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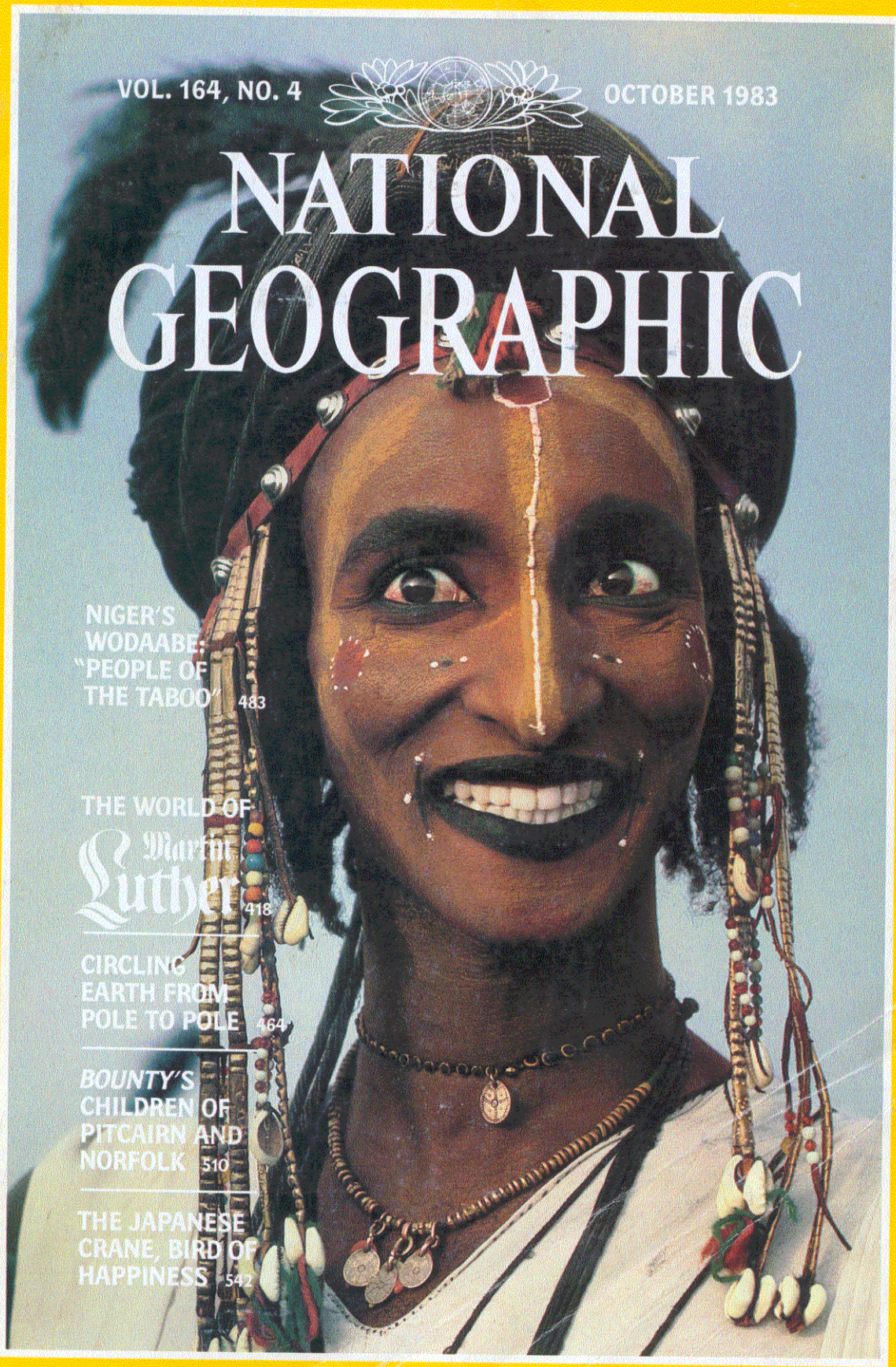

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Niger's Wodaabe: "People of the Taboo"

Article and photographs by CAROL BECKWITH

TALL, LITHE, AND FINE FEATURED in the way of the Wodaabe nomads of Niger, Mokao was properly indirect in declaring his fondness for me. Taking aside my friend and traveling companion, Marion van Offelen, he confessed he would like to have me as his second wife.

"But I do not know how to approach her father, though I will gladly ride to him on camelback. How many cattle should I offer for Fatiima?"

Months before, when he had taken me into his family, he had given me this Wodaabe name. And though I had tried to explain the great distance that separated me from my Boston parents, he could not imagine a place more distant than a good camel could travel.

According to the custom of *teegal*—any marriage that is not prearranged by parents—Mokao could, if I agreed, simply abduct me, slaughter a sheep, and, with that short celebration, we would be wed. He suspected this procedure might not be appropriate in my case.

