

The Case of the Recurring Wodaabe

Visual Obsessions in Globalizing Markets

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The Wodaabe people of the Sahel have been the subject of over seventeen documentary films—indeed, in both 1988 and 2007, three were released (Table 1). Filmmakers from Robert Gardner and Werner Herzog to National Geographic to individual researchers have turned their lenses on Wodaabe life, particularly their visually spectacular *geerewol* and *yaake* dances (Figs. 1–2). Likewise, Wodaabe have featured in sumptuous coffee table books (Fig. 3), the cover of *National Geographic*, *Elle* magazine, a World Bank brochure, advertising, CD and album covers. Their images have inspired painters and appeared on canvas bags, mugs, and mouse pads (Figs. 4–5). This concentration on the Wodaabe—a seeming visual obsession—is striking given the great diversity of culture and performance on the African continent.

Wodaabe are a pastoral Fulani group of roughly 100,000 people, sometimes known as Bororo.¹ Most live in Niger, where they are denigrated and marginalized for their nomadic life and non-Islamic religion. Wodaabe are known particularly for their *geerewol* and *yaake* performances, which occur during annual rainy season gatherings. Both involve competitions between young men from two lineages and moieties and selection of the most beautiful dancers (Fig. 6). Since 1950 the dances have also been performed as entertainment and cultural spectacle for various audiences.

This paper considers questions related to these recurring images but it is only partly about Wodaabe. It is more about the circulation, proliferation, and reframing of cultural images and about cultural obsession. But the obsessions are ours, even though presented as theirs. I will sketch the process of proliferation and the story of how this global Wodaabe cornucopia came about.

Wodaabe films, books, and images have circulated in Europe, the US, and African countries.² Wodaabe themselves have performed internationally in France, Denmark, Belgium, Spain, Canada, Morocco, Burkina Faso, and other African and European

countries, as a warm-up group for Baaba Mal in Paris (Boesen 2008a:159) and at Eurodisney (Lassibille 2006:116). In Niger, they perform for visiting dignitaries, heads of state, and tourists, at agricultural shows, and an annual post-Ramadan celebration in the Niamey sports stadium (Loftsdóttir 2008:178). Tourists, journalists, diplomats, and expatriate aid workers attend dances that Wodaabe organize for themselves outside town settings (Boesen 2008a:147, 153; Bovin 1998:106–108, 2001:60; Lassibille 2006, 2009; Loftsdóttir 2002:12, 2008:178, 194). The Wodaabe-Tuareg musical group Etran Finatawa also incorporates dress from the dances when they perform their “nomad blues” (Fig. 7), touring in Europe, North and South America, Australia, and west, south, and central Africa.³ In short, Wodaabe dance and images have gained widespread international currency over the last sixty-five years and might now be considered a global phenomenon.

The proliferation and spread of Wodaabe imagery and performances offer a way to understand how cultural resources—in this case visual representations, people, and performances—circulate in global economies. The Wodaabe case highlights complications and convolutions in those disparate circulations and social processes and shows how they can entwine across locales and scales. African art is no stranger to the marketplace, but the Wodaabe case points to transformations in how markets are defined, how interconnections and circulations work, and how cultural resources—knowledge, products, and practice—are involved in creative production. Transformations might be local, regional, cross-regional, international, multinational, and at times global, with conjunctions that produce collaborations, debates, tensions, and conflicts of many sorts, with positive and negative outcomes (Kratz and Karp 2006:2; Karp, Kratz et al. 2006).

These shifts, recontextualizations, reinterpretations, and interactions might lead to a range of transformations and changes. Formal changes include Wodaabe circle dances restaged in lines facing European festival audiences and framed by a presenter (Lassibille 2006:120–122; Loftsdóttir 2008:195), or mixing dress and make-up styles, genders, and generations in tourist performances (Lassibille 2009:328; Loftsdóttir 2008:195).⁴ Structural changes include expansion of Wodaabe performance venues to towns, agricultural shows,

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and international settings, coordination with tourist itineraries, and articulations with market processes. Processual changes often encompass transformed social relations: shifts in production as lineage associations organize tour performances or the new annual Assembly begun in 2004; in brokerage relations and new transnational networks linking performances and development projects; in monetization through photography fees and jewelry sales; and

of course, in commodification of images (Lassibille 2006, 2009; Loftsdóttir 2008).⁵

Scholars have analyzed such phenomena by focusing on particular globalizing processes and domains, using models of layered motion to conceptualize systems and networks where parts move, intersect, and transform in different ways. This includes work on marketing identity and tourism and analyses



1–2 Dramatic images of young Wodaabe men dancing *geerwol* (Fig. 1, above) and *yaake* (Fig. 2, right) have circulated widely, emphasizing their elaborate dress, face paint, and facial gestures. Wodaabe photographs by Carol Beckwith first appeared in beautiful coffee table books such as *Nomads of Niger* (Fig. 1) and later in the two-volume *African Ceremonies* (Fig. 2) that she published with Angela Fisher, but they have also appeared in many other contexts.
Photos: courtesy Carol Beckwith

of the politics and production of heritage that show how meta-cultural processes in self-presentation reshape relations to one's own culture, traditions, and practice (Stanley 1998; Comaroff and Comaroff 2009; Geismar 2013; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998, 2006; Witz 2012; Franquesa 2013; Peterson et al. 2015). Also important is work on intellectual property and on financial arrangements and creative production in world music and indigenous art, where ideologies and ontologies of design, property, and ethnicity might clash (Feld 1996, 2000; Brown 2003; Meintjes 2003; Seeger and Chaudhuri 2004; Myers 2005; Sanga 2010; Karp and Kratz 2015). Mobilities and cultural transformations are also addressed in work on cosmopolitanisms and on migration and refugees—a status Wodaabe experienced during dire droughts (Appiah 2006, 2007; Cheah and Robbins 1998).

Scholars take different stances on globalizing-localizing dynamics, finding both exploitative cultural imperialism and empowering situations that offer economic opportunities and promote cultural diversity and understanding. Steve Feld

identifies these contrasting anxious or celebratory representations in writing about globalization, increasingly in tense combination (2000:153–54). We could stage this like a debate on erstwhile host Jon Stewart's *The Daily Show*, with t-shirts for anxious Team Exploitation, celebratory Team Empowerment, and a third, Team Local Conditions, that emphasizes how these dynamics work within local politics of ethnicity and nation. A variant, call it Team Multilocal Conditions, traces social processes and transformations across sites, situating actors and dynamics in varied situations (Kratz and Karp 2006). The debate format might suggest one team wins, but the more subtle understanding would recruit them all.

Yet while the Wodaabe phenomenon clearly entails a far-flung distribution of images and performances based on equally wide-reaching international interactions, most films, popular photo books, and performances are framed by a different narrative. They present a different Wodaabe, described as traditional, unchanging, authentic, “people of the taboo”—not people embedded in global economies who perform internationally. Their culture is portrayed as ancient, connected to rock paintings in the region, and their nomadic life and lack of permanent housing underline exotic contrasts.⁶ Some late 1980s films comment on recent droughts and Wodaabe movement to towns and refugee camps, framed as endangered cultures. This template is all too familiar, and far from unique to Wodaabe. Deconstructing stereotypes of timelessness, isolation, primitivism and disappearance is the starting place for analyzing representations of African societies and other seemingly “exotic others.” But that doesn't seem to change the images and representations much.

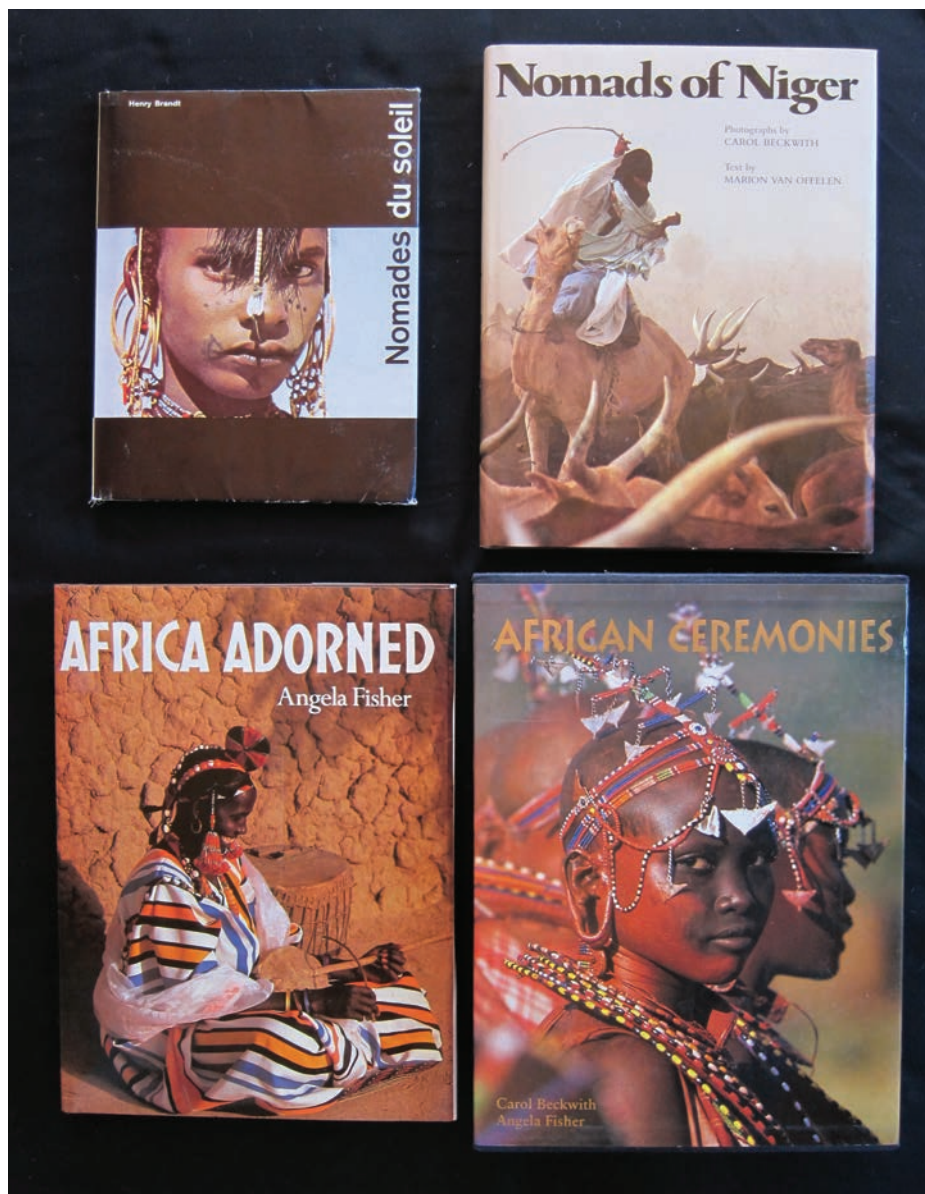
The Wodaabe proliferation is notable, then, but not unique. Just looking in the film collection at Emory University, where I work, I found a dozen films about Maasai and eighteen about Zulu. Both have long representational histories that include trade cards, stereographs, staged popular presentations, films, photo books, games, and advertising (Kratz and Gordon 2002:250; Sobania 2002; Smith 2013) (Figs. 8–9). It is precisely through such dispersed but ubiquitous repetition—crossing media, formats, and contexts—that stereotypes and archetypes are reproduced and perpetuated, often casting pastoralists in the romanticized, “noble savage” slot.⁷

Yet two things *are* striking about the Wodaabe films and images. First, they have marked thematic consistency. Emory's eighteen Zulu films focus on health and healing, religion, migrant labor, history, and music, with several feature films; Maasai films have a similar range. But while the twelve Wodaabe films I've seen offer general ethnographic portraits, with just one exception, young men's dances are prominent visually and thematically. Dance preparations or performances are on screen half the time in some, a quarter of the time in others, and 10–15 percent in a few that explicitly survey Wodaabe or Fulani life. Even films with lower total screen times, though, emphasize dance images by using them as dramatic start and climactic finale. The way the dances figure in their verbal narratives adds more emphasis.

