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## MOVIE REVIEW

*Herdsmen of the Sun*

## Herzog Profiles a Proud African People

By KEVIN THOMAS  
TIMES STAFF WRITER

Werner Herzog, once the *enfant terrible* of the New German Cinema, has always revealed his fascination with the extremes of human experience in both his fiction films and his documentaries. His fictional heroes, especially when played by the incomparably intense Klaus Kinski, have functioned as driven, obsessive alter egos for the director in such films as "Aguirre, Wrath of God" and "Fitzcarraldo."

The documentary form tends to bring out Herzog's gentler, more compassionate side, as his entrancing "Herdsmen of the Sun" (at the Nuart Sunday through Thursday) shows. The film is a graceful, poignant, 53-minute survey of the Wodaabe, a nomadic tribe wandering the southern edge of the Sahara Desert.

It has been theorized that the Wodaabe, whose name translates as "those who live in the taboo of purity," migrated from Mesopotamia, crossing the Red Sea in prehistoric times. When Herzog caught up with them in 1988, they had survived a terrible four-year

drought and were prepared to resume their ancient fall festival, highlighted by a male beauty contest staged in two parts.

Contestants make themselves up as gorgeously as they can, stretch to their fullest height—sometimes to seven feet on tiptoe—flash their perfect teeth and expose as much of the whites of their eyes as possible. The young women of the tribe, even though married, select their choices for a sexual interlude, agreed upon mutually.

The Wodaabe consider themselves the most beautiful people in the world, and they make a good case for themselves: They are a tall, lean people with chiseled features, proud carriage, and even in everyday attire, both men and women reveal an innate sense of elegance.

Believing that the Earth cannot belong to anyone unless they first become "herdsmen of the sun," the Wodaabe travel lightly and can break up camp within an hour. They allow their herds of cattle—they also travel with goats and camels—to determine the direction.

Herzog's images of their wanderings have a timeless sense of

beauty which he underlines with European classical music, a familiar ennobling tactic on the part of the director. Herzog suggests that the Wodaabe are endangered, especially when we visit a large group of them stranded, presumably for life, on the outskirts of an industrial city, their cattle lost to the drought.

Accompanying "Herdsmen of the Sun" (Times-rated Mature for adult themes) is Jean Rouch's 29-minute 1955 "Les Maitres Fous," a record of a voodoo ritual in what is now Ghana in which a group of Africans gather on the outskirts of Accra to throw themselves in a trance, assuming the roles of their white colonial administrators. The full meaning of this ceremony—which causes its participants to foam at the mouth yet leaves them exorcised—is sadly lost because of Rouch's flat narration in rather impenetrable English.

**'Herdsmen of the Sun'**

An Interema presentation of a co-production of Arion Productions/Antenne 2/Canal Plus. Director Werner Herzog. Producer Patrick Sandrin. Cinematographer Thomas Weber. Assistant director Walter Saxer. Editor Rainer Standke. Sound Jacques Pietrobelli. Narrated in English by Herzog. Running time: 53 minutes.

**Times-rated Mature (for adult themes).**