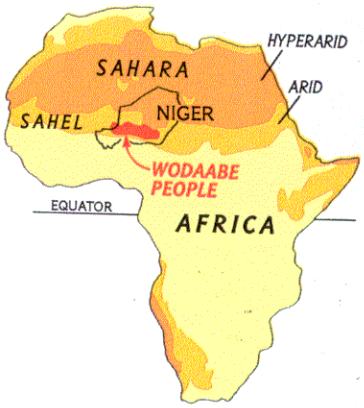
Fortunately, patience is an important and time-honored Wodaabe trait, and he was prepared to wait as long as necessary for my answer.

I was not totally unprepared for this roundabout proposal. For the past year I had lived with the Wodaabe, photographing and drawing them for a book Marion and I were preparing.*

Marion, a Belgian writer and anthropologist, had preceded me, establishing herself much earlier among these little-known people. They are now widely scattered, for the most part, across the sub-Sahara Sahelian steppe in the West African republic of Niger.

Roughly bounded by desert in the north and savanna in the south, the territory they cover in their ceaseless search for grass and water to sustain their herds is not easily measured. I estimate it to be about 250,000 square kilometers (96,500 square miles).

No one knows where the Wodaabe originated. Many



To charm women, *Wodaabe men in makeup and hand-embroidered tunics (**facing page**) exaggerate their features during an all-male dance. In the nomads' unending migration across the arid Sahel, Wodaabe rituals reflect admiration of masculine beauty.*

**Nomads of Niger,* with photographs by Carol Beckwith and text by Marion van Offelen, will be published this month by Harry N. Abrams, Inc., New York, and Editions du Chêne, Paris, and in 1984 by William Collins Sons & Co., Ltd, London.

scholars believe it to be the upper Nile basin in what is now Ethiopia, although a few suggest Egypt, where ancient art depicts individuals of strikingly similar appearance. The Wodaabe are part of the Fulani ethnic group, whose six million members are now mostly semi-sedentary. Only the Wodaabe, who today number about 45,000 in Niger, remain as nomadic as their ancestors.

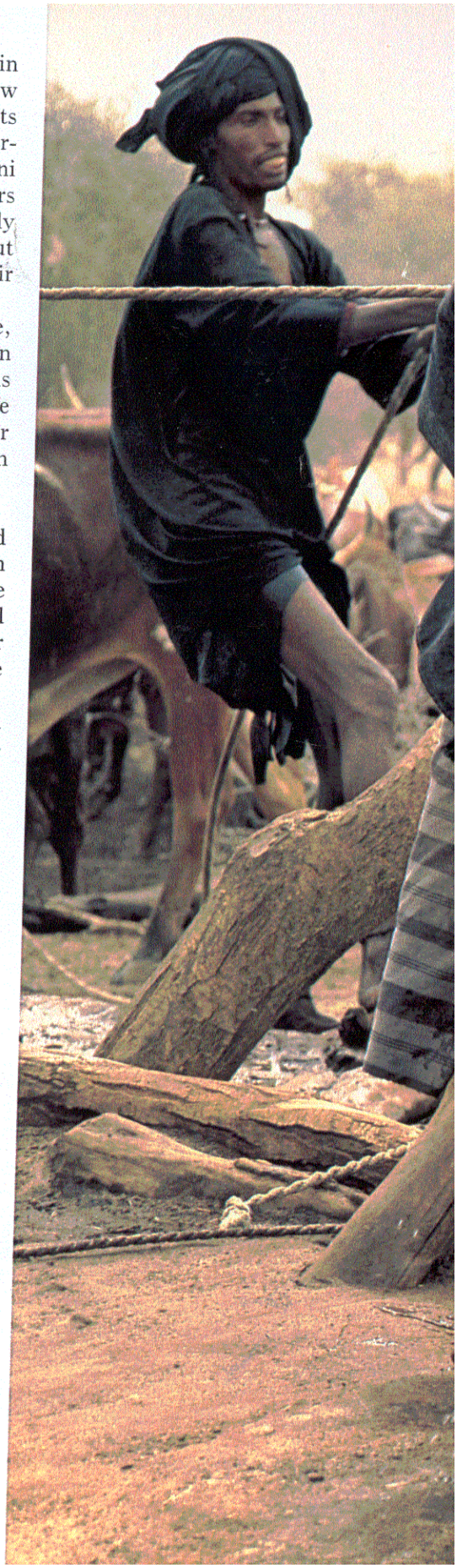
For an intimate view of Wodaabe life, Marion and I had decided to concentrate on one family unit—Mokao and some 30 of his close relatives. He expressed great pleasure over our choice: "For us there is no greater happiness and honor than those we can count as friends and guests."

