

# THE GEREWOL OF THE WODAABE

HOLGER  
HOFFMANN







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We have been driving off-road for hours over sandy and hardly recognizable tracks. Around us thorny bushes and flowering acacias. We are in searching for the Wodaabe camp. Shortly before noon our driver discovers camel tracks. We follow them and it doesn't take long before the campsite is before us. The Wodaabe belong to the Peul tribe and live as nomadic cattle herders mainly in Niger. Their meeting is due to the annual Gerewol in September, at the end of the rainy season. It takes place in different places. At this event, it is not the young men who choose their brides, but rather the other way around: all the unmarried young men in the region enter the competition, at the end, a marriageable woman chooses the most attractive man as the winner.

Upon arrival, each family installs itself. With a few moves, the men stretch fabrics that

provide privacy and protection from the sun. The women arrange calabashes and other ornate kitchen utensils decoratively on racks. We, too, escape the heat and set up camp near the shady acacias that stand in a pond created during the rainy season. The reflection of the sky in the water is interrupted by the accumulation of thousands of fallen yellow flower stars. We unfold our bedsteads and lie down, our heads protected by a customary local turban. While reading a book, I watch out of the corner of my eye what is happening nearby. A mother is pouring water from the Pond directly into her infant's mouth. Looking away and not thinking about the consequences is the only option in this situation. Because we are just as much under observation since we appeared with our driver in the acacia grove. The restraint is difficult for us, but it allows us to survey the camp in comfort.



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Our assumed - for tourists unusual - disinterest shows its effect: Two women are the bravest. In their dark blue dresses and perky hairstyles, they blatantly show their curiosity and want to know what I am reading. I willingly show them the book, which fortunately also contains some photos. I of course pulls out my camera, not without asking if they allow to be taken pictures. One of the women is interested in the camera. I hand it to her and explain how it works. When she takes a successful snapshot of me, wrapped in a black seven-meter-long turban, the laughter is great on all sides.

In the meantime, the young men have begun to paint their own or each other's faces with bright yellow paint. Soon after, rhythmic singing can be heard from the open area. Our restraint has lasted long enough, we have to join in. Protected from the blazing



midday sun under the traditional shepherd's hat of the Peul, about 30 of these beauties line up, dancing rhythmically to monotonous chants, rolling their eyes and baring their white teeth. Head and body are richly decorated with leather tassels and cowrie shells. Opposite them, the women in indigo dresses stand



and sit closely packed, next to them the older men, mostly with a wide-collared leather hat. In the second row of spectators, dozens of young men have lined up on their camels.



My wife Sylvia joins the women and sits down with them in the sand. She loses sight of me because I am well Camouflaged with his turban.

For a change, I stroll through the festival area. Everywhere there are smaller and larger gatherings of people united in various activities: Girls are clapping and dancing to it. Women are pounding grain or shaking calabashes filled with milk for butter production in front of their openair kitchen racks. Young men meanwhile paint their faces red for the evening performance. The boyfriend often holds mirrors. A tall slim Wodaabe, who has been watching Sylvia for some time, approaches her. A little unsettled but full of admiration, she looks at him. "Oû est ton mari?" ("Where's your husband?") he asks in a deep warm voice. She doesn't know. He seems to have been waiting for this reaction. "Je le sais, il lest là bas" ("I know it, he is over there") and points to the rows of spectators on camels. Indeed, I sit well camouflaged on a camel behind his rider and take pictures of the action from his high seat. The riders crowd around me and want to be photographed. One of the riders carries a huge ghetto blaster from which the rhythmic sounds of traditional music can be heard. We ask for the cassette. They instantly organize a copy for us.