Second, Wodaabe seem a more recent addition to the cast of cultures in this imaginary of otherness. I found very few early occurrences tracing Wodaabe images back to explorers, colonial government documentation, postcards, or stereographs; only two—likely from the 1920s–1930s (Figs. 10–11)—came up when I followed postcard auctions for a few months. Fulani were known

TABLE 1. SEVENTEEN FILMS ABOUT THE WODAABE

Year	Title (running time)	Director
1954	<i>Les Nomades du Soleil</i> (44 min.)	Henry Brandt (Swiss)
1972	<i>Les Hommes du Dernier Soleil</i> (62 min.)	Paul Lambert (Swiss)
1979	<i>Habbanaae: the Animal of Friendship</i>	Oxfam/America
1980	<i>La Femme Volée</i> (16 min.) (set in Cameroon)	Nena Baratier & Geneviève Louveau (France)
1981	<i>Deep Hearts</i> (53 min.)	Robert Gardner (US)
1988	<i>Way of the Wodaabe</i> (26 min.)	National Geographic (with Carol Beckwith) (US)
1988	<i>The Wodaabe</i> (51 min.)	Leslie Woodhead with Mette Bovin (<i>Disappearing World</i> series)
1988	<i>Wodaabe—Herdsmen of the Sun</i> (52 min.)	Werner Herzog (German)
1992	<i>The Art of Living</i> (60 min.)	Adrian Malone (<i>Millennium: Tribal Wisdom and the Modern World</i> series)
1992	<i>Strange Relations</i> (60 min.)	Adrian Malone (<i>Millennium: Tribal Wisdom and the Modern World</i> series)
1992	<i>På Tchad-søens Bund—En Film om et Venskab (On the Bottom of Lake Chad—A Film about Friendship)</i> (35 min.)	Mette Bovin (Danish)
2002	<i>Sahara with Michael Palin</i> , episode 3: “Absolute Desert” (60 min.)	John-Paul Davidson; writer: Michael Palin (BBC series)
2006	<i>Wodaabe, le Plus Beau des Combats</i> (52 min.)	Sandrine Loncke (French)
2007	<i>Birds of the Wilderness: The Beauty Competition of the Wodaabe People of Niger</i> (62 min.)	Christopher Roy (US) (<i>Art and Life in Africa</i> series)
2007	<i>Fulani: Art and Life of a Nomadic People</i> (84 min.)	Christopher Roy (US) (<i>Art and Life in Africa</i> series)
2007	<i>Tribal Secrets: The Wodaabe</i> (46 min.)	National Geographic (US)
2010	<i>La Danse des Wodaabe</i> (90 min.)	Sandrine Loncke (French)



3 These four titles are just a sampling of the photo books that have featured images of the Wodaabe people. The top two are devoted entirely to Wodaabe; the bottom two include Wodaabe sections in their regional coverage of Africa. Photo: Corinne Kratz

I identify structural features of visual proliferations where cultural resources circulate in global economies.⁹ The process seems to have four components, though the fascination with Wodaabe images is overdetermined by coinciding cultural, political, economic, and visual factors.

First, there may be *enabling factors*, local conditions that draw attention to certain images or practices. Second, a set of *associations, affinities, resonances, and logics* pave the way for potential extralocal reception and popularity, creating what I call a “receptive imaginary.” A particular cultural practice or group seems to provide a link, a contrast, or a translation of familiar practices or values relevant to those who become an audience. These imaginative contexts bridge cultural difference and motivate interest for viewers. The third component consists of particular *conjunctures*—cultural, historical, and political economic conditions that together create circumstances congenial to those resonances and logics being activated on a wide scale. Finally, there are *sparks*—pre-

cipitating events, objects, or encounters that catapult the images into a wider range of settings and uses, igniting wider circulation. Of course, these four aspects overlap, interact, and blur.

SETTING THE STAGE: ENABLING FACTORS AND RECEPTIVE IMAGINARY

Let me now tell the story of how this Wodaabe-rama developed, as I’ve pieced it together. The story has gaps, missing episodes, absent actors and events, and unknown connections—almost every story of transnational circulation will. But tracing the process may be suggestive.

Among *enabling factors* are the importance and cultural salience that *yaake* and *geerewol* competitions hold for Wodaabe themselves (Bovin 2001:46–48, 50, 52; Boesen 2008a:151–52) (Fig. 12). Being a beautiful dancer is a topic of Wodaabe proverbs and the object of much work; it brings fame for winners, nostalgic memories for others (Bovin 2001:40, 44, 52). Boesen calls the dances “the core of communal aesthetico-ritual self-experience” (2008a:160). Likewise, others in the region recognize the arresting spectacle of Wodaabe dances (Bocquené 2002:153–54).

and pictured on colonial postcards, as were Tuareg (cf. Loftsdóttir 2008:48, n.21), but scholars with extensive knowledge of stereotypes and colonial postcards of Africa could not recall early images of Wodaabe dancers like those now so widespread.⁸ In the early twentieth century, Wodaabe images were not circulating widely, marking a distinctive, visually striking identity. If we think about the now recurrent images as one of many such proliferations, then, the Wodaabe case provides a visually focused way to unravel how they went from invisible, virtually nonexistent, to ubiquitous. That story illuminates how the broad imaginary of otherness has been reproduced and perpetuated.

STRUCTURE AND STORY: HOW WODAABE IMAGES PROLIFERATED

Popular primitivism and exoticism are historical phenomena with diverse visual histories. They include visual proliferations occurring at different times, under different conditions, with varied trajectories. Yet while cases differ, at the same time they are part of a shared history, drawing upon related ideas and processes. In reconstructing *this* story, the Wodaabe episode,

The *associations, affinities, resonances, and logics* that created a “receptive imaginary” for Wodaabe images combine three interwoven aspects. First, as noted, is the extensive set of images related to the West’s popular primitivism, emphasizing “isolated tribes” and exotic practices. With those images and their genealogies goes the second: the more specific, longstanding romance with the figure of the pastoralist as an independent, sometimes mysterious individualist. Certain ethnic groups became regional exemplars—Maasai, Zulu, Himba (Kratz and Gordon 2002).¹⁰ But these were semi-nomadic peoples, agro-pastoralists, and the Zulu were also a kingdom. The *nomad* represented the “purest” version of this romantic figure.¹¹ Indeed the first Wodaabe film and book I’ve found, by Henry Brandt, is called *Nomades du Soleil* (see Fig. 3), and the nomad identification threads through films and popular books. Tuareg had been the better-known nomad exemplar in west Africa, with a representational history of colonial postcards and display at the 1907 Colonial Exhibition.¹² When Wodaabe performed in Europe nearly a century later, audiences and festival organizers confused the two and thought they were booking Tuareg, citing notions of “blue-men” and nomadic purity (Lassibille 2006:119, 125).

The pastoral nomad figure provided an episteme and template that easily fit Wodaabe images, defining expectations that helped propel them into wide circulation.¹³ Wodaabe epitomized the figure, the most nomad of nomads. Films emphasize their frequent movements and lack of shelters (though a camp is highly structured by gender and age [Stenning 1959:106; Bovin 2001:62–65]). National Geographic’s 2007 film describes their home “at

the heart of the Sahel” and a Fulani autobiography remarks that Jafun Fulani see Wodaabe as “the most bush of the bush-men” (Bocquené 2002:158). Just as Wodaabe seem to heighten notions associated with the nomad, dance images of young men present the most exotic face of Wodaabe (Pyper 1998:2). Their widespread popularity simultaneously heightens and narrows the representation, narrowing the Wodaabe identity that becomes known while creating “larger-than-life representations that take on a life of their own” (Kratz and Gordon 2002:256).

This links to the third aspect of the receptive imaginary, based on the visual spectacle of *geerewol* and *yaake* dances themselves. These striking, beautiful, and graceful scenes visually feed notions of the exotic and are embedded in descriptions that foreground exotic customs and sexual liaisons, giving the images particular gendered spins (Kratz and Gordon 2002:248). The spin builds on gender dislocations from a Euro-American perspective: Are the dancers male or female? Photos and films capitalize on the ambiguity. To our eyes, *geerewol* and *yaake* invert and echo our own pageants and rituals of gender: beauty contests, voguing, cross-dressing, and flirtatious adornment and seduction. Though based on glaring cross-cultural misreadings, these are the memorable images eventually recycled in the media, magazine advertising, commercials for McDonalds, and elsewhere. I return to this later, but now to the first conjuncture.

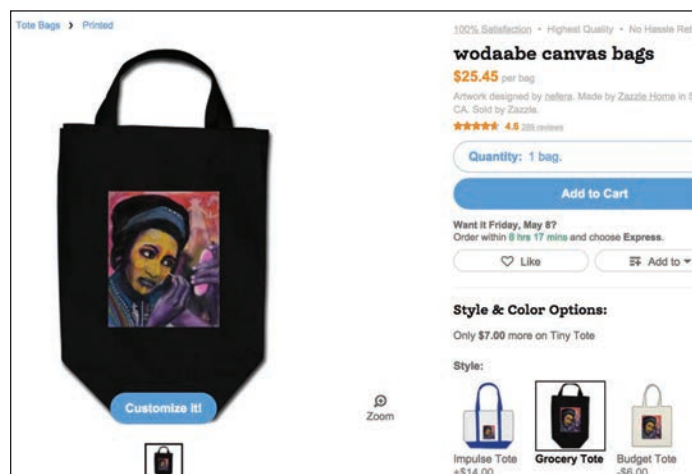
CONJUNCTURE AND SPARK I: FROM THE 1950s

The dances’ local cultural salience and the ways Wodaabe invoked Euro-American popular primitivism, nomadophilia, and gender fascinations set the stage for particular conjunctures and sparks to come together. There are two chapters, two conjunctures and sparks to consider. The first starts in the 1950s, with a confluence of new attention to Wodaabe in research, documentation, and prominent performances.