SINCE OUR FIRST MEETING we had traveled many miles together. With Marion's help I had already learned the rudiments of the Wodaabe culture and Fulfulde, the language they share with other Fulani peoples. Mokao patiently taught me how to manage better with both.

Through him I came to understand and eventually to identify with these proud nomadic people who long ago discovered how to live in harmony with their harsh environment and wrest from it the bare subsistence it provides.

Rarely exposed to outsiders, the Wodaabe continue to preserve the traditions and taboos of ages past. Prohibitions imposed upon their behavior are both rigid and plentiful. For example: When Wodaabe greet each other, they may not look each other directly in the eyes. During daylight a man cannot hold his wife's hand in public, call her by name, or speak to her in a personal way. Parents may never talk directly to their first- and second-born children or refer to them by name.

Free of the preoccupations of technological societies, the Wodaabe retain a high respect for human relationships, physical



Sharing a grueling task, *women haul water drawn by oxen from a 40-meter (130-foot) well. A necklace of talismans on the woman at right marks her as a nursing mother, who may not be touched by any man, even her husband.*

beauty, and the natural world on which their fate depends. These hereditary values have survived because the Wodaabe temperament is both elusive and nonaggressive.

"We are like birds in the bush," one elder said. "We never settle down, and we leave no trace of our passage. If strangers come too close, we fly to another tree."

To avoid pressures from British colonial rulers and local Muslim chiefs, the Wodaabe fled Nigeria at the end of the 19th century. Only the old ones remember hearing from their fathers of the migration, and why they chose the hostile Sahel as their present home. "Here we are free to follow our tradition. We have room to move with our animals when and where we please."

ONE OF THE MOST important values expressed in Wodaabe behavior is hospitality. When Marion and I first arrived, Mokao's wife, Mowa, brought an armful of long poles to "the area for greeting guests." There she assembled a Wodaabe-style portable bed on spool-shaped legs so that we would not have to sleep on the ground. We later found out that this was her wedding bed, a present from her mother when Mowa first joined her husband's encampment.

Mokao began my education immediately. "In our tradition we have a code of behavior which emphasizes *semteende,* reserve and modesty; *munyal,* patience and fortitude; and *hakkilo,* care and forethought. This code, along with our many taboos, was given to us by our ancestors. In fact, Wodaabe means 'people of the taboo.' "

When I asked him how he would rate me on *boodal*—physical beauty—he showed no reserve whatsoever in providing a complete vertical analysis.

"Fatiima, you are fine from your forehead to below your nose. You are less interesting between your nose and your chin. From your neck to your waist you are beautiful, but between your waist and your thighs you are not very good. Your knees and ankles are excellent, and your feet are the most beautiful of all. You have pale skin, which we admire, your hair is black like ours, and your dark eyes are not the blue ones that our children believe cannot see."

Sensing his remarks had made me a bit self-conscious about my shortcomings, Mokao hastily gave me high marks in *togu*—charm, personality, and magnetism. "For us that is far more important than physical beauty. Those blessed with togu will never be alone."

Mowa was as candid as Mokao when she told me the Wodaabe did not like my hairstyle. "It is too short and too bushy; in a word, unbecoming. Grow it long so I can braid it and make you more attractive."

Two months later I was ready to place my head in her lap and submit to the three-hour tressing she recommended. Separating my hair into sections, she ran a line of butter down each part. Then, pulling the strands so tightly I scrunched up my face and squealed, she wove them into the approved coiffure of two side braids, a topknot, and an elaborately layered arrangement reaching from my crown to nape.

FOR COMFORT AND CONFORMITY I had by this time adopted native dress: embroidered chemise-like top and knee-length, wraparound skirt. Now Mowa's daughter by a former marriage, Nebi, suggested she pierce my ears with the usual thin, sharp thorn, adding in each ear seven more holes above the one I already had. This would enable me to wear eight pairs of large silver or brass loop earrings as do most Wodaabe women. My courage failed with the second puncture.

I resisted completely the campaign to permanently tattoo my temples and cheeks with geometric designs and the corners of my mouth with fan-shaped patterns as is the custom. Instead, I accepted the use of erasable black kohl when I wished to create the same effect. The men, who excel at makeup because their *(Continued on page 497)*

Sidesaddle perch *on grandmother's feet keeps a baby girl free of the sand during a bath. Wodaabe taboo prohibits a mother from speaking to her first- or second-born child and—except for nursing—strictly limits physical contact with them. Other relatives, especially grandparents, lavish care and affection on the children.*

(Continued from page 488) ceremonial appearances demand this skill, delighted in doing these facial decorations for me.

