metaphor for effective access to, and understanding of, the exemplary forms of being Javanese. (1997: 56)

This is also true for the WoDaaBe. WoDaaBeness is seriously attained through dancing. Sometimes WoDaaBe have come up to me after a dance and said ‘Now you are becoming *debbu* BoDaaDo [WoDaaBe woman]!’ It is at the heart of WoDaaBe identity to dance with other WoDaaBe.

The semi-nomadic agro-pastoral FulBe (of Niger, Nigeria, Chad and Cameroun) practise a ceremony called *sorro*. It is often held in market places, and is a test of male endurance, patience, bravery and indifference to pain. It includes a beating with a huge stick which is so severe that the young male dancers sometimes die (Bovin 1974/5, 1991a). The *sorro* is a true rite of passage, an initiation ceremony that ‘produces’ men.

The *sorro* performances are tests of enduring and surviving pain, and differ considerably from those of the nomadic WoDaaBe, which are concerned with beauty and appearance. The WoDaaBe dances and other performances are not violent but ‘soft’, although they also involve heavy competition. They are also obligatory.

Do FulBe and WoDaaBe performances have anything in common? The performances of both ethnic groups are related to courtship, betrothal, mating, marriage and wife-stealing. As such they are ‘marriage partner dances’ which offer ‘access’ to the opposite sex. They are also ethnic performances. Both groups speak the same language, Fulfulde, and know and observe the same rules of *pulaaku*, the moral code. Nomadic WoDaaBe and semi-nomadic FulBe share cultural key concepts, like *laapol pulaaku*, the Fulani way. Yet the dances

demonstrate the differences between the two. For WoDaaBe, this involves elaborate demonstrations of beauty.

The WoDaaBe often say 'We are the most beautiful people in the world!' Their dancing asserts this aesthetic supremacy in which WoDaaBe place themselves at the top of an ethnic prestige scale (Bovin 1985). This beauty is embodied, not just in the special performances, but also through everyday bodily comportment. It is a question of posture as much as adornment. WoDaaBe walk and ride on their animals in an upright position. This gives straightness of the body, the importance of a 'vertical' posture being emphasised in the *yauke* dance. This posture contrasts with farmers of the same region, who work with a bent back, using the hoe in the field which produces a V-shaped position of the body, making it less aesthetically pleasing to WoDaaBe eyes.

WoDaaBe often make linguistic comparisons between themselves and wild birds. Male dancers seek to obtain the qualities of the ostrich, eagle, heron and crane. Sometimes they say 'We build a nest in the bush and then we fly off again'. Yet in the act of cultivating beauty, nature is appropriated. It operates as a 'stamp' of culture on the body, embellished with tattoos, paints, embroidered clothes and jewellery.

Media and change in performance

WoDaaBe culture is not 'traditional' in the sense of being a static culture, as some observers believe. On the contrary, WoDaaBe fashion often changes in its shapes, forms, colours and materials. WoDaaBe wear jewellery made of leather, brass, copper and aluminium, although I have never seen gold employed.¹⁹ A leather loincloth is used by young men on all important ceremonial occasions where cotton trousers are banned. In the old days the man's tunic was made from indigo cloth, hand-woven and hand-dyed. In 1968, when I first met WoDaaBe in eastern Niger, all the WoDaaBe used dark blue, indigo-dyed clothes. Now, thirty years later, only very few WoDaaBe use indigo cloth, and for feasts only. Almost everyone uses black factory-woven and dyed cotton cloth imported from China, since it is cheaper than indigo cloth. Women wear dark skirts and blouses. In 1968 young women's blouses were very short, like 'bolero' blouses, but in the 1980s and 1990s their blouses have become much longer, reaching to the waist or hips, and the belly is no longer shown publicly.

Performances also change. In Dakoro and Niamey (the capital city) the *geerwol* has been undergoing a kind of 'inflation' since Niger's television sometimes comes along to film the WoDaaBe dance as a

'folkloristic event'. Often WoDaaBe from Dakoro perform at agricultural shows, opening ceremonies, etc. Film teams have added a new and often distorted picture of WoDaaBe dances (cf. Crain, this volume).²⁰

The appearance of modern cinema has also brought other changes to WoDaaBe performances and clothes. To be light-skinned is to be beautiful and superior in WoDaaBe eyes. To be beautiful is to the WoDaaBe to be 'red-skinned', but although WoDaaBe regard themselves as 'the most beautiful people in the world', some WoDaaBe have told me that the 'Hindus' are more beautiful than themselves, referring to people from the Indian subcontinent. In West Africa 'Hindu' (i.e. Hindi) films are popular in big cities and are even shown in smaller towns, with Indian ladies dancing in beautiful gardens, with rubies and love-stories. Film stars with 'red' skin and plenty of jewellery and nice clothes are highly admired, as are men with 'beautiful turbans, and nice handsome faces and fine noses'. Some WoDaaBe began to imitate Hindu headdresses in the 1970s and 1980s.