Professional anthropological research with Wodaabe started in the early 1950s (Table 2), when the International African Institute commissioned research by Derrick Stenning in Nigeria, Marguerite Dupire in Niger and Cameroon (1962), and C.E. Hopen on pastoral Fulani in Nigeria (Forde 1959:ix–x). At the same time, Jean Gabus, director of the Swiss Musée d’Ethnographie de Neuchâtel, sent filmmaker Henry Brandt to Niger for six months (Fig. 13). Brandt produced *Nomades du Soleil*, the first film about Wodaabe, and then a book by the same name, the first

4 This oil painting, *Wodaabe*, by Pasadena artist George Combs, is available as a giclee print or on greeting cards through Fine Art America.
Photo: <http://fineartamerica.com/featured/wodaabe-george-combs.html>, accessed 11 August 2015

5 This canvas bag with an image of a Wodaabe man applying makeup is one example of the Wodaabe-decorated merchandise available online. Screenshot by Corinne Kratz on 29 April 2015.
Photo: courtesy Zazzle.com (http://www.zazzle.com/wodaabe_canvas_bags-149174157010595251)





6 Young Wodaabe women judge the *geerewol* dancers, as shown in this photo from a final series of images in *Nomads of Niger*. They “kneel modestly” before the line of dancers, “left hands up as if to conceal their scrutiny” (Beckwith and van Offelen 1982:218–19). Photo: courtesy Carol Beckwith

7 Founded in 2004, the group Etran Finatawa includes both Wodaabe and Tuareg musicians. They incorporate dress, face paint, and facial gestures related to Wodaabe men’s dances into their performance style, as seen on the cover of their third CD, *Tarkat Tajje/Let’s Go!* Photo: courtesy Riverboat Records/World Music Network (UK) Ltd. (<http://www.worldmusic.net/>)

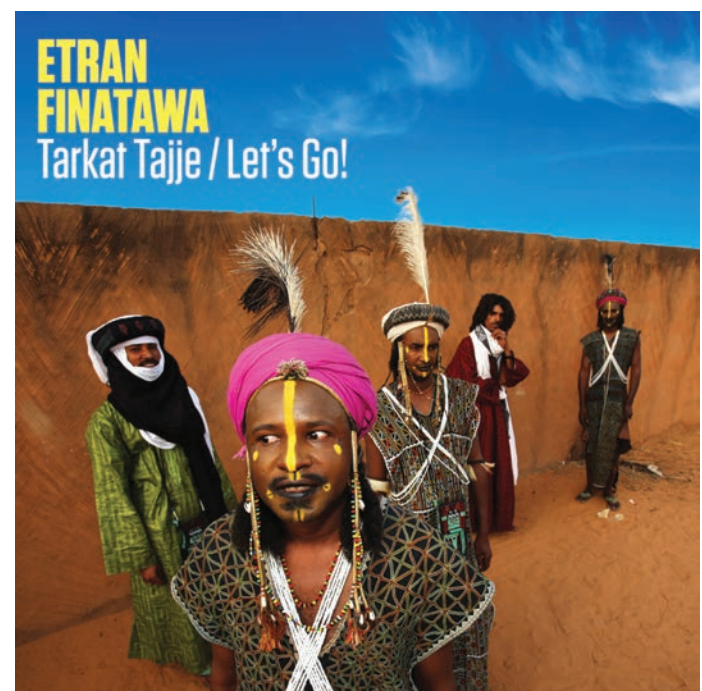
of five Wodaabe film-book pairings over the years.¹⁴ This cluster of researchers defined two strands of work which continue to the present, with markedly different trajectories of circulation.

The first focused on history, social structure, cultural ecology, marriage, and politics (Stenning, Dupire, Hopen) and has circulated mainly in scholarly circles. Some facets are taken up in development work, which is how this strand took visual form. *Habbanaae*, a 1979 film strip-cassette program produced by Oxfam, described a herd reconstitution program based on Wodaabe cattle lending practices (Scott and Gormley 1980). This interesting didactic piece recycles tropes of nomadic freedom and includes images of camps, sandstorms, Wodaabe portraits, lots of livestock shots, drought scenes of cattle bones, and a thin refugee.¹⁵ Dance images are totally absent, and Wodaabe are described as “known ... for their special love of animals” (Oxfam 1979: frame 26), *not* for dances or beauty contests. Given the format, topic, and producer, I think *Habbanaae* had limited circulation. Notably, though, Stenning’s book also pays little attention to *geerewol* and *yaake* dances, devoting to them just two paragraphs (1959:157). The introduction to a new edition in 1994, when these images were widely known, puzzles over this (Burnham 1994:xii–xiii).

The other research strand, represented in the 1950s by Henry Brandt, has been heavily visualized.¹⁶ It too presented an ethnographic portrait of social relations, marriage, and the importance of domestic herds. Brandt’s book has poetic descriptions of Wodaabe life across seasons. As in the *Habbanaae* film-tape,

Brandt first notes the “passion that binds them closely to their large herds of black zebu cattle” (Brandt 1956:5, my translation); the film narration says cattle are their reason for living. Beauty is not the immediate focus, but rainy season gatherings and young men’s dance images *are* the book’s climax, with fold-out color images in a largely black-and-white book (Fig. 14). Brandt’s film parallels the book’s structure, with dance images first appearing 25 minutes into the 44 minute film.

Brandt’s final section includes themes familiar from the subsequent flood of Wodaabe films and books, but there are telling differences. After a dance scene with young men and women alike, young *women* feature and the first discussion of beauty is accompanied by pictures of young women. The *geerewol* gathering follows, with descriptions of dress and adornment similar to recent ones, but young women and men alike are described as beautifying themselves (Fig. 15). The film likewise balances images of young men and women. Other emphases also differ. The dance is a “solemn presentation of young men, the strange beauty contest that opposes several lineages [called tribes]” (Brandt 1956:107), but the contest aspect returns only later, after evocative portrayals that stress the songs’ hypnotic effect. Finally, Brandt’s book does not sexualize the event like more recent





8 “House-building by Masai Women, Their Husbands Looking On—East Africa.” Stereoscopic image, c. 1909. Published by Keystone, V11997. Photo: Collection of the author

depictions. He uses the word “seduction” just once, about catching the judge’s eye. His demure version of what happens next explains that couples come together for verbal jousting, for eloquent speaking is also valued. He goes on, “What happens next, only the Bororo and the night know. But it is certain that one does not go much beyond long amorous discussion, and great reserve rules the attitude of each couple” (Brandt 1956:134, my translation). These differences seem small, but given how uniform later representations are, Brandt’s more balanced gender treatment, attention to song, and lack of emphasis on sexual encounters is distinctive.

TABLE 2
SOME WODAABE RESEARCHERS (PARTIAL; ONLY FILMS AND BOOKS SHOWN)

NAME	RESEARCH PERIOD	COMMENTS
Henry Brandt (Swiss)	early 1950s	film: <i>Les Nomades du Soleil</i> (1954); book: <i>Nomades du Soleil</i> (1956)
C.E. Hopen (Canadian)	early 1950s (Sokoto Province, Nigeria)	<i>The Pastoral Fulbe Family in Gwandu</i> (1958)
Derrick Stenning (British)	early 1950s (Bornu Province, Nigeria)	<i>Savannah Nomads: A Study of the Wodaabe Pastoral Fulani of Western Bornu Province, Northern Region, Nigeria</i> (1959)
Margaret Dupire (French)	early 1950s (Niger & northern Cameroon)	<i>Peuls Nomades: étude descriptive des Wodaabe du Sahel Nigérien</i> (1962); <i>L’Organisation Sociale des Peul</i> (1970)
Paul Reisman (US)	1967–1968 (Upper Volta)	<i>Freedom in Fulani Social Life</i> (1974). Reisman didn’t work with Wodaabe, but his research with Jelgobe Fulani was influential
Niger Range and Livestock Project	1979–1983	Research on pastoralism and economy with Wodaabe and others by A. Bonfiglioli, J. Swift, C. White and others. USAID + Niger support
Mette Bovin (Danish)	1985–2000 (other work in the area from 1968)	films: <i>Disappearing World</i> series: <i>The Wodaabe</i> (1988, with Leslie Whitehead), <i>På Tchad-sjöens bund—En film om et venskab (On the Bottom of Lake Chad—A Film about Friendship)</i> (1992); book: <i>Nomads Who Cultivate Beauty</i> (2001)
Marion van Offelen (Belgian)	1980s	<i>Nomads of Niger</i> (with Carol Beckwith, 1983); van Offelen holds an MA in anthropology and does development work for the Belgian government
Mahalia Lassibille (French)	1994–2000s	2004 dissertation (EHESS, Paris), <i>Danses Nomades (Mouvements et Beauté chez les WoDaaBe du Niger)</i>
Kristin Loftsdóttir (Icelandic)	1996–1998 + later visits	2000 dissertation (University of Arizona); <i>The Bush is Sweet: Identity, Power, and Development among the WoDaaBe Fulani in Niger</i> (2008)
Elisabeth Boesen (German)	1999–2008	<i>Scham und Schönheit. Über Identität und Selbstvergewisserung bei den Fulbe Nordbenins</i> (1999, research in Benin; followed by research with Wodaabe starting 1999)
Sandrine Loncke (French)	1994–2014	2002 dissertation, <i>Lignages et lignes de chant chez les Peuls Wodaabe du Niger</i> ; film: <i>La Danse des Wodaabe</i> (2010); book: <i>Geerewol: Musique, Danse et Lien Social chez les Peuls Nomades Wodaabe du Niger</i> (2015)



Jean Rouch calls *Nomades du Soleil* a classic and counts Brandt among the handful of pioneers at the time, as 16 mm format and synchronous sound recording forged a technological revolution in portability that made possible the combined role of ethnographer-filmmaker (2003:57, 34–35, 269–70). I don't know how widely it was shown. Rouch says "it has never been distributed commercially" (2003:57; cf. Gardner 2006:184), but it certainly registered on later authors, filmmakers, and presumably other viewers. I see Brandt's film and book as the spark in this 1950s conjuncture, important vehicles through which Wodaabe images began to circulate more widely.

