

ST Insight

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Two women photographers who have roamed Africa's remotest parts for four decades have published perhaps their most stunning book yet, capturing seldom-seen dances and ceremonies



PENDE MUTHATHO MASK, DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO Performers in 'angry masks' wearing nettled raffia costumes dance frenetically to amuse their audience.



EKOKO N'UTEH MASQUERADER, BENIN Dancers from the Uteh community wear these red-feathered masks to pay homage to the oba, or head of state, of Benin. They also attach raffia 'rattle' pods to their legs.

Where dance was born

By NADINE DREYER

With her genteel manner you'd be forgiven for mistaking Carol Beckwith for an elegant society hostess who spends her time organising soirees and charity balls. In reality she's one half of an intrepid photographic duo who have travelled to some of Africa's most inaccessible places to document the continent's vanishing ceremonies. For more than 40 years Beckwith and her partner Angela Fisher have captured rites of passage and the other traditions in 44 countries across the continent. Their latest project, *African Twilight*, is a two-volume masterpiece of mind-blowing photographs and accompanying text that took 14 years to complete.

In the course of their work the two have faced political upheavals, closed frontiers, severe droughts and threats to their lives. They once organised a mule train of 16 animals for a trip to Surmaland in Ethiopia, travelling up and down 3,000m-high mountains near the border of Sudan for six days. "When we arrived in the first remote village, the women came out to meet us and some of them had never seen a white woman. We were deeply touched by how warmly they greeted us."

This trip had a frightening climax. At the end of their five-week stay, they learnt of a plan to ambush their mule train. "We had broken a cardinal rule in Sarma society – all Sarma must be treated equally – and we had singled out three villages of 250 people to work with, out of a total population of 14,000."

So their guide invited all the Sarma chiefs to a goat roast at their camp and the photographers asked them at the end of the feast if they would do the women the honour of escorting them out of the region – at 3am in the morning. The chiefs agreed. "At sunrise we spotted Sarma warriors hidden high up in the branches of trees pointing their Kalashnikov rifles at us. But they were so awed by this procession of chiefs that they did not fire and we reached the border in safety."

The Kuba kingdom in the Democratic Republic of Congo – famous for its carving traditions – invited them to record ceremonies that were normally held in secrecy and had not been photographed since the 1970s.

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After three weeks on this assignment they were told, due to elections in the country, that there could be danger at the airport in Kinshasa and they had to get out quickly.

"We got back to Kinshasa and when we were en route to the airport we got caught in a traffic jam and people started going crazy," Beckwith said. "So we got out of the car with our luggage and started walking. Traditional women came around us to protect us from bandits on the road. We walked out of the traffic jam and then flagged down a vehicle to get us to the terminal."

They always try to learn at least 30 words of the local dialect. "We do this by writing the words on our hands so that we can look at people and kind of glance down at our hand and peek, and feel very comfortable in conversing with them. Even if the conversation is very simple. It starts on the hand and the words go down the arm as the days progress."

Some of the ceremonies they witnessed have never been photographed before and the two photographers estimate that 40% of these rituals now only exist in the pages of their books. "Over the years, we have had to go further and deeper into Africa to find ceremonies that were really still intact."

Beckwith and Fisher always try to show their images to the people they photograph. "The problem with getting photographs back into Sudan is that there was a civil war for 30 years. Carol and I had done a very big shoot with the Dinka people in Sudan, but we couldn't get back," Fisher said in an interview once. "Once the borders opened we decided to go back in again. We went down to the Nile swamplands, and we found all the people that we'd been working with." One of them was an elder who had never seen himself in a mirror. "He was looking at himself 30 years ago as a handsome warrior, and he was so moved."

They have learnt a lot on their travels: the benefit of knowledge being passed from one generation to the next, the importance of elders sharing their wisdom, the value of rites of passage that define and teach us what is expected at each stage of life.

On their first trip together they encountered the Wodaabe people of Niger. "We travelled with them by donkey and camel for six weeks. We lived off one calabash of milk a day and when we grew tired or impatient with the long journey, our Wodaabe chief would say to us: 'She who can't bear the smoke will never get to the fire.'"

Insight Ritual

RAFFIA HARVEST MASK, BURKINA FASO People in millet-stalk masks from the village of Balavé dance to the accompaniment of rapid drumming.



YORUBA VOODOO MASK, BURKINA FASO This spinning zangbeta mask is assigned guardians who guide it around the village. According to legend there is no one inside the whirling mask except night spirits. Those wearing the masks served as night watchmen and traditionally acted as an unofficial police force, wandering the streets to detect thieves.



WARRIOR OF THE NYANG NYANG SOCIETY CAMEROON Nyang Nyang society members of the Fonou kingdom blacken their bodies with charcoal and oil. Once masked in this guise they channel ancestral forces to terrify the enemy and banish evil spirits. They also carry the blackened horns of the forest antelope, the bongu, to protect the Cameroon royal kingdom.

'We have had to go deeper into Africa'



SALEI MAASAI WARRIORS APPROACH THE CEREMONIAL MANYATTA, TANZANIA Salei Maasai warriors arrive at the 'eunoto' ceremony to undergo their passage to elderhood.



SALAMPASU WARRIOR, DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO Only a warrior who has killed an enemy or committed a brave act has the right to wear this mask.



PENDE 'TALL MEN WALKING' STILT DANCERS, GUNGU, DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO These stilt dancers come to entertain the chief and the community.

WODAABE MAN PREPARING FOR CHARM DANCE, NIGER A Wodaabe man wraps a 4m turban on his head in preparation for the yaake dance, a competition of charm and personality. He applies pale yellow powder to lighten the face; borders of black kohl to highlight the whiteness of the teeth and eyes; and a painted line from forehead to chin to elongate the nose. These applications are believed to enhance his masculine beauty.



'African Twilight: The Vanishing Rituals and Ceremonies of the African Continent' is published by Rizzoli and can be purchased on Amazon.com. An exhibition of the photographs is on at THK Gallery in Cape Town until February 28. Carol Beckwith and Angela Fisher will give a walkabout and talk there on February 14, 15 and 16.