

Mette Bovin

NOMADS WHO CULTIVATE BEAUTY

Wodaabe Dances and Visual Arts in Niger



Nordiska Afrikainstitutet



Why do young men use mirrors and make-up more than girls? Why do the Wod'aaɓe nomads of West Africa have beauty parades for men? Wod'aaɓe's extraordinary and unique live performances are often misunderstood by outsiders. The book provides some answers about these aesthetic activities. One answer is courtship and "wife-stealing ceremonies" involving enemy clans, another is ethnic identity. Beauty and existence are linked. Wod'aaɓe dances and visual arts are not "exotic" but are arenas for social action and identity politics in the largely agricultural society of the arid regions of Niger, Nigeria and Chad.

The author describes Wod'aaɓe cultural choices as "active archaisation". Different art forms are analysed in the light of identity construction by the Wod'aaɓe. Their elaborate cultivation of beauty in make-up, tattoos, body paintings, calabash carvings, embroideries, and architecture all follow the principle of symmetry and order in the cosmos. The author emphasizes the gendered aspects of social life and identity construction and explores masculinity among nomadic Wod'aaɓe men, who are living sculptures displaying their beauty as a spiritual act, full of honour and dignity.

Mette Bovin, is a social anthropologist from Århus University in Denmark. Between 1964 and 1978 she worked among West African agricultural and nomadic cultures and societies. She spent eight years among Wod'aaɓe nomads between 1968 and 2000 in Niger, Nigeria, Chad, Cameroon, and speaks their language, Fulfulde. She was researcher at Nordiska Afrikainstitutet in Uppsala, Sweden, 1993–98, running the project on "Nomads of the Drought in Sahel: Survival Strategies". Mette Bovin has produced a number of books, articles, films, theatre performances, and museum exhibitions on West Africa.

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