The film received an award at the Lucarno film festival in 1955, impressed viewers at a 1955 showing at the Musée de l'Homme organized by Rouch, and was screened in Belgium by the Comité International du Film Ethnographique (DAV 2010:4; de Heusch 2007:367, 370). Stenning's monograph footnotes it with admiration (1959:157),

(counterclockwise from top)

9 "Heroic Sports of the Kraal—a Zulu War Dance, Zululand, South Africa." Stereoscopic image, 1901. Published by Underwood & Underwood.

Photo: Collection of the author

10 "Visage du Niger. Peul Bororo." Postcard, c. 1930. Photographer J.M. Bertrand. Published by l'ONT.

Photo: Collection of the author

11 "Tchad—Bororos en costume de fête." Postcard, c. 1920–1930. Photographer René Moreau. Published by R. Bègne.

Photo: Collection of the author





and missionary Père Henri Bocquené saw it at a cinema in 1962, his “first ‘visual’ contact with this unknown world” (2002:xiv). Brandt’s film and book are cited as inspiration or source by the next cluster of researcher/filmmakers who worked with Wodaabe in the 1970s or early 1980s, the second conjuncture of this story.

For instance, Robert Gardner saw Brandt’s film in the late 1950s (Gardner 2006:184). In 1971, seven years before filming *Deep Hearts* (1981), he said,

I became quite obsessed with the image of people moving across a wider landscape. Such people, I imagined, would move gracefully

and effortlessly, mindful only of such elemental considerations as water and pasture. They would be musical, fond of dance and above all content with the natural order which a pastoral mode must follow. There is a short but memorable film made in the fifties called *Nomades du Soleil* [T]his film, I’m sure, helped to fixate my mind on certain qualities of appearance, environment and emphasis with which I then invested all herding groups (1971:1).

Likewise Danish anthropologist Mette Bovin mentions the film (1974–75:466) and Brandt’s book is noted in the 1983 book *Nomads of Niger* by photographer Carol Beckwith and Belgian anthropologist Marion van Offelen (1983:224). Bovin later made two films (1988, 1992) and published the book *Nomads Who Cultivate Beauty* (2001); Beckwith was involved with three other Wodaabe films.¹⁷

Brandt’s work and images, then, animated the first American-made Wodaabe film decades later and informed the next set of people who figure in the proliferation of Wodaabe images. In tracing image circulation, chapters can be like cycles; they don’t always end, but a conjuncture’s elements and sparks have a certain reach and period of prominence, even if their traces and influence percolate into later chapters.¹⁸ Before turning to the second conjuncture, let me note the final piece of this 1950s conjuncture of attention, an expansion in Wodaabe performance venues.

Europeans showed some interest in Wodaabe dances during colonial times. Officials encouraged youth “to form dancing troupes that can be called upon whenever a ‘folkloric’ display is required for tourists or visiting dignitaries” (Burnham 1994:xii).¹⁹ Wodaabe danced on a national stage, however, in 1959, at independence celebrations.²⁰ One reaction suggests they were not yet known widely: “All ... present, both Blacks and Whites, agreed on pronouncing that these were the most amazing people they had ever seen” (Wenek 1962a:7, also quoted in Loftsdóttir 2008:192; Wenek 1962b). These performance extensions foreshadowed the international circuits where Wodaabe now perform and helped bring wider notice beyond Niger.

CONJUNCTURE AND SPARKS II: FROM THE 1980s

The 1980s began the second conjuncture—a second, greater confluence of attention to Wodaabe, including eight new films between 1980 and 1992, influential coffee table books, and two new researchers who worked with visual projects. Things get

12 Mette Bovin’s book includes this 1975 image of Wodaabe dancers (2001:99). The large mirrors they wear were part of the style of the 1970s. All three men were beauty contest champions. The photo was taken in a village studio after a dance, suggesting they wanted to mark the occasion as important.

Photo: courtesy The Nordic Africa Institute

13 Henry Brandt produced the first film (1954) and book (1956) pairing about the Wodaabe, both under the name *Nomades du Soleil* and based on research done under the auspices of the Musée d’Ethnographie de Neuchâtel. The book includes several image sequences that focus on *geerewol*. These images, on pages 138–39, are part of a series of seven.

Photo: courtesy Bibliothèque cantonale et universitaire—Lausanne





complicated because Wodaabe images cross into other realms of circulation, including television, and sparks occur in several realms. At the same time, Wodaabe began performing more regularly in Niger for opening ceremonies, agricultural shows, and diplomatic visits, and on national television. Dance troupes also went to Europe, though that was more common after 1990 (Bovin 1998:106–108, 2001:60–61).²¹

Three cultural and political economic shifts in the 1980s bolstered interest, enhancing the receptive imaginary. First, devastating Sahelian droughts in the 1970s and mid-1980s brought attention to the region. After Gardner's *Deep Hearts* and the short French film *La Femme Volée* in the early 1980s, the cluster of films from the late 1980s include this ecological theme. Resumption of *geerewol* gatherings becomes a sign in the environmental drama of recovery. "At the same time, the Wodaabe were also 'discovered' in their own country" (Boesen 2008a:147) when large numbers arrived in urban centers during droughts, and many incorporated "seasonal urban activities" into their pastoral rounds.

Second, the politics of gender and sexuality had changed since the 1950s. By the 1980s, feminist and gay politics had entered mainstream social discourse and visual culture in Europe and the US²² and Wodaabe films and books began foregrounding gender and sexuality in *geerewol* interpretations (cf. Pyper 1998:3). The relative gender balance in Brandt's book, with little overt sexualization, gives way to strong emphasis on *geerewol*, sexual encounters, and gender misreadings. Let me review how films of this period handle this theme before discussing the third shift and the sparks of this conjuncture.

REPRESENTATIONS OF GENDER AND SEXUALITY

Gardner spent a month in Niger in 1978 filming *Deep Hearts*, released in 1981 (Gardner 2006:181–215). *Geerewol* is the focus.²³ His sparse voiceover interprets it as competing "for approval as physical and moral specimens [Y]ounger men risk their pride as dancers and as embodiments of Bororo virtue ... It is a contest between two lineages," he says, "for women who will be stolen



14 The fold-out color spread in Henry Brandt's *Nomades du Soleil* (pp. 121–24) shows dramatic scenes from a *geerewol* dance, the left side focused on young women and the right on male dancers.

Photo: courtesy Bibliothèque cantonale et universitaire—Lausanne

15 Brandt's pairing (pp. 108–109) puts equal emphasis on beautification by young women and young men. His captions for these images are: "Preparations for the festival." (left) and "Young men adorn themselves for as long and as carefully as young women." (right) (my translation).

Photo: courtesy Bibliothèque cantonale et universitaire—Lausanne



16 The gender of Wodaabe dancers was sometimes misread. In US reviews and film showings, they were sometimes likened to the men in *Paris is Burning*, a 1991 film about competitive drag balls in New York.
Photo: courtesy Miramax

17 Wodaabe dancers' gender can seem ambiguous in closeups that show only their painted faces, headdresses and jewelry, such as this image from the *Millennium* book that accompanied the television series of the same name.
Photo: courtesy Carol Beckwith

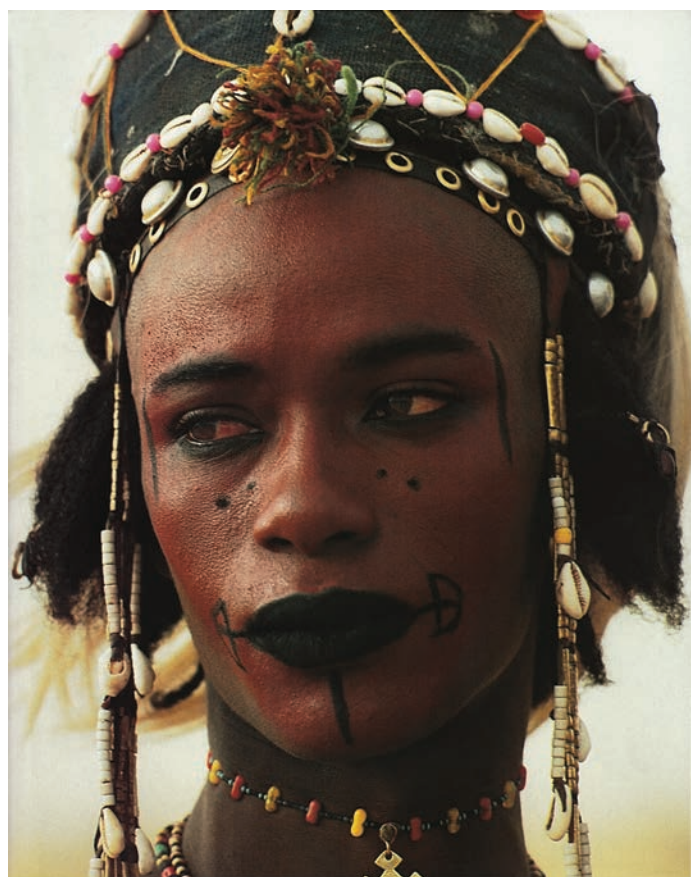
18 In this scene, the young Wodaabe woman declares, "I will be full woman tonight." Screenshot frame from *The Art of Living* episode of the *Millennium* television series, 1992.
Photo: PBS Video

and between members of the same lineage for acknowledgment as the most desirable among them" (Gardner 1981). He eschews sexual interpretations and in his journal declares, "there is no room for personal or romantic notions; it is principally social in significance" (Gardner 1981, 2006:213).²⁴ *La Femme Volée* appeared the year before, with the sexual emphasis that became prominent, asserting that *geerewol* is intended to seduce women.

The three films released in 1988 split on this theme. All were made for television: one in Granada Television's *Disappearing World* series; a National Geographic profile with Carol Beckwith; and Werner Herzog's *Herdsmen of the Sun*, made for French television. Note that these films put Wodaabe on television in three countries, available for wider distribution. *Geerewol* figures in the first two, but dominates neither, and neither comments on sexual opportunities at the dance.

Herzog's film, however, has a significant focus on *geerewol*,²⁵ even as it shows other scenes and Wodaabe talk about the drought. He describes it as a marriage market, celebration of beauty, and an occasion where sexual encounters are expected. He says, "young women have taken up their positions; each ... will choose her beau for the night." Interview-like conversations among Wodaabe, a delightful feature of the film, develop this further. A final interview with the winner and the woman who chose him takes place, we are told, after they spent the night together. "Do you love me because of my beauty or my charms?" he asks. She tells him, "I have chosen you with my heart." One reviewer connected with Wodaabe through the interviews, she says, since they seem like us: "worrying about relationships" (Philips 1991).