Self-exhibition and cultural archaism

One may wonder why the WoDaaBe continue to reproduce the 'exotic'; why they deliberately show their art in farming villages and market places, the most public of all spaces in West Africa. Why do they not stick to performing 'at home' in the bush, in their own nomadic family camps, exclusively for other WoDaaBe?

This self-exhibition of 'strange culture' is highly political, and can be used as a strategic weapon. WoDaaBe extravagance is part of their cultural resistance. Dances, songs and beauty parades are 'cultural weapons' against their increasing marginalisation.

The WoDaaBe are being squeezed from the north (by desertification), from the south (by agricultural colonisation of the Sahel), from the east (by Tubu nomads) and from the west (by Tuareg nomads). They are being chased out into drier and drier desert habitats. They are losing capital, i.e. their animals. Zebu cattle, sheep, goats and camels die in years of drought. There are also strong pressures on nomads to 'settle down and become civilised like us, the Hausa and Kanuri and Zerma in the Republic of Niger and Nigeria and Chad' (Bovin 1985, 1997). Settled farmers tend to win when there are conflicts over grazing or agricultural land. The WoDaaBe fear the way of life of settled FulBe, who 'have lost the Way' (*laawol puluaku*), the moral code which to them is linked with true cattle nomadism. It is necessary

for the WoDaaBe to 'show their existence' more clearly now, more visibly.

This is why the WoDaaBe continue to reproduce 'the exotic' and why they deliberately perform in farming villages and market places as well as at their distant bush camps. Being deliberately exotic is one of their strategies.

WoDaaBe dances are ethnic performances par excellence. The young men's leather trousers or loincloths are not only sexy but political, proclaiming the message: 'We are different. We are old-fashioned. We are of the bush. We are not like settled Muslims. We are WoDaaBe!' In order to remain a nomadic pastoralist, you must constantly 'fight' against various sedentarisation pressures. You are up against the governments of four nation states as well as against settled farmers in these same countries. Performers are transmitting ethnic as well as religious messages to the surrounding peoples. The ethnic performance can be seen as a political weapon besides having an aesthetic value for WoDaaBe performers and spectators. These visually extravagant performances of dance, music and song form part of the survival strategy of an ethnic minority that is continually being chased out into more and more arid parts of the desert, continually being marginalised.

This is why WoDaaBe cultural performances not only endure, but have become more and more colourful and extravagant since the 1970s. They must almost 'overdo' their ethnic manifestations *vis-à-vis* the outside world in order to remain WoDaaBe, to be allowed to continue as nomads migrating in the bush. So we see picturesque dances, songs and feasts in the middle of Diffa town and Zinder town. We watch WoDaaBe 'dances' in front of Nigerian television teams in Dakar. WoDaaBe troupes have even performed in Europe: in Paris for the last three decades, and in the 1990s in Denmark, Sweden, Belgium and Holland. Since 1990 there has been strong competition among WoDaaBe migrant labourers living in and near the capital city Niamey to join WoDaaBe tours to Europe.

Conclusions

In western societies we are precoded to read Africa as exotic. Nomadic WoDaaBe rituals fit well into our stereotype of exotic otherness. Men's dances, painted masks and strange eye movements are famous outside WoDaaBeland, and have been portrayed in western magazines from the *National Geographic* to *Elle*, in documentary films by directors

such as Robert Gardner and Werner Herzog, and also in film dramas.²¹ Niger Television regularly broadcasts WoDaaBe performances under labels like 'Bororo geerewol' and 'Dances des Peuls Bororo'.

I have tried to demystify the exoticness of these dances, to demonstrate their significance in the production of male identity, and in the processes of courtship, marriage and procreation. I have also argued that the dances demarcate the ethnic space of WoDaaBeness, in relation both to neighbouring peoples and the state. I see these cultural expressions as true cultural weapons. They are strategies of survival for nomadic peoples across the globe. WoDaaBe 'cultural archaism' (Bovin 1985) is thus a deliberate 'weapon' which is linked to their reproduction of WoDaaBe identity management, which in turn is linked to their fight for economic, political and land rights and the continuation of *ngaymaaka*, the pastoral nomadic life in the 'sweet bush' (*laahe beluum*). WoDaaBe culture is constantly changing, with inventions of new 'archaic' elements, or 'active archaisation', according to fashion in the bush. However, there remains a continuity and essential kernel which is not touched or moved: the moral ideas of the WoDaaBe way: *laarol pulaaaku*.

