Three Wodaabe male dancers in 1976. Photo: Mette Bovin

Mette Bovin

Stories in Between Anthropology and Theatre

Abstract: : *In this article, Mette Bovin narrates her experiences and anthropological fieldwork among different African peoples since the 1960s. Her research brought her to meet the Mumuye people in Nigeria, and the Wodaabe people in Niger. In 1982 Mette Bovin invited Roberta Carreri to West Africa where they started the project on Bartering performances in Niger and Burkina Faso. The author also describes her personal experience as a participant during nine ISTA sessions and the impact of those encounters on her life.*

Keywords: *Mumuye animists; Burkina Faso; Roberta Carreri "Charlot, Charlot"; Barters*

In Niger and Burkina Faso

In 1981 I asked Eugenio Barba if his nine Odin Teatret actors would like to travel to Niger and Burkina Faso with me to make cultural barters[1] in villages and deserts. Eugenio Barba suggested Roberta Carreri could accompany me: one actress and one anthropologist vis-a-vis African performers and spectators. Nobody at Odin Teatret had ever been to Africa, so it was a completely new experience for Roberta Carreri. It turned out to be very interesting for both of us, and for hundreds of African participants and spectators.

I made a 16 mm documentary film about our experiences, *Dances in the Sand - A Meeting between Europe and Africa* (Actress: Roberta Carreri; Director, researcher and producer: Mette Bovin; Camera: Jean-Pierre Kaba; Sound: Moussa Hamidou; Editor: Grete Møldrup; 16 mm Film Production: Mette Bovin Film. 1982-83, DVD available in Danish, English, French, and Italian at Odin Teatret Archives, Holstebro, Denmark). I also described the barter between Roberta Carreri and the people of Dori in Burkina Faso in an essay.[2]

1. Cultural barters by Odin Teatret have been applied in different circumstances and analysed in many publications, see among others: D'URSO, Tony and Eugenio Barba. 2000. *Viaggi/Voyages with Odin Teatret*. Milano: Ubulibri. RASMUSSEN, Iben Nagel. 2012. "Byttehandler i Danmark?" In *Den fjerde dør. På vej med Odin Teatret*. Copenhagen: Nyt Nordisk Forlag Arnold Busck A/S, pp. 148-184. VARLEY, Julia. 2019. "Holstebro Festuge: Re-thinking Theatre." In *Caravan Next. A Social Community Theatre Project*, edited by Alessandra Rossi Ghiglione, Rita Maria Fabris and Alberto Pagliarino. Milano: Franco Angeli, pp. 218-224. WATSON, Ian. 1993. "Barter." In Ian Watson, *Towards a Third Theatre. Eugenio Barba and the Odin Teatret*. Foreword by Richard Schechner. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 22-30. WATSON, Ian, Maria Shevtsova, Eugenio Barba, et.al. 2002. "II Barter: Performance as cultural exchange." In *Negotiating Cultures. Eugenio Barba and the intercultural debate*, edited by Ian Watson. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, pp. 94-167.

2. Bovin 1988, 21-41.

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I prepared our journey by studying the ethnographic reality: which ethnic groups were present and how could we ask both sedentary peasants, half nomadic, and truly nomadic people to perform for us after Roberta's performances. Roberta had prepared seven different short performances. The barters were peaceful and enjoyable in the summer of 1982.

Before Roberta Carreri and I left for Burkina Faso, we talked about what we should do if we earned some money with the performances. I didn't think we would, but Eugenio Barba suggested that if we did, we could give the money to the local mosque, or distribute free condoms. I shook my head. As it turned out, we didn't earn anything. I paid Jean, the young man who was our interpreter between several local languages and French. My tape recorder was stolen; and I was very sorry to lose the recording of the beautiful singing by a blind muezzin in Dori. Maybe I should have given back more to Dori or the 200 boys who ran after Roberta shouting "Charlot, Charlot", but, unfortunately, I had no money to give. Our hired Land Rover was old and rusty and did not belong to us. But we had a car, nice clothes, a still camera and two 16 mm cameras, so Roberta and I were rich Tobago (white people) from Denmark, compared to the villagers in Dori and surroundings.

In 1986, my son Jakob, who did fieldwork with me, and I travelled from Denmark to Niger and Burkina Faso taking with us the French version of the 16 mm film. We worked for six months in Niger and Burkina Faso among true nomads, the Wodaabe (egalitarian lineage society) in Niger, and with the agropastoral half-nomadic Fulbe (with a hierarchical social structure) in the Dori region of Northern Burkina Faso.[3]

We went to the same Dori region where Roberta had performed four years earlier. I wished to give back the results of our fieldwork, showing the film *Dances dans le sable. Une rencontre entre l'Europe et l'Afrique*.