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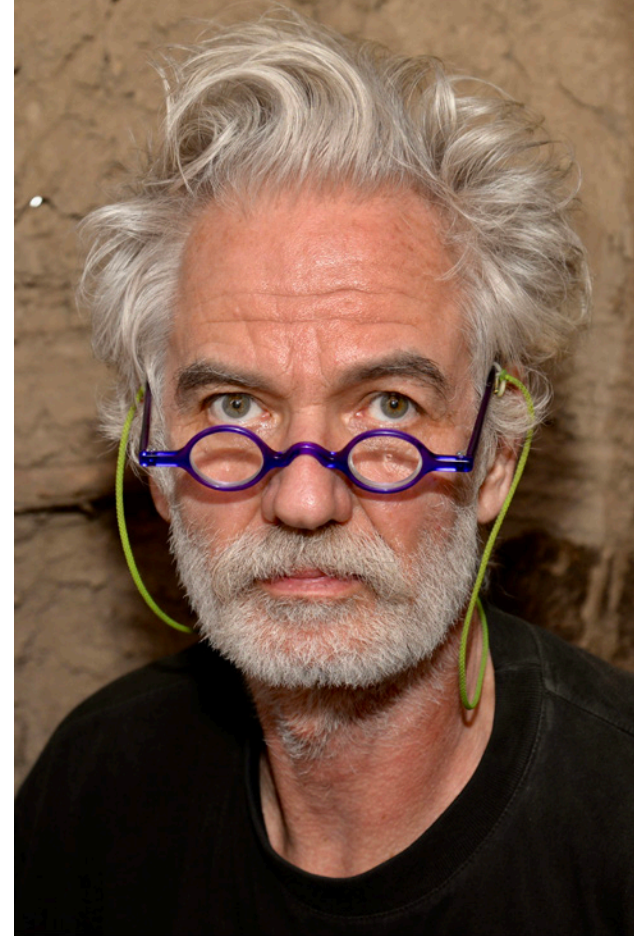
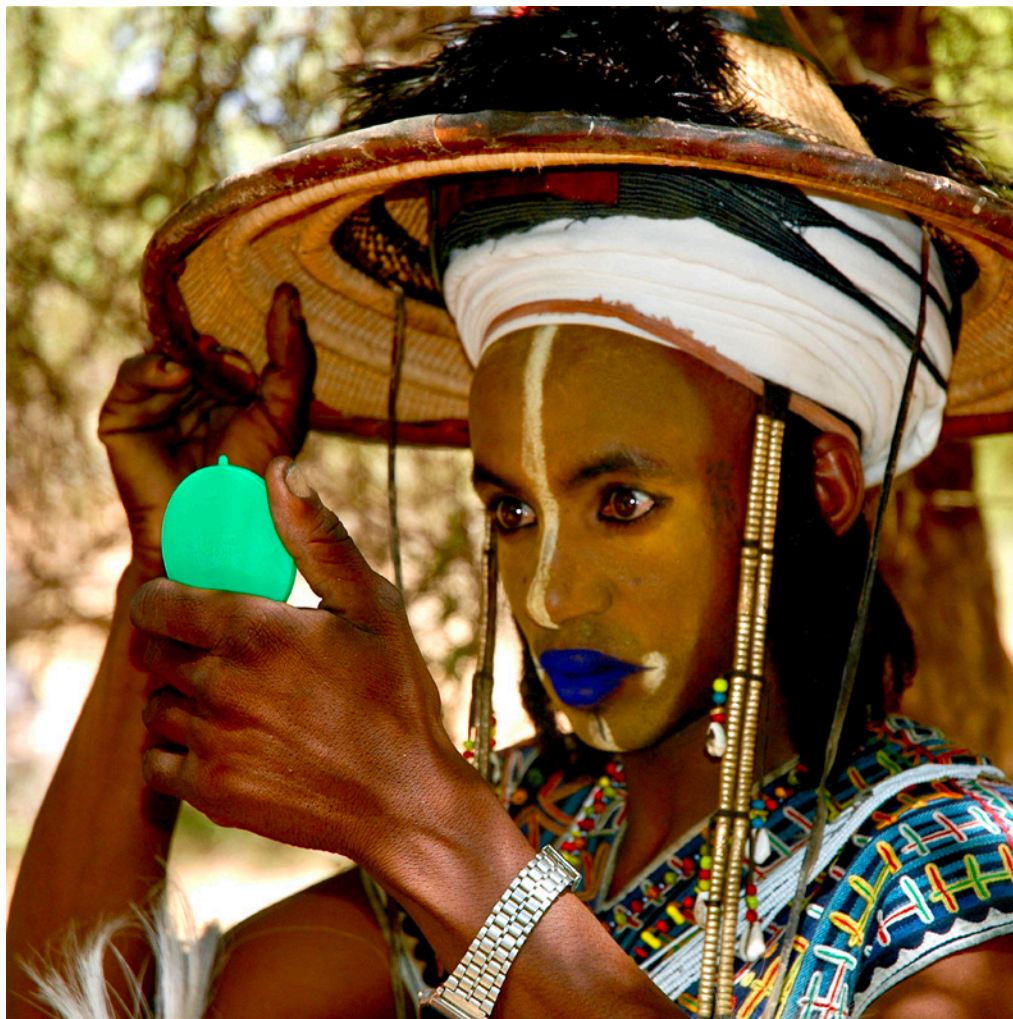


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**A**fter nightfall, the men, now wearing red makeup, continue to dance around a large fire. The faces look even more dramatic in the glow of the flames. Two selected girls choose their favorite with a gesture not recognizable to us outsiders. Everyone now knows who the two lucky ones are with whom they may spend the night 'dans la brousse' - 'in the bush'. We retire to our small tent, tired from the sun and the impressions. Long after midnight we listen to the chants and eventually fall asleep happily.

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## HOLGER HOFFMANN

**H**olger Hoffmann is a Swiss travel and documentary photographer. He and his wife Sylvia Furrer have already traveled to over 100 countries. The longer they travel together, the more they are fascinated by the customs and everyday life of the indigenous people who preserve their traditional culture. They deeply respect these people who live in remote areas under harsh living conditions such as the extreme cold of Siberia, the hot desert of the Danakil, the humid jungles of West Papua or the high altitude of the Himalayas. Nomadic peoples have become a major focus of their recent travels. Holger Hoffmann has published travel and photo reports in various magazines.

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