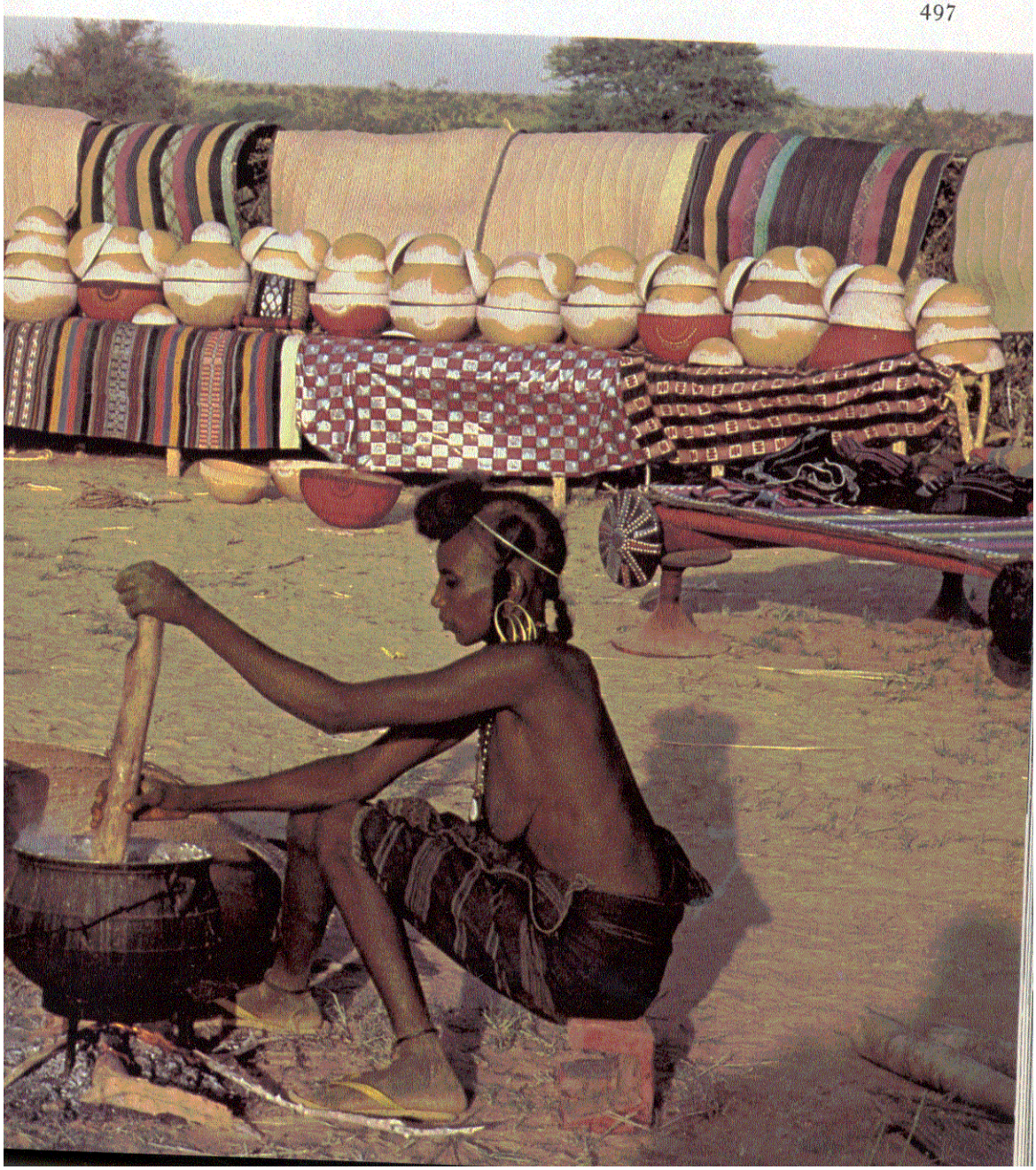
My physical transformation was more easily achieved than adjusting to my Wodaabe hosts' overwhelming generosity.

Though Marion and I had joined Mokao's encampment at the peak of the dry season when milk—almost the only food in the Wodaabe diet—was extremely scarce, Mowa brought us a calabash full. Nor did she stint in giving us millet porridge, a necessary supplement as the milk supply shrinks.

"If you have guests and there is little milk," said Mokao's father, Gao, "you give what you have to them and you eat nothing. With plenty of cows and milk to share, the heart is happy. Everyone will come and see you and respect you."

Our attachment to the Wodaabe deepened as Marion and I traveled by foot, camel, and donkey with Mokao and his kin—father, brothers, their wives and children. As haphazard as their movements at first seemed to be, I was told that each family group has a well-defined travel pattern from which it seldom strays.

As the October-to-May dry season became more severe, the herds were directed in ever widening circles around a family-owned well in search of dwindling patches of pasture.