Notes

- 1 My thanks to Felicia Hughes-Freeland and Mary M. Crain for their valuable comments on a previous draft of this chapter, and to Felicia Hughes-Freeland and Jon Mitchell for helping to redraft the English in parts.
- 2 *Guadiana*, 27 July 1988.
- 3 *Sunday Times*, 24 July 1988.
- 4 Linda Grant, 'Making WoDaaBe Whoopee', *Evening Standard*, 22 July 1988.
- 5 Tom Ferguson, *Sunday Telegraph*, 24 July 1988.
- 6 *Independent*, 27 July 1988.
- 7 *National Geographic*, (USA) 164, 4, October 1983.
- 8 The Fulani live in eighteen African countries: Nigeria, Niger, Chad, Cameroun, Central African Republic, Sudan, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Gambia, Mali, Mauritania, Guinea Conakry, Guinea Bissau, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Togo, Benin and Ivory Coast. They are called 'FulBe' in their own language, 'Peuls' in Francophone countries, 'Pulaar' in Senegal, Gambia and Mauritania, 'Fula' in Guinea, and 'Fellata' in the Sudan. For a pioneering analysis of ethnic identity, see Barth 1969.
- 9 Thanks to my French colleague Patrick Paris, in Zinder, Niger, for this statistical information.
- 10 WoDaaBe are 'opportunistic' rather than 'conservative' (Sandford 1983) in their pastoral strategy. WoDaaBe also have no fixed houses, and exhibit the most 'traditional culture' of all Fulani.

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- 11 Bovin 1974/5, 1979, 1985, 1990a, 1990b, 1991a, 1991b, 1995, 1998a.
- 12 A person can be *boɗum*, and an object can be *boɗum* ('beautiful' in the Fulfulde language). The WoDaaBe noun for beauty is *woɗde*. 'To be' (*na woɗi*) and 'to be beautiful' (*na woɗi*) is expressed by the same term. The negation *woɗa*, means 'ugly', or 'that which should disappear'. Ugliness is almost like non-existence.
- 13 Differences in fashion over time and space are described in Bovin 1998a.
- 14 In 1968 I saw young men wearing lots of ostrich feathers placed in a harmonious circle all around the conical straw hat.
- 15 'Both in Bali... and in the Peking Opera... the eyes are directed... higher than they normally are in daily life' (Barba and Savarese 1991: 106).
- 16 This occurs in my film about WoDaaBe performances, which is not yet edited.
- 17 Werner Herzog's (1991) film shows a young couple talking about sex, giving the viewer a distorted impression of verbal liberty.
- 18 Specific women's dances are called by animal names, but specific men's dances are not called by animal names (Bovin 1998b).
- 19 This precious metal they leave to the settled Muslim farmers of the Sahel: Kanuri, Shuwa Arabs and Hausa, who are very fond of gold, and buy it in Mecca.
- 20 When WoDaaBe women make '*yaake*' eyes in front of a television camera in the 1990 film as a provocation, this turns WoDaaBe performance into something non-WoDaaBe, as *yaake* eyes are normally only made by men.
- 21 Such as *Léleɗ*, a film drama by Ahmadou Kanta about a WoDaaBe girl who is the first-born 'taboo child'.

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Making persons in a global ritual?

Embodied experience and free-floating symbols in Olympic sport

Ingrid Rudie

Introduction

The particular analytical concern of this chapter is to identify the element of ritualisation in Olympic sport.¹ In order to achieve this, I shall start from how the bodily nature of sport makes it both easily communicable and highly esoteric. Core questions will be how far symbols of the person as communicated in the arena and in the media can be shared and extended, and indeed, whether there is such a thing as a global ritual. These questions are of course related to the broader understanding of symbols and ritual as vehicles of shared understanding, and to the highly contextual character of meaning-making.² The questions further invite a careful sorting out of the discourses as well as the pre-discursive fields of experience in which various sports are embedded.

The issue of gender is of central concern in my analysis, because I argue that sport exhibits in a distilled manner a split message about gender equality and inequality. In everyday experience this split tends to be blurred by the complexity of practices and discourses in modern society. In sport it stands out clearly because an ongoing struggle for gender equality coexists with a strict set of rules designed to keep biologically defined male and female categories apart and pure.³

My focus is on various negotiations – in a wide sense of the term – about the gender issue in different disciplines, and the symbolic repercussions of particular athletes and particular events.

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