

African Ceremonies

One doesn't read this; one falls into it, like an experience. Printed in lavish color in large format, this two-volume celebration of contemporary ritual in Africa is shocking in its lushness. It seems to explode with possibilities—of what ritual and ceremony could be, of how many different ways there are to find meaning in life. It also presents the best argument for why Africa should not be written off: it has difference, and difference is the engine behind innovation. Although expensive, this box set is cheaper than a rocket ship to another galaxy—which is the only other thing I can imagine having similar effect of this work.

Two remarkable women, who first started photographing the jewelry of Africa, developed these books over decades of fieldwork. Some of their work has been published in National Geographic and their other books. Beside eye-popping photos, there is outstanding text on what is pictured. This is spectacle with intelligence. To offset the pricey cost of this magnum opus, their publisher has recently issued a paperback selection called Passages: Photographs in Africa, which presents highlights from Ceremonies. But this abridgement has only one-tenth the 850 images in Ceremonies, and I feel it misses the point of the larger work: glorious, extravagant diversity.

—KK

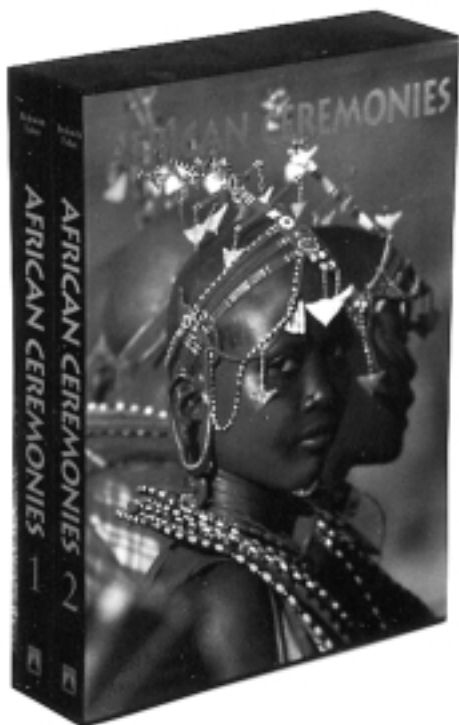
African Ceremonies

Carol Beckwith, Angela Fisher
1999, 744 pages (two volumes)
\$150
Harry N. Abrams

Passages

Photographs in Africa

Carol Beckwith, Angela Fisher
2000, 112 pages
\$24.95
Harry N. Abrams



Wearing costumes fashioned from hibiscus fibers and cowrie shells, and with coconut shells as breasts, dancers on stilts rest before performing. Their teetering dance and flapping arm movements imitate a long-legged water bird, but it is also mischievously said that their antics mimic their neighbors, the tall, pointy-breasted Fulani women.

Katjambia summons all her powers to draw the lion spirit out of the woman. Her eyes roll back and she enters a trance, absorbing the evil force into her own body. Forced into Katjambia's body, the lion spirit remains so powerful that she is unable to expel it no matter how she tries. Barely able to speak, she whispers that she must retreat to her family village to call on the help of ancestral spirits contained in the sacred fire.