However far away grazing is found, the undernourished stock must be led back to the well at frequent intervals to be watered. To accomplish this, herdsmen engage in the backbreaking, day-long chore of toting the full 30-liter buckets, hoisted up by ox power, from well rim to long, shallow drinking troughs nearby. Often the animals' thirst seems unquenchable.

Sharing Mowa's stores for our rations, Marion and I carried little with us beyond bare essentials. Wodaabe wives, ever on the move, must transport everything they own: beds and mats, clothes both ceremonial and everyday, cooking utensils, sacks of millet, newborn animals, young children, and an abundance of large, round calabashes.

For, while a man measures his worldly wealth in cattle and children, his wives measure theirs in calabashes. Of the many they acquire in a lifetime, few are put to practical use. All the others are purely ornamental, to be displayed only on certain ceremonial occasions.

Making camp, a woman unloads her heavily burdened ox and donkey, then builds the *suudu* that she, her husband, and all their possessions will occupy. The roofless space is partially protected by a semicircular screen of dry thorny branches.

While the men relax from cattle tending and sip their tea, the women milk the cows, haul the water, gather and ignite the firewood, and—to make the meals when milk is low—spend several hours each day pounding millet for porridge with mortar and pestle. They may take a brief respite from this routine—sometimes as long as a week—after they deliver babies in the bush.

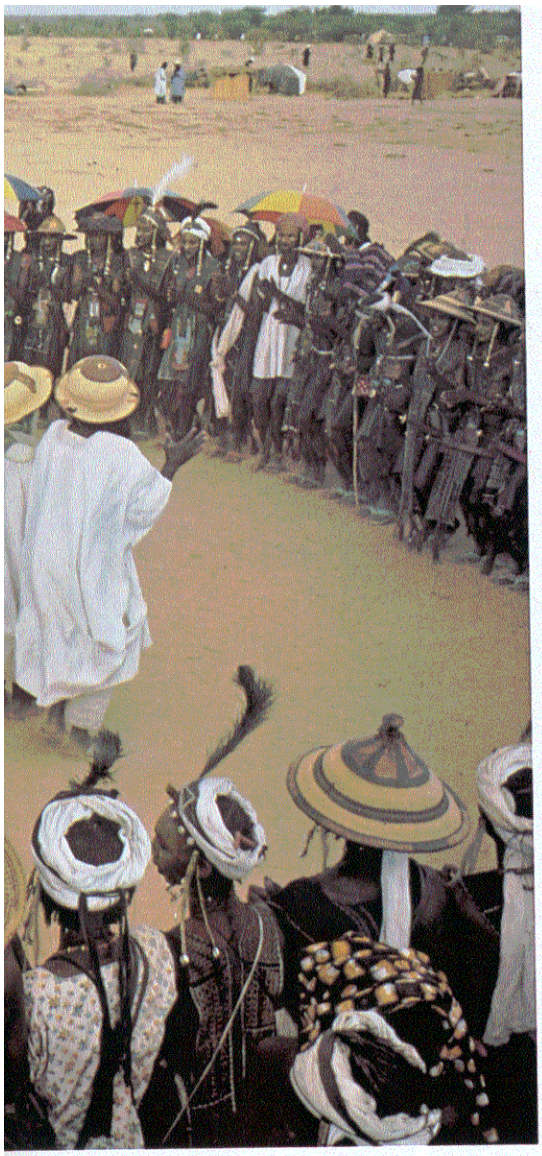
Husbands see nothing unfair about this division of labor. And, since women perform most of the work, take care of the family, and bring prestige to their husbands, men are often eager to acquire a second, third, or even fourth wife, the maximum allowed at any one time. (This does not preclude rejecting one and winning another to keep within the quota.)

As I assumed the hairdo, dress, and linguistic skills of a nomad, curious women would ask to see the palms of my hands and, having done so, sadly shake their heads. "You have no calluses from pounding millet. You will never truly be one of us."

I certainly could not emulate their stoicism or endurance. Daily walks of five hours in heat as high as 50°C (120°F) on a scant milk diet, with blisters on my feet and digestive problems from drinking the sandy, brown water, often left me too exhausted to make photographs, draw, or conduct lengthy conversations.

The only solution I could think of was to purchase a Suzuki jeep that would permit

Absorbed in preening, *a young man with his hairline shaved to dramatize his forehead applies powder to lighten skin* ***(facing page)*** *for the yaake dance, when women judge men on charm. Turban, jewelry, black kohl on the eyelids and lips, and a line to elongate the nose complete the look* ***(above)****.*



***Chanting paeans** to feminine beauty, a circle of elaborately costumed men moves slowly counterclockwise (**above**) in the ruume dance during the Worso. In the center, elders urge them on and laud particularly talented singers. As wives cast appraising looks (**left**), marriageable women stand outside the circle inviting courtship. Should a man's wink be met by a woman's gaze, romance is born. To encourage mingling with other lineages, a woman may not attend certain courtship dances performed by her own clan.*

Marion and me to conserve our energy, transport our own food, and carry extra provisions for our hosts. Happily, this decision caused no rift in our Wodaabe relationships. Rather, it generated a friendly rivalry among the men over who would sit in front to guide us across the sandy, seemingly trackless Sahel. After Marion left for home to work on her manuscript, an extra passenger or two often hopped aboard.