Geerewol dress, makeup, and dance carry no sense of feminine inversion or cross-dressing for Wodaabe, and Herzog's verbal presentation of *geerewol* is entirely heterosexual. Yet the film's opening introduces gender ambiguity for Euro-American viewers. It shows slow motion head shots with characteristic facial gestures: Dancers widen their eyes, flash their teeth, and turn their heads. The soundtrack is a scratchy recording of Gounod's "Ave Maria."²⁶ Herzog says this redefines the realm of truth, indicating it is a story of beauty and desire, not documentary per se (Cronin 2002:214). The combination—so far contextless—certainly raises questions about beauty and purity, but perhaps also of gender and sexual identity, even for viewers unaware that the 1901 singer



19 Anita Roddick, founder of the Body Shop, appears with Wodaabe and evokes their wisdom in this ad, which appeared in *New York* magazine in November 1995.
 Photo: *The Body Shop/L'Oreal*

20 Some images in Beckwith's book showed scenes or interactions that went beyond the usual portrayals of Maasai.
 Photo: courtesy Carol Beckwith

21 Carol Beckwith features as cultural interpreter in *Way of the Wodaabe*, wearing her own hair in the style of Wodaabe women. Screenshot frame from *Way of the Wodaabe*, 1988.
 Photo: *National Geographic*



is Alessandro Moreschi, the last castrato of the Vatican (Cronin 2002:214; Prager 2007:184). Later scenes have similar musical juxtapositions as Wodaabe men apply masklike facial makeup, but by then narration has made clear that these are men.

These juxtapositions are subtle, fleeting, but striking. Whatever they communicated, the film's reception highlighted sexual promiscuity and cross-dressing. The same review observes breezily, "camels notwithstanding, [it] looks more like *Paris is Burning* than *National Geographic*," referring to the 1991 documentary about gay men competing in New York drag balls (Philips 1991) (Fig. 16). In fact, the two films played together in Chicago and in New York (Maslin 1991). Some commentaries just assume the gender misreading, as analogy collapses into assertions that *geerewol* are "transvestite courting rituals" (Atkinson 2001) of "Desert Drag Queens" (Jolique 2000).

Gender can be visually ambiguous and unstable. When we don't recognize contextual signs that disambiguate gender identity, we tend to read it through our own familiar signs and assumptions. "Beauty contest" signals female competition for Euro-Americans (Pyper 1998:3; Cohen, Wilk, and Stoeltje 1996:2; Hayes 2005:527). Dramatic headshots of dancers' faces minimize other disambiguating signs and contrasts (*TV Guide* n.d.) (Fig. 17). With norms of gender and sexuality still in flux, the dazzling Wodaabe *geerewol* captivated viewers' gendered imaginations and offered exotic titillation.²⁷



The last two films of this period give *geerewol* a sexual framing, cast as romance. Two episodes of the 1992 *Millennium* television series had Wodaabe segments, one on *The Art of Living* and one about marriage and family, *Strange Relations*.²⁸ *Geerewol* is central; contrived "dramatized documentary" foregrounds budding romance between individuals, with accented English narration written in the protagonists' voices. *Geerewol* footage builds this by cutting between the pair to create both tension and narrative relation. In *Strange Relations*, the suitor says, "I will love you to exhaustion." A new sexual wrinkle appears in *The Art of Living* (Fig. 18). The young woman sits with her beau and his friend near the segment's end. Her "English voice" declares, "I will be full woman tonight, I will love both."²⁹

RETURN TO CONJUNCTURE AND SPARKS II

Let me return to the third development shaping the receptive imaginary: growing interest and markets for cultural diversity, indigeneity, world music, and related products in the 1980s and 1990s. The politics of indigeneity gained visibility in the mid-1970s and early 1980s,³⁰ linked with environmentalism (Conklin and Graham 1995). Concurrently, the "commercial potential of world music began developing rapidly in the 1980s," mediated at first through pop star curation (Feld 2000:149–51). These trends carried to other marketing spheres and stoked an appetite for images and experiences related to indigenous peoples.





The Body Shop is a prime example. Sponsor of the *Millennium* series on “tribal wisdom” (during the UN’s International Year for the World’s Indigenous People), the Body Shop used Wodaabe images in magazine advertising (Fig. 19), on billboards, and in *The Body Shop Book* (1994). Founder Anita Roddick visited Wodaabe, apparently searched for skin cream ingredients there, introduced the *Millennium* book (Roddick 1992), and commented on Wodaabe “beauty pageants” in interviews (Bastin 2003; *Newsweek* 1994; Martinez and Villariba 1996; Loftsdóttir 2008:50–55). This is just one piece of how Wodaabe films and images were caught in this wave and rode it to ubiquity.

These three shifts—concern with Sahelian droughts, changing politics of gender and sexuality, and greater interest in and marketing of indigeneity and diversity—reoriented the receptive imaginary as new sparks bolstered attention to Wodaabe materials and accelerated their circulation. I mentioned that this complex second conjuncture had several sparks, in different realms of circulation. Controversies also garnered more attention and images spread further through juxtapositions commenting on Euro-American practices, as with *Paris is Burning*. Films by Gardner and Herzog were two significant sparks, one early in the 1980s and one late in the decade. The third came in between, almost concurrent with Gardner’s *Deep Hearts*, but in print format: Carol Beckwith’s photographic book, *Nomads of Niger* (1983). Since I’ve already introduced the two films, let me consider the nature of their sparkiness before turning to Beckwith.

Robert Gardner’s ethnographic films are some of the most widely viewed. They circulate most extensively in educational settings, but *Deep Hearts* also shows in film festivals.³¹ *Deep Hearts* sparked circulation of Wodaabe images in these contexts because of his prominence and the pedagogical popularity of his films, but also because he is a polarizing figure for what Loizos calls his “rejection of realism” (1993; Ruby 2000:95–113). Gardner seeks to portray universal themes rather than the lives and perspectives of those filmed. Some see his films as poetic compositions (Loizos 1993), others as imposed interpretations unengaged with those filmed. Camera work and montage can seem arbitrary and choppy;

22 Images on the front and back covers of Ornette Coleman’s 1988 *Virgin Beauty* album juxtapose a color photograph of Wodaabe men performing the *yaake* dance with a black-and-white photo of people in attire that recalls 17th century French fashion and features feather headdresses. Records/Sony Music Entertainment. Photos: Front cover: Angela Fisher. Back cover: courtesy the collection of Prince Jean Louis Faucegney

narration can be portentous, contextualization minimal. In *Deep Hearts*, Gardner used Wodaabe performance to think about choice and constraint. The film has quick pans and zooms, seemingly arbitrary slow motion, shots that cut off people’s heads, seemingly unmotivated shots of a woman bathing, and many images of feet. But debates about Gardner’s work increase its visibility and bring his Wodaabe images wider viewing.³²

Later in the decade, Herzog’s *Herdsmen of the Sun* propelled filmic Wodaabe images into wide public view. The other Wodaabe television shows that year were part of this, but Herzog’s film was released more widely. A filmmaker of his stature garnered major reviews³³ and commercial screenings. *Herdsmen* still shows regularly in film festivals and retrospectives.³⁴ A continuing spark, *Herdsmen* has arguably kept Wodaabe film images in circulation more than any other film.

Carol Beckwith’s 1983 book, *Nomads of Niger* is the third spark (Fig. 3), though the spark might better be seen as Beckwith herself as a phenomenon. Three years before, her first book, *Maasai* (1980), appeared with gorgeous photos that amplified stereotypical images with lush color and sensuous detail but also went beyond the usual, like showing the impish side of the Maasai warrior during a jocular moment with an elder (Fig. 20). Next Beckwith went to the Wodaabe, photographing for eighteen months—pictures that brought Wodaabe still images into popular circulation worldwide. She was later involved in film projects. First, in National Geographic’s *Way of the Wodaabe* (1988), Beckwith was onscreen cultural guide, sporting a Wodaabe

coiffure (Fig. 21). Four years later the *Millennium* series listed Beckwith as associate producer on both Wodaabe segments.

Beckwith's partner in later books was Angela Fisher, whose 1984 *Africa Adorned* includes *geerewol* and *yaake* photos taken while visiting Beckwith (1984:6, 147–65). Beckwith and Fisher have since been a veritable joint industry of sensational African imagery, with a formidable PR and marketing arm. Of sixteen books, one focuses on Wodaabe, and Wodaabe feature in four other collections between 1999 and 2004.³⁵ As all this started in the early 1980s, Beckwith's Wodaabe images began to travel far and wide and across domains—from a 1983 *National Geographic* cover story when her book appeared, to a 1989 photo essay in the Zone Books volume *Fragments for a History of the Human Body*, to museum and gallery exhibitions worldwide.³⁶

Apart from her energy, talent, and marketing drive, Beckwith significantly boosted the visibility of Wodaabe images because she made them available in photographic format. Single images could be readily separated from texts and contexts to circulate widely, be incorporated into other formats and uses, and recast³⁷: in press coverage, postcards, calendars, advertising, the mass market *Millennium* and *Body Shop* books, and elsewhere. Ornette Coleman's 1988 *Virgin Beauty* album uses one of Fisher's images for both its English and Japanese versions.³⁸ This cover is now in the Design Archives of the American Institute of Graphic Arts.³⁹

Coleman's album carried the Wodaabe image into jazz arenas, but it also shows how the images are used to comment on our own histories and practice, as with *Paris is Burning*. The album's other photograph—apparently a costume party from the interwar years of the early twentieth century—creates a juxtaposition—perhaps ironic—that lifts the Wodaabe out of the exotic to show parallels, or perhaps expands exotic realms to include us all (Fig. 22).⁴⁰ It is a juxtaposition that raises provocative questions about beauty, gender, dress, and performance.⁴¹

23 Wodaabe images can be found on a wide array of inexpensive merchandise available online, including mouse pads. Screenshot by Corinne Kratz on 4 May 2015. Photo: courtesy Zazzle.com (http://www.zazzle.com/wodaabe_men_in_niger_mouse_pad-144063738901974079)

24 While images of Wodaabe men have circulated most widely, Wodaabe women feature in this widely circulated 2010 advertisement. It was part of an international, multi-ad campaign by HSBC bank. HSBC ad from *The New Yorker*, 4 October 2010. Photo: HSBC



Even as the Beckwith-Fisher Wodaabe images circulated prolifically, others joined the expanding array. In 2000, Benneton's magazine *Colors* included what they called "Wodaabe warriors"⁴² and Wodaabe dancers appeared on a 2003 World Bank brochure (Loftsdóttir 2008:51). Merchandise spinoffs continued: mugs, t-shirts, bags, keychains, CD covers (Fig. 23).⁴³ And HSBC bank ran a 2010 advertising campaign under the rubric "Unlocking the World's Potential" that foregrounded a Wodaabe image by Beckwith, but this time of women (Fig. 24).