My informants in Dori and other villages asked where the 'Crazy One' (Roberta) was. They wondered why I had not come with the 'Crazy One' like before, they missed the woman who stared up in the air when she danced, like crazy people do. They were a little afraid of the Dancing Tobago. They had discovered that Europeans also have male and even female *griots* (professional *troubadours*, performers, poets, storytellers, praise-singers in the courts of chiefs, sultans, kings, dancers, and also beggars). The *griots* form a special social caste who only marry within themselves. People are always afraid of them, because if you don't give them enough money, the griots will sing and slander and scorn you publicly.

My son Jakob was 13 years-old in 1986. He also spoke some Fulfulde language and could communicate with the agro-pastoralists in Burkina and the true nomads in Niger. We had both looked forwards to the evening when we were going to give the 16 mm film as a gift to the people of Dori. The projection went all right, on a huge open-air screen on the market-place wall. I listened to the comments of the Dori people about the film. The blacksmith's son was happy to be on a big film using the bellows with his father.

But after the film had finished, the poorest boys started to throw stones at Jakob. We didn't understand why. Jakob quickly jumped up on the roof of the rented Land Rover to avoid the stones. I also jumped on the car-roof to protect Jakob. They kept on throwing stones at us. I had to call the driver to take us away fast.

3. Bovin 1990, 103-20.

Perhaps the hundreds of boys running in the market-place shouting "Charlot Charlot!" in 1982 had enjoyed that day. But now, after four years, they had had time to think about their roles. Perhaps they thought that people who appear in a film should earn money. I shall never know. I had no money to give to 200-300 young boys. The poorest people think that Tobago always have money. In fact, I was forced to sell my house and car in Helsingør, back in Denmark, to pay for our project in Burkina Faso 1982 and for the production of the film in 1982-84.

That evening in Dori was a big disappointment, since we thought that we had a good relationship with the town, and suddenly we realised it was not so. I wondered where a barter ends. The day that Roberta ended her last dance, or the moment when Mette and Jakob gave the film to the whole town in 1986? Or when stones were thrown at us that evening? Where did I stand as an anthropologist without the power of theatre?

On the mountains of Nigeria

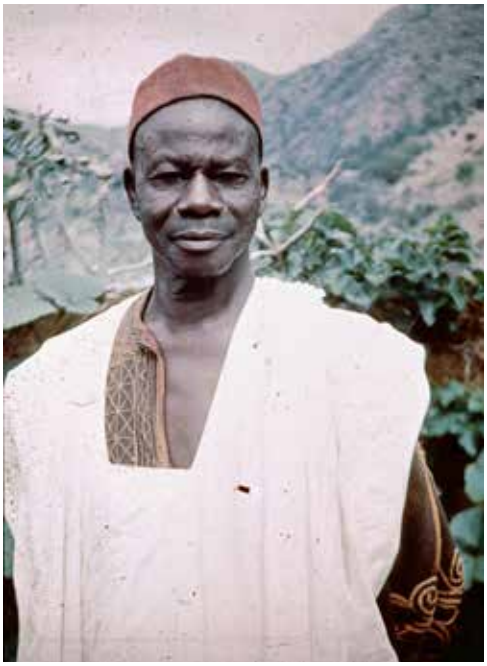
In 1964 - the same year Eugenio Barba started Odin Teatret - I started my anthropological fieldwork in Africa. I went to Northern Nigeria to study The Mountain Pagans as white missionaries called them. Mumuye was how they called themselves. Mumuye were neither Christians nor Muslims, they were "animists" because they believed in the spirits of nature. The Middle Belt in Nigeria separated the Muslims in the north from the Christians in the south. Many Mumuye had not seen a European woman before; and some ran away when I came close to their village. They had only seen one male Catholic priest from Portugal and another one from Ireland.

I often danced with the Mumuye women, in Zing, the village where I lived. They dragged me into the line of the circular dance. The older women always danced in the front of the circle while the youngest girls danced behind. The woman who dragged me into the circle was called Mahæ or Dance Sister. I could rely on Mahæ to help and guide me. We exchanged food. It was very useful to have this social bond for a 21-year-old foreign single girl in Mumuye land.[4]

Mette Bovin and her Mumuye Land Dance Sister, Mahæ. Photo: Mette Bovin

At that time, the highest political leader in Mumuye land was the Rain King. With my Mumuye interpreter, one day I climbed the steep blue mountain, where the big Rain King lived with his bodyguards, his five