Despite the hardships they face and the restraints imposed by the practice of semteende, the Wodaabe are basically a lighthearted, playful people. I was sometimes a bit slow, however, to grasp the full meaning of their fun.

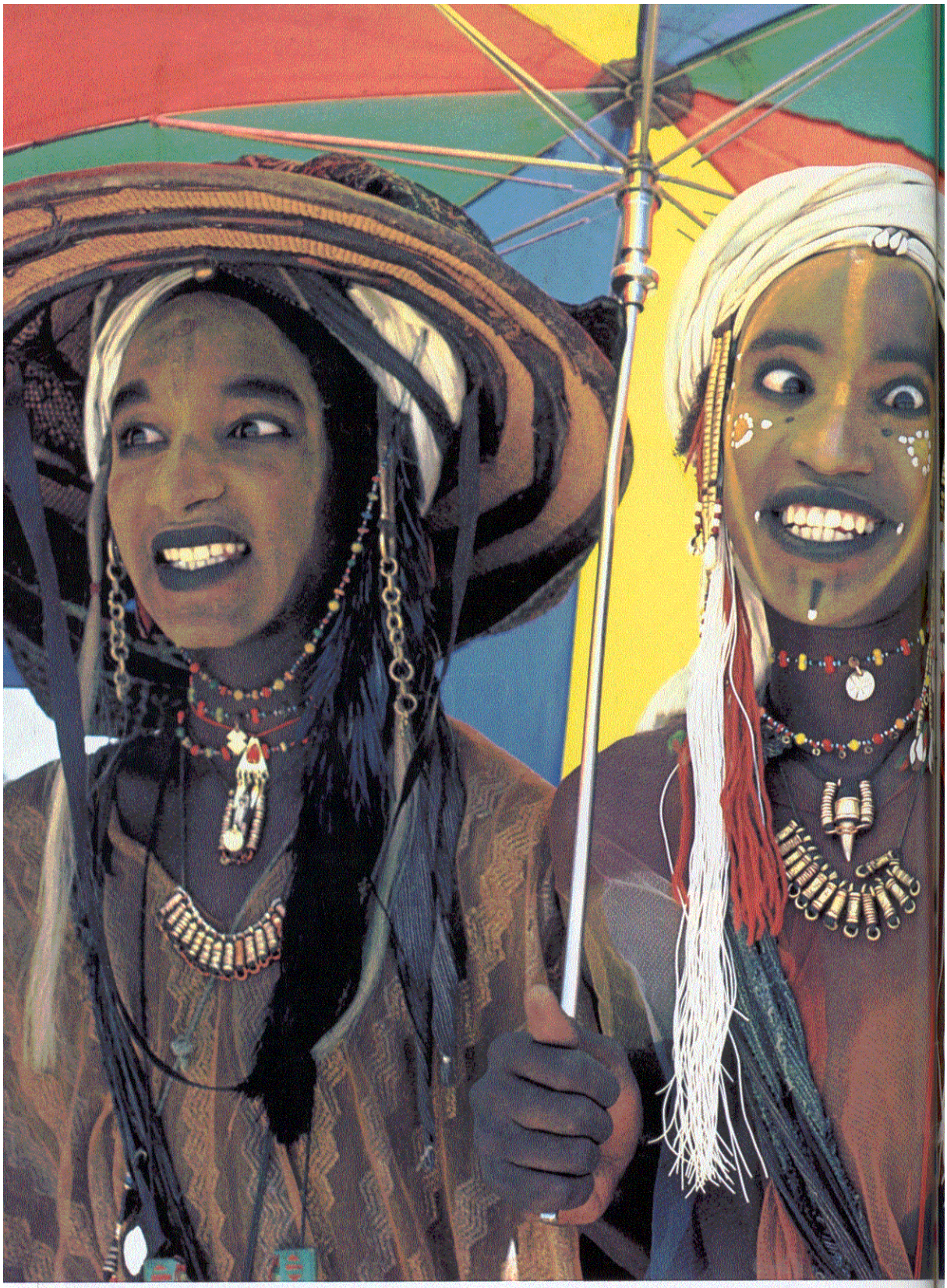
So it was when a young man first winked at me. My automatic response was to wink back—not once but several times—much to the amusement of those around us. I had, according to Mowa, committed a slight breach of Wodaabe etiquette. "A man winks to show his interest in a woman. If she does not turn away, he twitches one corner of his mouth—ever so discreetly, of course—to indicate which direction she should take to join him in the bush."