The political economies, cross-cultural aesthetics, and timing in this second conjuncture set conditions for Wodaabe images to circulate globally—spreading, recurring, and gaining new uses and meanings. Early in the 1980s, Gardner's film and the Beckwith-Fisher books and photographs established the images in the educational realm, caught the public eye with dramatic photos and exotic-seeming practices, and provided portable versions of stunning pictures that could be reproduced across domains of practice. The decade's end brought new impetus to the proliferation. Herzog's *Herdsmen of the Sun* brought artistic stature to international television presentations between 1988 and 1992 and has sustained a filmic Wodaabe presence ever since. Beckwith and Fisher continued to produce new books with Wodaabe images. These three sparks—supported by other films, photos, and media stories—kept a steady stream of Wodaabe images in the public eye, sedimenting the wide-eyed painted faces of young Wodaabe men into Euro-American popular culture (Fig. 25), and sustaining a worldwide circulation of Wodaabe images that took on other lives in advertising, music album covers, and more.

But let's not forget Wodaabe themselves, for they too were cultivating a presence on the world stage (Boesen 2008a). Developments in Niger during this conjuncture show local and national interactions with the growing circulation of Wodaabe images, with shifts in Wodaabe dance performances, social organization, and international engagements as they and others in Niger shaped and responded to growing interest in their performances and images. Let me briefly outline these developments, as well as the latest Wodaabe films.

"Wodaabe have learned to market themselves, i.e., their craft products, ... cultural performances and ... exotic nomadic way of life" and are now "a folkloristic emblem of their country" (Boesen





25 This two-page spread from Carol Beckwith's book *Nomads of Niger* shows the kind of Wodaabe images that were becoming ubiquitous in the 1980s.

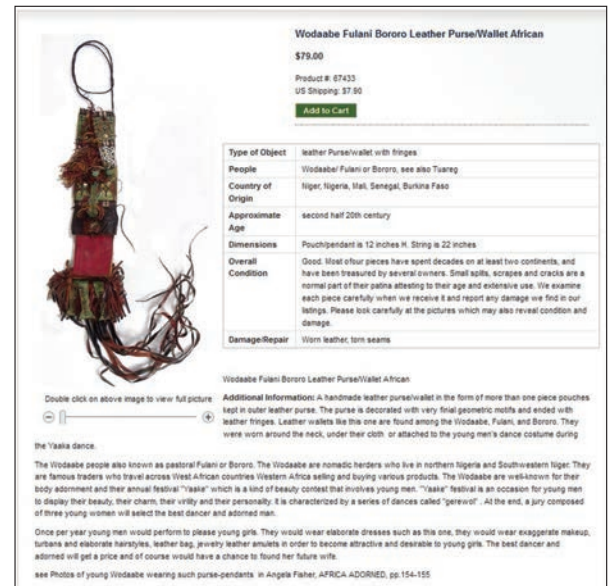
Photo: courtesy Carol Beckwith

2008a:147; cf. Lassibille 2006:116–17). Wodaabe began selling crafts after the 1980s drought (Figs. 26–27); some remained in town or incorporated urban activities in their nomadic cycle (Loftsdóttir 2002:20, 2008:144–45; Boesen 2008b:595).⁴⁴ Dance performances were an income source as young Wodaabe performed in more venues. Those near Niamey began performing in Europe in the 1980s, although this was more common after 1990 (Bovin 1998:106–108, 2001:60).

Synergy between increasing tourism at home, performances abroad, the circulating images, and Nigérien media attention brought more performance opportunities for Wodaabe in the 1990s and 2000s (Lassibille 2006:116, 2009; Bovin 2001:61). This led to shifts in performance schedules and form. *Geerewol* is performed annually at rainy season gatherings, but tourists want performances all year, so Wodaabe stage *yaake* for them (Lassibille 2006:114). Other performance contexts include ceremonies Wodaabe have done for generations; cultural festivals, agricultural shows, or diplomatic occasions in towns; and international festivals (Lassibille 2006:116).

I already mentioned changes to adapt international performances to European expectations, such as performing in lines facing the audience and having presenters explain customs (Lassibille 2006:120–22, 2009:328; Loftsdóttir 2008:195). In Paris in 2003, the performance included on-stage dance preparation, with the audience fascinated to watch young men apply makeup (Boesen 2008a:159). As performances increased, young Wodaabe men initiated a significant organizational change, forming town-based pastoralist associations to coordinate performance tours and take more control of their work conditions. Based on lineage segments, like the dance competitions, associations also began to work with NGOs and on land rights. By 2004, there were sixteen such associations (Boesen 2008a:156–57; Lassibille 2006:117, 2009:312); now there are over thirty.

In 1998, the Nigérien government integrated into the tourist circuit the Cure Salée, the so-called Festival of the Nomads, when Tuareg and Wodaabe gathered yearly.⁴⁵ In 2004 Wodaabe stopped participating and began their own annual *Assemblée Générale des Peuls Wodaabe du Niger*. The Assembly was started by Djingo, a new collective of the pastoral associations formed in the previous decade (Lassibille 2009:312).⁴⁶ The Assembly sought to address a situation in which Wodaabe were unsupported and unpaid, although their dances were the major tourist attraction, and where Tuareg controlled tour group access and fees (Lassibille 2009).⁴⁷



26–27 Wodaabe often sell their crafts at performances now. The totes for sale at left feature hand embroidery by Wodaabe women in an artisan cooperative in Fouduk, Niger. Wodaabe crafts also reach a wider market through online marketers such as the Denver-based Africa Direct, which provides information on each piece and has a staff “Curator of African Art.”
 Photos: Left: RAIN staff in Fouduk; courtesy Rain for the Sahel and Sahara. Right: screenshot by Corinne Kratz, 15 September 2012, courtesy Africa Direct

28 Musical group Etran Finatawa’s first four CDs. Screenshot by Corinne Kratz, 15 May 2015.
 Photo: courtesy Riverboat Records/World Music Network (UK) Ltd. (<http://www.worldmusic.net/>)

29 The website for Etran Finatawa includes an array of images that emphasize nomadic scenes and elements of Wodaabe dress. Screenshot by Corinne Kratz, 7 April 2011.
 Photo: courtesy Etran Finatawa

Etran Finatawa is another product of intersecting interests in world music, nomads, and tourism (Fig. 28). Formed in 2004, it combines Wodaabe and Tuareg musicians as “a gesture of reconciliation and recognition of differences between the two sometimes-feuding groups” (National Public Radio 2008), although that same year Wodaabe started their own Assembly in Niger.⁴⁸ Both on stage and on CDs, they use dress and facial gestures from the dances (Fig. 29). All these phenomena have been fueled, in part, by decades of circulating Wodaabe images—some of their on-the-ground repercussions. They underline the metacultural, and often political, understandings that develop when daily practices and traditions become “heritage” or performance, some of the implications of “being ourselves for you” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2006; Stanley 1998).

As these developments extended into the 1990s and 2000s, defining a later phase of the second conjuncture, attention to Wodaabe and their images continued. New researchers began working with Wodaabe in the mid-1990s, focusing on urban



30 Ouba Hassane teaches his son about Wodaabe tradition, creating a pedagogical frame for presenting cultural interpretation in Sandrine Loncke's film. Screenshot frame from *La Danse des Wodaabe*, dir. Sandrine Loncke, 2010. Berkeley Media LLC.

Photo: courtesy Sandrine Loncke

31 Sandrine Loncke's film includes "back stage" scenes that extend viewers' sense of how Wodaabe dances and ceremonies unfold and the relations that play out through them. In this scene, elders scold young men who do not want to dance. Screenshot frame from *La Danse des Wodaabe*, dir. Sandrine Loncke, 2010. Berkeley Media LLC.

Photo: courtesy Sandrine Loncke



migration, trading, music, and tourism and bringing new insights to contemporary Wodaabe circumstances.⁴⁹ New films appeared after 2000 and photographs continued circulating. In 2002, Michael Palin's travel series *Sahara* became the fifth film-book pairing presenting Wodaabe and *geerewol*, though in a small role.

Another cluster of films appeared late in the decade. In 2007 National Geographic released *Tribal Secrets: The Wodaabe*; three other films were made by researchers Christopher Roy and Sandrine Loncke. *Tribal Secrets* contrasts markedly with the others as "old school." Voice-over and cutesy commentary seem almost caricatured at times, with built in commercial breaks and lines such as:

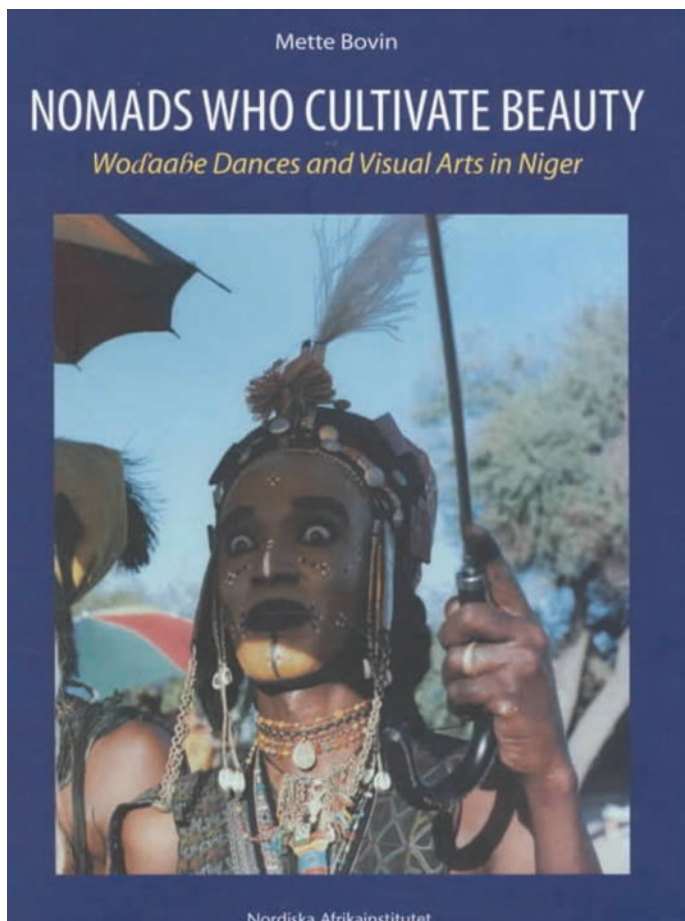
- "It's love Wodaabe style as National Geographic presents *Tribal Secrets: The Wodaabe*."
- "Coming up: Kounche and Mena spend the day at the races and decide to attend the *geerewol* without their wives."
- "When we return: It takes a lot of work to look this beautiful."

That same year, Christopher Roy produced two DVDs, well-suited for teaching, in his *Art and Life in Africa* series. Filmed mostly in Burkina Faso, *Fulani: Art and Life of a Nomadic People* covers many topics, ending with eight minutes of *geerewol* in Niger. The other, *Birds of the Wilderness*, focuses on *geerewol* with some of the same footage (Klemm 2009:95).