4. Bovin 2011, 364-84.



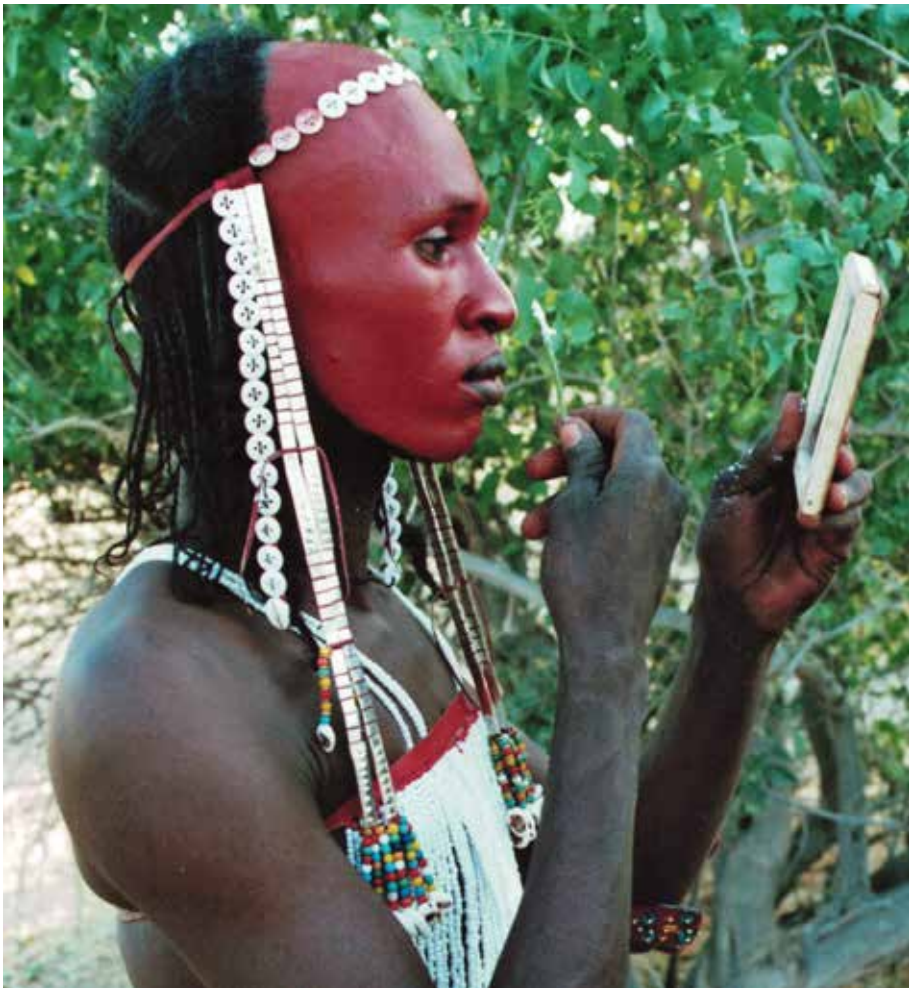

The Rain King, Matakon, on the top of a blue mountain, Nigeria 1964.
Presents given by Matakon to Mette Bovin: iron bars and a handwoven burial cloth. Photos: Mette Bovin

wives and many children. When I arrived, I waited three hours for the Rain King to receive me. He appeared on a stage like cliff. He had eagle eyes and emanated respect and authority. I did not look at him straight in the eyes. His name was Matakon, which means respect. I was allowed to ask questions, but I could not enter the Rain Ritual Hut. The Rain King explained in words what happened inside: "I sacrifice goats and chicken and other animals and let the blood run down on many objects, while I utter all the prayers to Kpanti-La, The Honourable Sun God, and then the rain starts falling in Mumuye land". He said he had only once before hosted a white man. After having told me how he made rain, a mystical figure came out to greet me, a tiny little ritual hunter. The figure uttered a sound, like a strange whistling, and then disappeared.

Matakon gave me some gifts: two iron bars and a handwoven burial cloth, valuable Mumuye objects that functioned as 'primitive money' (as they were called in academic language at the time I received them). Two iron bars were normally given by young Mumuye men to young girls as a marriage proposal. The Rain King had given me the two essential things for life's two main rites of passage - marriage and death. Back in Denmark I gave the gifts to Moesgaard Museum in Aarhus together with the 400 other Mumuye objects. Ever since I sat bartering with the Rain King on top of that blue mountain in 1964, I have been vividly interested in exchange of magical objects, dances, songs and images. It is when I started being aware of the communicative strength of performance.