BY MAY I have spent seven months with Mokao and his extended family; any reserve about my presence has long since disappeared. I have become attuned to the tempo of their travels. My affection for them and my admiration of their fortitude grows with every day.

The long dry spell is ending, but the heavy rains of summer have not begun. In this between-seasons period, the Wodaabe face their most difficult time. Forage is extremely scarce and scattered; water is to be found only in a few very deep wells. Cows become emaciated and almost milkless. Precious cattle must be sold at rock-bottom prices in village markets to purchase millet.

Now, an occasional shower begins to refresh the landscape. We move more often, abandoning the wells and "following the clouds" that will create ponds and rejuvenate the grasslands.

Finally the long-awaited summer rains descend, reviving man, beast, and the parched countryside. Various small groups like ours, moving northward on a narrowing front in search of prime pasturage, draw



***Marriages are made** by the strength of the eyes, the Wodaabe believe. During the yaake competition, a man rolls his right eye in and out, a talent*

Modern motifs *find increasing use in the eclectic designs of Wodaabe fashion. Blanket labels blend with embroidery on a male dancer's tunic* ***(above)****. Eyelets festoon his ammunition belt, worn strictly for decoration. Safety pins* ***(below)*** *separate a traditional snake pattern at top from a design inspired by the airplane. As a final decorative touch, a young girl adds new sandals to her headdress* ***(facing page)****.*

closer together. The forced isolation imposed by the dry season is over. Visiting resumes as we make camp within sight of Wodaabe neighbors.

Energies until recently expended on mere survival now focus on the annual celebrations that will highlight the rainy season—the Worso and the Geerewol. My costume, which I have been embroidering for several months under the expert guidance of Nebi, will soon be finished.

"It is good that you will have it ready for the Worso," said Mokao. "This is a festive time when Wodaabe of the same lineage—mine is the Kasawsawa, which means 'lineage of the long lance'—gather to celebrate births and marriages. Already the elders have passed the word on where it will be held. Other family groups like ours will ride in this way until our paths converge."

LINEAGE IS THE KEYSTONE of the Wodaabe social structure. "All of us trace our origins," said Gao, "from two brothers: Ali and Degereejo. Their descendants divide into 15 primary lineages, which in turn break up into many sublineages like ours. In traditional marriage—*koobgal*—only cousins of the same lineage, pledged to each other in infancy by their parents, may wed."

The joyous reunion begins. Clad in their most elegant attire, the tribesmen sweep into the Worso site on camelback, showing off the speed and splendor of their mounts. Women follow on donkeys laden with calabashes and other treasures exhibited only at this time.

The next three days are filled with various rituals associated with births and marriages: singing, dancing, and the roasting of rarely slaughtered animals. Tradition dictates how the meat will be divided and who will feast upon it. Storytelling, one of the most popular leisure-hour pastimes (for the Wodaabe have no written language), continues far into the night. Through the expanded togetherness of the Worso, the Wodaabe reaffirm their common ancestry.

This ceremony, though important, cannot compare with the grandeur of the many Geerewol celebrations held at various locations several weeks later. At each site two lineages unite for seven days of dancing

designed primarily to display male beauty. One of its extra benefits is that it provides young men and women an opportunity to seek attachments—permanent or otherwise—outside their circle of cousins.

Two dances—the *yaake* and the *geerewol*—dominate the festivities. At these, handsome young men vie for the honor of being chosen the most charming and the most beautiful, thus proving their outstanding ability to attract women. Romance flourishes. Many a teegal marriage grows out of alliances formed at the Geerewol.

Many hours of preparation precede each performance. For the yaake—the charm competition—pale yellow powder is liberally applied to the dancer's face to lighten skin tone; borders of black kohl are painstakingly applied to highlight the whiteness of teeth and eyes. A painted line running from forehead to chin elongates the nose; a shaved hairline heightens the forehead. These are among the physical features the Wodaabe most admire (pages 502-503).

Leaving little to chance, *men seek to repel bad luck and attract the good through talismans worn on their turbans and on their arms during dances* ***(above)****. Ground bark, seeds, and leaves carried in pouches ward off evil words and enemies and enhance one's desirability to women. Among the peoples of West Africa, the Wodaabe are renowned for their knowledge of maagani, cures both real and magical.*

Now the dancers, shoulder to shoulder as in a chorus line, quiver forward on tiptoe to accentuate their height, and launch into a series of wildly exaggerated facial expressions on which their charm, magnetism, and personality will be judged.

