

Gerewol: The Seduction Festival

I had eyed the Gerewol Festival Male Beauty contest for many years. In my work as an anthropologist who studies gender, sexuality and partnering patterns, this unique festival where young single men dress and dance seductively to attract lovers had been on my bucket list for years. The attendees, Wodaabe pastoralists who habit the Sahel desert in Niger, gather in late September at the end of the grazing season. Due to concerns regarding safety and security, tourists had not been able to visit the festival for several years. There was anxiety about Boko Haram style-kidnappings.... anyone who seemed connected to wealth was considered to be at risk.

As an anthropologist, I visited Africa some 20 years ago to study traditional polygyny amongst the Luo and Maasai peoples of East Africa and then as a tourist nearly 10 years ago to absorb the *mélange* of Muslim, Berber and French cultures in Morocco's market cities, deserts and beaches. To further my understanding of Africa, just prior to arriving in Niger, I spent ten days exploring South Africa. Apart from the remaining structural and cultural vestiges of Apartheid (wherein white Euro-Africans continue to own more land and control more resources than black Africans and anxiety over black on white violence is ever present), the cities were easily manageable for a Western traveler. Uber taxis arrived quickly, tap water was drinkable, credit cards were widely accepted (even in casual craft markets) and tourist attractions like game parks, world class museums and the fantastic views from Cape Town's Table Mountain and Robben Island (the now defunct prison complex where Nelson Mandela was held) were easy to access.

Then one mid-September morning the world around me changed. I caught an Uber to the Cape Town airport and soon I was on board a flight to Addis Ababa Ethiopia. The flight was nearly seven hours long; I was one of the few pale-skinned travelers aboard. Announcements were made in Ethiopian, French and occasionally in English. I stepped off the plane in Addis Ababa into the dead of night. After a series of encounters with official looking people with rubber stamps, I was given a transit visa, a ride to a nearby hotel and a dinner with limp vegetables, spicy beef and warm rice. In that the following morning a political demonstration was expected to fill the streets, we were woken up at 5 am to ensure a safe arrival back to the airport. I gulped a quick cup of tea and then wandered the very international Bole Airport. Eventually I found my way into a lounge and helped myself to some soft sour injera bread, spicy potatoes and scrambled eggs. As my 12-hour-layover ended, I set out to locate the departure area for my flight to Niamey, the capital city of Niger. It was in a whole other section of the airport, down many stairs in a relatively remote area. Bags were re-inspected, heavy carry-ons were checked and then I was aboard a bus that was a slight distance from the plane. My light rosy skin was a complete anomaly as I boarded the five-hour-flight to Niger.

To me, Niger felt like the other side of the world. It was hot, most of the streets were unpaved and most of the buildings were made of mud and straw. Everything was a pale coffee brown. Entry into the airport involved finger scans of both hands, a perusal of my previously arranged visa, a passport stamping and then an examination (by another official) of the just-stamped passport page. Mahaman, my Nigerien tour guide, flashed a piece of paper with my name on it and I flashed back a thumbs up. He helped me gather my travel bag and along with two other travelers from the same flight, we headed into the bumpy streets of Niamey.

Very few Americans would ever consider going to Niger for a vacation. It's intensely hot for at least five midday hours, reducing productivity to a sleepy crawl. Air conditioning is rare in public places and barely functional in hotel rooms. To me the country was reminiscent of Mexico in the 1970s when I first submerged myself into participant-observation style ethnographic field research. There were donkeys hauling huge loads, barely adolescent girls with babies strapped to their backs and the cost of everything was negotiated. Cash machines were only found in spiffy hotels in the capital city (and were often on the fritz) and no one could make change. Whenever I had cash, it would disappear quickly. I had no idea what things were actually worth and suspect I made many donations to the conniving vendors of Niger!

Mahaman, wasn't exactly my personal guide; he was responsible for 50 other festival guests from all over the world. Included were sub-groups of Taiwanese, Dutch, Polish, Germans and then my group which was international. It was made up Italians, Spaniards, a Swiss woman, an Argentinian couple, a guy from Croatia and two East Coast Americans. My roommate was a recently-retired flight attendant from Barcelona who has a passion for visiting remote peoples and places. I was the only one attending who had ever been to Burning Man, an international festival that also features seduction, the possibility of meeting new lovers and also occurs in a remote desert.

We were part of a 10-car caravan which traversed some of the worst roads I'd ever seen. The cars were four-wheel drive SUVs in varying states of repair. Every time there was a flat tire or a dead battery, everyone halted and our skilled drivers rushed to the scene. Ultimately, it took us three days to get to the festival – during the second and third days we were escorted by an open bed-truck with state soldiers whose guns were trained on all possible disturbances. This military attaché struck me as theater. Our three-day drive through Niger featured a wide open completely safe looking dusty brown desert sprinkled with lakes and small villages each with their own mosque and main street market place.