In the Sahelian Desert

In 1968 in the Niger bush a group of nomadic Wodaabe people came to my hut and presented themselves to me. They were seven boys and girls, all related, cousins. We became friends immediately. They were proud to look like us Europeans, who they called Nazara. One of them, Amina, asked me one day with gestures and mimic: "How do your people dance?" "I will show you," I answered. I showed Amina and two other nomadic girls, Tå'bå and Yi'di, the dances I had learned at dancing schools in Denmark and other places: classical ballet, waltz, foxtrot, and jive. Then we changed roles: Amina showed me the nomads' dances: Ruume (the rainy season happy dance), Moosi (which means smiling, during this dance spirits sit on the dancers' shoulders, and they fall into trance), and Yaake dances. Then I danced calypso, mambo, rock & roll, and



Jodi, a young Wodaabe man, finishes his make-up before the Jeerewol dance. Photo: Mette Bovin

Wodaabe youth under umbrellas, in 1992. Photo Mette Bovin
Jeerewol dance, with the long line of young men in the beauty parade. Photo Mette Bovin

high life music that I had learned in Nigeria in 1964. The dances were the beginning of a friendship that lasts until today, confirming my belief in body language.

ISTA

I have participated in nine ISTA sessions (Bonn, Germany, and Holstebro, Denmark 1980; Volterra, Italy 1981; Holstebro, Denmark 1986; Brecon, Wales UK 1990; Umeå, Sweden 1996; Copenhagen, Denmark 1996; Wroclaw, Poland 2005; Favignana, Italy 2021), learning many tools for my work as an anthropologist.

Ever since participating in ISTA sessions, I have spoken of the principle of stage presence when talking to informants in many West African countries. I also learned about presence and situational awareness from Africans in the bush, for instance when hunting dangerous animals and having to mobilise the utmost possible presence to stay alive.

Learning to use my voice with power and with resonators helped me in Niger when I had to address 200 people in an African village with my speech in Kanuri language, a Manga dialect. I had to explain to a whole village near the Niger-Nigeria border, about a future drinking water project for their village. At other times, in closer social situations, I chose to whisper. For example, when for anthropological research I would sit among women and girls only, apart from the group of men. I was among Muslim Manga and Kanuri in Niger, far away from Mecca in Saudi Arabia. My research showed that the Manga social structure had been more matrilineal earlier and only when Islam came from the north through the Sahara desert around 900 A.D., the Manga became more and more patrilineal and their family structure changed.

Escape

Once I used all I had learned at ISTA to save my life in West Africa. It was in 2011. I sensed something was completely wrong. As I walked alone, I felt that I was being spied upon and followed. Someone had given me the wrong information on how to find a French internet-café while another person was filming me from a distance.

I called the Danish Consul in Niger, but he scornfully said that many people take videos in the streets of this town. I packed my bag in five minutes, left my little hotel through the back door and fled to another hotel where I locked myself up in a little annex room, without water and food, for two days. I called the Danish Consul on my mobile again and he excused himself because two young French had been taken as hostages by Al-Qaeda and I was their third target.

For the terrorists, we were a handful of stupid Europeans, while I was in Africa to do cultural studies and anthropological work among the Wodaabe nomads I knew so well, for an exhibition at the Royal Ontario Museum in Canada. I had collected women's and men's everyday clothes and feast costumes. Sometimes peaceful work can be dangerous. Miraculously I managed to change my flight and get back home.

Dance

Often during my twenty-four years in West Africa, I have been asked by Europeans who had just arrived: "When is the theatre performance beginning?" I had to answer: "The dances are the theatre! The dances are the performance!"

From 1968-2011, I studied nomadic Wodaabe culture in the bush of Niger, Nigeria, Cameroun and Tchad. Wodaabe are certainly professional dancers. From the age of one a Wodaabe boy is taught by his older brothers, father and uncles to move the eyes in a special way. Dance is a serious matter, not done for fun or as a game. When a boy turns 15, 16 or 17 the most holy dance called Jeerewol happens. The boy goes through a kind of exam judged by the Wodaabe spectators and critics. The boy's chances to find a girl to marry depend on his performance during the long Beauty Parade. The young men stand on a long line, trying to move the eyes correctly and attract young girls. Often those who dance in a feminine way win the beauty competition. Dance is the social network and the way to show charisma and seduce a girl by magic, maybe even steal a woman from the opposite clan. Also the young girls begin to train the dance steps and movements and specific songs early. Dance is everything to the nomads. All their cultural objects and magic and money and music is embodied in the main dances.

I believe that the Wodaabe would not have survived the years of drought, loss of cows, crickets eating the bush, and Boko Haram terrorist killings, if they did not have their dances to practice and look forwards to in times of hunger.

When I studied Wodaabe performances I often thought about the knowledge of principles which I had learned at ISTA. I observed the performers' presence, their balance and movement in space and the ostrich feather in the turban. My two worlds of anthropology and theatre came together. It was not a technical awareness like the one studied by theatre anthropology, but an experience that allowed me to see an essence beyond the form; an experience that keeps me alive.■

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