Eyes roll; teeth flash; lips purse, part, and tremble; cheeks, inflated like toy balloons, collapse in short puffs of breath as if extinguishing a candle. Elders dash up and down the line, challenging, mocking, and criticizing in an effort to incite the contestants to ever greater contortions. A dancer knows he's receiving favorable attention when an old woman dashes toward him yelling "Yeee hoo" and gently butts him in the torso.

"You'll see," said Mokao, "my cousin Djajiijo will win again, as he has for many years. No one projects more charm in the yaake than he does. Already it has attracted three wives."

As predicted, Djajiijo emerges the victor. Not until his eldest son becomes eligible to compete will he be forced, by custom, to retire from dancing.

THE WEEK, as it progresses, becomes an exhausting dance marathon highlighted by afternoon and evening performances of the geerewol, where the most beautiful men are selected.

Uniformly dressed in tight wrappers bound at the knees, strings of white beads crisscrossing bare chests, and turbans adorned with ostrich feathers, the men line up before their audience.

Resplendent in red ocher face makeup, they fill the next two hours with haunting chants and frenzied jumping and stamping dance steps. Then those who feel the competition is too great for them voluntarily withdraw. Those remaining replace their ostrich feathers with horsetail plumes, and the event resumes at an even wilder pace.

Three unmarried young ladies chosen for their loveliness are brought out by the elders to serve as judges. Kneeling modestly, they conceal with the left hand their scrutinizing glances. In order to hold their attention, the finalists resort to every facial expression and bodily movement they can muster.

After a period of observation the women rise and, advancing slowly toward the dancers, indicate their favorites with a graceful swinging of the arm. In this way the most beautiful are chosen. The winners reap only intangible rewards: increased pride in themselves, the admiration of other men, and the ardor of women.

The week-long Geerewol ends at sunrise after a full night of spirited dancing. As a final gesture of generosity and goodwill, the host lineage presents the roasted meat of a bull to the departing guests. Then, like the chameleon whose dried, powdered skin is worn as a ceremonial cosmetic, celebrators fade into their surroundings and disappear from view.

"Why," I asked Mowa's brother Jumou, "do the Wodaabe place such emphasis on male beauty?"

"Because it makes women want us. We are born beautiful. But we also have the power of *maagani*—the knowledge of secret potions—to enhance that beauty."

The gift of maagani makes the Wodaabe feared by some, sought by others. For the formulas they concoct from roots, seeds, leaves, and bark are capable, many believe, of having both magical and curative powers. Thus, leaves of the *eedi* tree *(Sclerocarya birrea)* are applied as a poultice on scorpion bites. The seeds of the *roogo* plant, or cassava *(Manihot esculenta),* are used to keep away the evil spirits that induce madness. These and many more, widely used by the Wodaabe, find a ready market as far away as Senegal and the Ivory Coast.

Since the devastating drought of the early 1970s that decimated herds on which their self-sufficiency depends, the Wodaabe have been forced to yield increasingly to the currency economy of more settled peoples. Some Wodaabe travel into the towns and cities to sell traditional maagani remedies. On occasional visits to local weekly markets—often only a spot on the landscape where vendors meet—they may sell a goat or sheep to purchase such necessities as millet, salt, waterskins, sugar, tea, spices, blankets, and cloth. But only under the direst of circumstances will they part with one of their zebu cattle. And under no circumstances will they accept the more sedentary life where these items are readily available.

LIKE FELLOW tribesmen, Mokao wears many maagani powders in leather pouches around his neck. Some protect him from snakes, scorpions, sorcery, fear, evil words, and injury; others increase his charm and virility. For he still wants a wife who can bear the children that Mowa, ten years his senior, has never been able to give him.

But Mowa, who loves him dearly, has made it clear that should he bring another wife into their suudu, she would return to her own people as she had done some years before when an earlier husband married again. And she would take her daughter, Nebi, wed to Mokao's brother Bango with her, thus breaking up two families.

Although Mokao, when pressing his courtship with me, claimed that Mowa would never be jealous of an *anasara* wife—one with white skin—I knew Mowa felt differently, and I respected her feelings.

As important as fatherhood is to all Wodaabe men, Mokao has no desire to lose Mowa, who outshines the average wife in her devotion, loyalty, modesty, and grace.

When the time came for me to leave the Wodaabe, Mokao asked me to share with him the traditional three glasses of tea: The first "strong like life," the second "sweet like love," the third "subtle like friendship."

As we sipped, he talked. "Friends the Wodaabe make remain so forever. We mount our camels and find our friends even if much time and distance lie between us. But when the anasaras make friends and go away, they never return; they forget us. This I have observed. Friendship is not the same for the anasaras as for the Wodaabe."

But Mokao sensed our friendship would be more lasting. On the day of my departure he scooped some sand from one of my footprints to wear—along with 14 other maagani—as a talisman. "In this way I know you will return. For you are leaving your footprints on my heart." □