The most recent Wodaabe film is ethnomusicologist Sandrine Loncke's 2010 *La Danse des Wodaabe*, awarded the Prix Nanook-Jean Rouch. Its treatment is different, with fresh images and commentary. After ten years of research, Loncke worked with Ouba Hassane and his wife Kedi to present Wodaabe understandings of *geerewol*; they are the voices and guides throughout (Loncke n.d.:5, 9, 13; 2015). The film uses a pedagogical framing: Ouba teaches his son about Wodaabe traditions, with explanation, commentary, myth references, and a far fuller sense of the occasion beyond the dance (Fig. 30).

Entirely in subtitled Fulfulde,⁵⁰ the film describes *geerewol* as ritual war and a lineage contest over marriage—not primarily in terms of individual romance and sexual encounter, although individuals describe their feelings and memories.⁵¹ A broader space/time framing includes scenes where older men exhort youth reluctant to dance





32 With umbrella shade cutting across the Wodaabe dancer's face, the cover of Mette Bovin's book differs sharply from the bright, perfectly lit images that had become canonical through widespread circulation of Wodaabe images by Carol Beckwith and Angela Fisher. Photo: courtesy The Nordic Africa Institute

33 While images of young Wodaabe men have circulated most widely, photos of young Wodaabe women have also been appearing in advertisements and elsewhere in the recent years. This image first appeared in Angela Fisher's 1984 book *Africa Adorned*. Photo: courtesy Angela Fisher

and other interlineage events (Fig. 31). Dance scenes are longer, giving a better sense of songs and showing those leading call lines. Camp scenes also differ. Cloth shades convey a sense of domestic space, not just vast desert sand. The first animals on screen are not majestic cows, but donkeys; the last are goats. Finally, the credits are unique among Wodaabe films: They give full names for lead singers and those who comment on screen.

These are just a few contrasts. Overall, Loncke's film offers an effective, compelling reframing. Earlier films interview Wodaabe, but keep their comments on *geerewol* narrowly focused on beauty, the competition, and sexual and romantic storylines. *La Danse des Wodaabe* allows Wodaabe to explain the event more fully, to show its cultural and emotional significance. In this way, the film provides a more complex, varied sense of Wodaabe perspectives and experience. It remains to be seen whether it significantly alters the web of Wodaabe images and interpretations already sedimented into place.⁵²



CODA

I've told something of a shaggy dog story, almost unavoidable when tracing the paths and transformations of cultural resources through global economies. Sixty-five years ago, Wodaabe images were just beginning to circulate; thirty-five years ago they began to proliferate. By 2000, they were widespread and familiar. Once such a "canon" of images is established, others begin to play off the canon with implicit critiques. Loncke's film might be seen in this light. Likewise Bovin's pictures contrast with Beckwith's luminous images, with umbrella shade right across dancers' faces (2001:105). This seems intentional, when it is on the cover of a book (Fig. 32).

Images of *geerewol* dancers are most widely circulated and seen, but images of young women also circulate now, mainly photos by Beckwith and Fisher (Fig. 33). Are they even recognized as counterparts to the male dancers? Differences among the Wodaabe films are as interesting as their proliferation and there is much more to think about: how images are used and combined, how they construct narratives and treat soundtracks, and more.⁵³ But that will have to wait. For now, I've considered how the Wodaabe case suggests a structure of visual proliferation and offered a winding story to trace how this occurred.

It was a story centrally about circulation, and the complicated loops, jumps, eddies, and quirky transformations involved. It mapped how a convention—at times seeming a visual obsession—becomes established in a global media space, then returns

to local settings before returning back again to a global market. Many circulations were involved—from films and photographs to markets for ethnicity to new forms of self-fashioning and self-marketing among Wodaabe themselves. As local practices and forms of visibility circulated globally in image form, new recursive loops were produced both in Wodaabe practice and in how new images were crafted by non-Wodaabe—with a recursive practice among Euro-American filmmakers, for instance, as well as among Wodaabe dancers. These complex circulations interact in unpredictable ways in the global market but create both new stereotypes and new conceptual resources going forward.

As images and performances circulated beyond the Sahel, viewers attributed to them meanings and understandings congruous with a Euro-American receptive imaginary, resonating with notions of the exotic and indigenous, changing ideas about gender and sexuality, and the ever-romanticized figure of the nomad. In the process, Wodaabe and their images were objectified, sexualized, and commodified—varied processes that often underpin and fuel visual proliferations in global markets. Wodaabe have received relatively little remuneration from the worldwide use of their

images, but they have been able to turn their visual fame, at least in part, to local purposes of political recognition and mobilization, income generation, and community development.

The Wodaabe images are one of many visual proliferations that occur at different times, like an erupting volcano, with varied histories and trajectories sparked from particular conjunctures. Other scholars have traced multifaceted objects, like kente cloth, across time and space to tell complex stories of cultural identity, political engagement, and aesthetic adaptation (Ross 1998), or analyzed how circulating images form “a visual grammar that over time, through successive reproduction and repetition, defined” the Bahamas as “tropical” (Thompson 2006:34; cf. Kratz and Gordon 2002, Kunzle 1997). These episodes are different but at the same time part of a common history of visual encounter and representation of cultural difference. In each case, available technologies and circumstances of communication and circulation at the time shape the range, extent, and rate of proliferation as well. I hope the structure and story of the Wodaabe case will help understand other, parallel processes and proliferations and the histories involved when cultural resources circulate in global economies.

Notes

I started thinking about the proliferation of Wodaabe images at the Institute for Advanced Study in the African Humanities in 1991–1992 when I arranged a program showing the four films I knew then. I continued such screenings in my African Popular Culture courses. This paper was prepared and delivered as the keynote for the 15th Triennial Symposium on African Art (2011) in Los Angeles. Special thanks to Doran Ross, program chair, who was, as always, supportive and irreverent. I presented revised versions as the Distinguished Dean's Lecture at University of the Western Cape, a public lecture for the School for Advanced Research, and at the Harvard African Studies Workshop. Ivan Karp read and commented as this paper took shape; his absence is an ever-present void. Many others discussed the project with me: Mary Jo Arnoldi, Johannes Fabian, Steve Feld, Christraud Geary, Melissa Gilstrap, Patricia Hayes, Dalia Judovitz, Chris Kreamer, Kristin Loftsdóttir, Sandrine Loncke, Joe Masco, Mike McGovern, Susan Rasmussen, Neal Sobania, Bilinda Straight, Jay Straker, Lisa Tedesco, and Leslie Witz. Sandrine Loncke kindly sent copies of her film and the Brandt film. This paper involved obscure sources, stretched loan periods, and other challenges that colleagues at Emory's Woodruff Library met with aplomb and efficiency: Liz McBride, Colin Bragg, Marie Hansen, and Chase Lovellette. Final revisions were completed while I was a Heilbrun Distinguished Emeritus Fellow.

1 Boesen (2008b:582) and Loftsdóttir (2008:11) both give this estimate. Some Wodaabe live in Cameroon and Nigeria. Some use the spelling WoDaaBe to show the glottalized consonants in the Fulfulde language (Loftsdóttir 2008:9 n.1). See Loftsdóttir (2007) on the history of ethnic names for Wodaabe and (2001) on representations of Wodaabe.

2 A Japanese example is on Ornette Coleman's *Virgin Beauty* (http://www.ebay.ca/sch/sis.html?_nkw=ORNETTE%20COLEMAN%20PRIME%20TIME%20VIRGIN%20BEAUTY%20JAPAN%20BLU%20SPEC%20CD%20D73&_itemId=271533704088, accessed 14 October 2014).

3 <http://www.etrان finatawa.com/tour.html>, accessed 6 February 2011; [http://fidjomusic.com/etrان finatawa.html](http://fidjomusic.com/etrان-finatawa.html), accessed 27 April 2015.

4 Websites offering Wodaabe tours include <http://tinawene.com/tour-cure-salee.html>, and <http://www.gwenbooks.com/?p=50> (both accessed 27 November 2014).

5 <http://nomadfoundation.org/about>, accessed 17 September 2017.

6 Cf. Loftsdóttir (2008:48–56); Lassibille (2009:309); Bovin (2001:9). They were “often characterized in older sources as the ‘purest’ form of Fulani culture, due to their close attachment to herding and nomadism” (Loftsdóttir 2008:12). Early portrayals of Wodaabe and Fulani also had racial dimensions (Loftsdóttir 2008:48–50). Fascination with Wodaabe origins and possible rock art connections, a common theme in the films and books, may be a remnant of this earlier construal.

7 Sobania (2002) contrasts more romantic Maasai portrayals with Zulu portrayals as warlike. Both were part of German *Volkerschauen* circuits in the late 1800s, and among the earliest named African groups in European images (Kratz and Gordon 2002:250). Thanks to Neal Sobania for giving me the stereographs in Figures 8 and 9.

8 Neal Sobania, personal communication; Christraud Geary, personal communication

9 Many kinds of cultural resources are also part of such circulations. Feld and Shipley track musical examples (Feld 1996, 2000; Shipley 2013). Gordon (1997) traces how photos and international coverage of a 1920s expedition shaped and circulated representations of Bushmen. Carse (2014) reviews current work on circulation. Hevia's (2009) concept of the “photography complex” draws on Latour to examine photography in imperial practice, looking at photography as a technology, process, set of relations, and archive and seeing some photographs functioning as “immutable mobiles” as they circulate in publications and other outlets.

10 The Tutsi might also be included here, though their portrayal in the 1950s films *King Solomon's Mines* (1950) and *Watusi* (1959) emphasized royal status and intrigues.

11 The figure was also promoted filmically in the 1925 documentary *Grass* about Bakhtiari migrations (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grass_%281925_film%29, accessed 28 February 2011). Literary scholars have constructed a theory based on this idealized figure; “nomadology” is said to resist a single settled perspective to emphasize resistant deterritorialization (Noyes 2004; Okoye 2004). Others find it full of contradiction, with a dubious ethical stance (Miller 1998: Chapter 6; Conteh-Morgan 2000).

12 Fulani appeared on colonial postcards, but

Wodaabe dancers were rarely shown. Bovin notes that Maasai and Tuareg were better known in Europe and had performed in festivals where Wodaabe were later booked (2001:9, 60). Gilvin (2014:44–47) examines how fashion designer Alphadi claims Wodaabe embroidery as a sign of the Nigerian nation.

13 Similarly, Krista Thompson shows how a visual canon of images defined stock figures and landscapes that helped “tropicalize” the Caribbean (Thompson 2006).

14 In most cases the film came first; the accompanying book sometimes echoes the film structure. After Brandt, Bovin worked on two films (1988, 1992) and later did a book (2001); two television series with Wodaabe segments were accompanied by books (*Millennium* [1992] and Michael Palin's *Sahara* [2002]). Moving in the opposite direction, Beckwith's book (1983) led to involvement in film projects (1988 and the *Millennium* series). Rouch (2003:57) and Buache (1998:13) say Brandt spent a year filming, but Brandt says in his film it was six months (cf. DAV 2010). Corthésy (2013) describes how Brandt's book came about.