It was evening when we arrived at the Gerewol festival. As a professor of cultural anthropology, I'd given hundreds of lectures on Pastoralism – the unique mode of production wherein a people are interdependent on herds of animals. It was my first time to be fully witness to this world! The festival grounds were filled with grazing herds of camels, goats, sheep and cows. Alongside, were serviceable donkeys and horses. Mahaman's crew pitched pup tents, set up tables and shade structures and made dinner. We were encouraged to visit the dancing that had just started.

I walked through a herd of resting camels and a smattering of goats until I could hear a distant whining chant. As I approached a clearing, my eyes literally popped. While many of the tourists had their eyes trained through long camera lenses, I just gazed in wonderment. There they were—the androgynously slender Wodaabe young men engaging in the time worn Yakee dance! Their faces were painted with gold yellow stripes down their thin tan noses, evoking light and play. Black eye-liner and black lipstick set off their shiny white teeth and the whites of their beautiful dark eyes. They were no longer *National Geographic* photographs – I could smell them, touch them...they were absolutely real! Eventually, I calmed myself down and focused them through my own camera lens.

It was a process for me to truly make sense of all that I was seeing. First there was all that I had previously read, then there was what Mahaman said was going on, then there was what I saw with my own eyes and finally there were my anthropological assessments of the scene – what it meant to the participating dancers, their own support communities and then larger theoretical meanings. During the hot afternoons while my fellow tourists would sit under shade structures, drinking copious amounts of bottled water and discuss the details of their return flights, I would grab my yellow note pad and sit alone in the hot sun and write. Perhaps, the festival was a culturally sanctioned means for the expression of adolescent male sexuality? My hot brain would then reflect on the utter contempt that my own Western culture has for young men's intense needs for erotic expression.

I contemplated what it would be like if guys everywhere were provided a singular prescription for how to effectively attract women. Like the Wodaabe they'd be provided with make-up, costumes, dance-steps and an arena in which to present themselves. Moreover the prescription would be unilaterally endorsed by their communities in such a way that everyone celebrated their beauty and their sexuality. Over the next several days, this is exactly what I witnessed!

The following night the gold yellow stripes gave way to full-faced dark red make-up for the seduction dance. An elderly woman and several older men inspected the line of dancers wielding the same sort of sticks that herdsmen use to keep their flocks in order. A time-worn culturally prescribed standard was being enforced—the dancing men were to roll their eyes and quiver their lips to effectively display their gleaming and healthy attributes. Those who presented the most effectively, were moved to the center of the lineup of dancers. By the third night, two young women, were appointed to make their personal selections. The crowd of onlookers swelled in anticipation. These were a people who very much value beauty...And the winning men might possibly find life-long mates!

As I photographed the anxious men and scrutinizing girls, I was suddenly caught up in a stampede and rushed to the edges for personal safety. Adjacent to the festival rituals there was a large encampment of attendees who due to herding responsibilities only see each other once a year. Like Burning Man, attending the Gerewol Festival, functions as a home coming.

Each night a big fire is built and the young men line up to dance, flashing seductive gazes to gain approval of both the elder judges and ultimately their female age mates.

Ultimately, the seduction dances net good results. After the ritual choice dance, many less-monitored seductions occurred. A shared night in a Wodaabe dancer's tent could lead to a year-long trial partnership. If a baby were produced and the couple enjoyed their time together, the Gerewol Festival would mark the start of a life together. If not, a couple, could leave their baby for a grandmother to raise and return the following year in search of someone more beautiful! Reflecting on Burning Man, largely the same thing happens. There are trial couplings...some last and some don't. And certainly returning subsequent years can lead to finding a better-matched partner.

Certainly there were signs of culture change. Several young men carried boom boxes, solar panels, and themselves photographed the event with cell phones. One vendor created a cell-phone charging station equipped with solar panels, a car battery and a series of power strips which I gratefully patronized. Vendors brought handmade crafts to sell to the tourists, some were recently made while others appeared to be well-worn. Scatterings of women would show up at our camp begging for a "cadeau" (gift). I wondered if they were simply being opportunistic or if in fact Niger's thin infrastructure was weighing on them.

I surmised a conundrum. While the Wodaabe pastoral life style is very much sustainable within the extensive grasslands of Niger, opportunities for higher education and access to life-changing resources barely exist. If a child were to attend school, s/he would have to live with relatives in a city and leave behind the pastoral way of life. Eventually all of these unique and sustainable cultural practices would be up for grabs. The people I witnessed appeared to be healthy and purposeful. Their robust cultural practices left them impermeable to Christian or Muslim conversion as well as state controlled marriage. In the end, I'd been witness to an extraordinary festival with no commemorative T-shirts or Chinese knock-offs and a people who were free to fully access sex, new lovers and ultimately life partners