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 Wođaañe nomads of West Africa have beauty parades for men? Wođaañe’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. Wođaañe 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 Wođaañe cultural choices as “active archaisation”. Different art forms are analysed in the light of identity construction by the Wođaañe. 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 Wođaañe 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 Wođaañe 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.