15 It does not name individuals but portraits and quotes personalize the setting and issues. The conventions of using individual characters and direct dialogue became prominent in ethnographic film in the 1970s, developed earlier by Rouch, MacDougal and others, and echoed in *Habbanaae*. This approach is common to other Wodaabe films except for Gardner's *Deep Hearts*, with its distant, totalizing sense of Wodaabe.

16 Research on history and socioeconomic organization continued in the 1980s with the Niger Range and Livestock Project (Loftsdóttir 2008:235), while Bovin (1974–75, 1998, 2001) and Beckwith and van Offelen (1983) continued the visual emphasis, foregrounding Wodaabe beauty and dances in books and films. Fine research in the past decade on Wodaabe urban migration, trading, and tourism performance bridges these foci (Boesen 2008a, 2008b; Lassibille 2006, 2009; Loftsdóttir 2002, 2008).

17 National Geographic's *Way of the Wodaabe* (1988) features Beckwith and she is associate producer on two *Millennium* episodes (1992) with Wodaabe segments.

18 Brandt's film still shows occasionally in Swiss and French ethnographic film programs. Between his film and Gardner's, I identified two other Wodaabe films: *Les Hommes du Dernier Soleil* (1972) by Swiss

filmmaker Paul Lambert and the short *La Femme Volée* (1980) by French filmmakers Nena Baratar and Geneviève Louveau. I have not been able to view them but synopses suggest that both foreground the *geerewol*. Lambert covers Tuareg and Wodaabe at the Cure Salée rainy season gathering. *La Femme Volée* appeared just before *Deep Hearts*. It centers on beauty and dance, but introduces the sexual emphasis that becomes prominent in the 1980s. The two films are rarely cited by later researchers, though *La Femme Volée* sometimes shows at French documentary festivals (Bibliothèque Nationale de France 2008:6).

19 In the 1990s, Loftsdóttir heard about people in the colonial era coming to the bush to ask for performances (Loftsdóttir 2008:193).

20 Niger became independent in 1960, so this may refer to celebrations when the First Republic of Niger was established in 1959, semi-independent under France.

21 Bovin sees expanded performances as fighting marginalization. Performances have also become “more colourful and extravagant since the 1970s” (1998:108).

22 Gay rights groups burgeoned in the United States after the 1969 Stonewall Rebellion in New York City. A decade later, in the 1980 US presidential election, the Democratic National Convention supported gay rights and the *Village Voice* newspaper became the first business to offer domestic partnership benefits in 1982 (Head n.d.). ActUp (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) formed in 1987 and began highly visible demonstrations as the second group of Wodaabe films in this conjuncture began to appear.

23 At least half the screen time is spent on makeup and dance shots.

24 The film commentary underlines this too: “The winner will be known as the Bull, though his election is based not on sexual mastery, but only on appearance” (Gardner 1981). Only one brief line offers any support for later misreadings of *geerewol* as transvestism: “Only in the *geerewol* dances do the men wear skirts made from women’s cloth” (1981). This observation has no support from other sources.

25 Slightly less than half the screen time is spent on makeup and dance shots.

26 See the opening sequence at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MlnO1QDqpaQ>, accessed 22 September 2017.

27 In another case of misconstrued gender identity, a German newspaper in 2001 identified a photo as “female Wodaabe seduction dancers” since the otherness created by their makeup and facial gestures is often considered “effeminate” or “androgynous” by Europeans and Americans (Boesen 2008a:148 n.20). My “Okiek Portraits” exhibition met similar gender misreadings of photographs from Kenya because of different gender conventions related to hair and names (Kratz 2002:205–206).

28 Metta Bovin released a third Wodaabe film in Danish in 1992. *På Tchad-søens bund—En film om et venskab* (On the bottom of Lake Chad—A film about friendship) has had limited distribution. I have not been able to view it.

29 This may refer to a practice described by Beckwith and Fisher: Male cousins may court the same woman and sleep with the other’s wife, with her consent (1999:178; 2004:77–79).

30 Indicators include the first international conference of indigenous peoples in 1974 and the first meeting of the United Nations Working Group of Indigenous Populations of the Subcommission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities of the Commission on Human Rights in 1982.

31 Gardner’s films are distributed by Documentary Educational Resources and the Royal Anthropological Institute, education-oriented organizations. Festival

showings for *Deep Hearts* include the 1980 Melbourne International Film Festival, a 2008 Gardner retrospective at DOCDSE, Mexico City, and a 2013 Gardner focus at an American Film Institute festival in April 2013. Loizos says Gardner’s films are among the most widely viewed by anthropology students (1993:139); Ruby declares them among best-known ethnographic films (2000:95; cf. Barbash and Taylor 2007).

32 See also Nichols (1991:38–39). The *Millennium* series and book (Maybury-Lewis 1992) were also critiqued in the academy. Some lauded Maybury-Lewis for taking anthropology to the public (Benthall 1992); *Millennium* was reviewed widely and expected to reach 40 million viewers (Knight 1993:22). Viewership extended with classroom adoption. Others were critical of its “collapsing wildly different societies in one mushy ‘tribal’ image,” lack of “attention ... to the range of experiences and situations of indigenous peoples today” and contribution “to the formation of tribal ‘chic’” (di Leonardo 2000:35; Knight 1993:23, original emphasis). Beidelman calls it “intellectually muddled, glib, misleading, sententious work” (1992:508). But *Millennium* widened circulation of Wodaabe images and bridged public, scholarly, and educational domains.

33 Including *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Newsday*, *Village Voice*, and *TV Guide* in the US.

34 For example, the Herzog retrospective in London at the NFT toured nationally in 2001, at the same time that the Edinburgh International Film Festival offered a retrospective of his documentaries. New York’s Film Forum did a major Herzog retrospective in 2007.

35 This includes three versions of *African Ceremonies*: a two volume edition (1999), 100 selected images in an exhibition tour published as *Passages* (2000), and a concise version (2002) (<http://africanceremonies.com/books/>, accessed 14 February 2011). The fourth is *Faces of Africa*, issued in two trim sizes (2004, 2009). *Nomads of Niger* was reprinted in 1993, but the publisher could not provide lifetime sales numbers because their royalty tracking system changed twice over the years.

36 I was unable to secure permission to reproduce the *National Geographic* cover image, but it can be seen at <http://www.amazon.com/National-Geographic-October-Nigers-Wodaabe/dp/B00301ZTWS> (accessed 27 October 2015). Exhibitions were at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, Carnegie Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Museum of African Art, Borges Cultural Center of Buenos Aires, National Museums of Kenya, and other venues in Australia, Europe, the United States, and Japan (<http://www.africanceremonies.com/about/>, accessed 16 March 2011).

37 On processes of decontextualization and recontextualization, see Bauman and Briggs (1990) and Silverstein and Urban (1996). Photographic rights are a continuing issue. European tour organizers often retain rights and control of photos of touring Wodaabe dancers (Loftsdóttir 2008:198). Beckwith and Fisher created a foundation that assists communities where they worked. Beckwith may donate some proceeds to Wodaabe, but agreements are not publicly available (<http://www.africanceremonies.com/foundation/>, accessed 16 March 2011). The School for Advanced Research contacted Beckwith and Fisher’s agent when I presented this paper as a public lecture. The fee for a nonprofit educational organization to use one image on the lecture flyer was \$1500.

38 It is a cropped version of the photo on pp. 154–55 of *Africa Adorned*.

39 See http://designarchives.aiga.org/#/entries/Ornette%20Coleman%20%E2%80%9CVirgin%20Beauty%E2%80%9D/_/detail/relevance/asc/0/7/10615/ornette-coleman--prime-timevirgin-beauty/1, accessed 29 September 2017.

40 Scholars of French cultural history (Judovitz, personal communication; Miller, personal

communication) thought these costumes were inspired by seventeenth century French theatricals or court fashion, and that the image itself recalled Carnival, or a masquerade theme ball in the 1930s or 1940s.

41 Searching for the collection credited for the photograph on the CD cover, the collection of Prince Jean Louis Faucegney, returned no further information. However, results with a different variation of the name, Jean-Louis de Faucigny-Lucinge, seem to confirm my colleagues’ provenance for the scene. A blog identifies him as attending and hosting some of the most memorable costume balls in France between the two world wars (<https://nursemyra.wordpress.com/tag/costume-ball/>, accessed 2 June 2015) and he is also the author of a 1987 book on famous costume balls entitled *Legendary Parties, 1922–1972*.

42 http://www.benetton.com/coloexb/web/content_press.html, accessed 16 December 2010.

43 For instance Manu Chao’s 1998 album *Clandestino* uses Wodaabe images (Lassabile 2009:114).

44 Wodaabe women also became traders in the dry season. They use proceeds for consumer goods and items for their household displays. Boesen notes aesthetic parallels between the gleaming brightness preferred in displays and similar qualities sought in personal appearance and the line of *yaake* dancers (2008b:587, 595).

45 The government-created festival for Western visitors is sponsored by international corporations like Coca-Cola. One Wodaabe noted, “It is more and more of a circus. The government sets the date artificially, decides who gets to perform, and creates a structure none of us understand” (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cure_Salee, accessed 18 March 2011).

46 See <http://www.djingo.net/en/index.htm> (accessed 11 October 2014).

47 The Assembly is not just for tourists but also an occasion when Wodaabe lineages hold meetings and where connections are made with NGOs and aid organizations (<http://www.djingo.net/en/index.htm>, accessed 11 October 2014). The Sahara of Cultures and Peoples project may further transform and expand both Wodaabe performances and circulation of their images (Lassabile 2009; UNESCO n.d.a, n.d.b).

48 See <http://fdjomusic.com/etran-finatawa.html>, accessed 27 April 2015. Cf. the Tuareg performance ensemble Tartit, who tour internationally and “fashion themselves as both extremely exotic and essential figures of a nomadic lifestyle that flourished in a spell-binding desert realm a world away” (Straker 2008:82).

49 The new researchers include Lassabile, Loncke, Loftsdóttir, and Boesen.

50 In other Wodaabe films I have seen, only the soundtrack of the *Disappearing World* series’ Wodaabe episode also consists entirely of ambient sound and subtitled interviews.

51 Similarly, Loftsdóttir sees *geerewol* as a contest for prestige and power among men as much as about winning women (2008:188).

52 It now has a US distributor: http://www.berkeleymedia.com/catalog/berkeleymedia/films/environmental_issues/dance_with_the_wodaabes, accessed 11 October 2014.

53 *Geerewol* sequences themselves vary considerably: from where they first appear, to how they are cut in throughout or concentrated in sections, to how they are filmed.

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