

With the Nomads



by Julian Richards

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Running time: 120 minutes

With the Nomads information page 1

An intimate, unromantic contemplation of Tuareg herders in the Sahara desert.

Synopsis

“With the Nomads” opens with an elderly Tuareg man predicting that none of his people will still be living as nomads in fifty years’ time. It contemplates the everyday labour of desert nomads with an intimate but unromantic eye. There is no narrator: instead, Tuareg people speak of their hardships, their distaste for city living and the nomad’s fierce love of liberty and open spaces. Extraordinary feats break in, too: an invasion of locusts, the castration of an angry adult camel and the inspection of a well bottom by a man dangling from 65-metre ropes. This is not an anthropological study but an individual film-maker’s response to the rhythms, dramas and personalities of a family, a way of life and a place.

Stills

Still images from “With the Nomads” (video frame grabs) can be seen at:

http://julian-richards.co.uk/doc_thumb_frameset.html

Print resolution images available on request.

Audience comments

From premiere at the Ritzy Cinema, Brixton, London, 11 May 2006, as part of the Mosaïques festival of the Institut Francais:

“Where most documentary makers take an agenda, Julian Richards took his eyes. That gives *With the Nomads* an impact, clarity and engagingness – a freshness and believability – we simply aren’t used to any more.”

M. John Harrison, novelist

“Julian Richards’s film describes the material culture of the Tuareg nomads so exactly that the physicality of it is vividly felt. Astonished by the nomads’ elegant and patient adaptation to unpromising conditions of sand, more sand and scant vegetation, one’s body responds to the texture of camel hair, the grit under the feet, the dank scent of a spiralling well, the chafe of woven saddlery, the oily dirt on the plastic water bottles and the hot slippery hands of an outdoor charcutier as though one were braving the trip oneself.”

Eleanor Crook, sculptor, lecturer at the Royal College of Art, London

“Julian Richards’s film *With the Nomads* is a rare treat. Beautifully filmed and paced, it provides an unusually empathic illumination of a way of life in the throes of change. It is both original and refreshing – not to be missed.”

Shula Marks, OBE, Emeritus Professor of the School of Oriental and African Studies, London, and Distinguished Research Fellow of the School for Advanced Study of the University of London

Full synopsis

[DVD chapter 1: Prologue: old man talks about the end of nomadism]

An old man dressed in drab colours sits outside a tent in the desert. His eyes peer out of a leathery face half-masked by his turban. A hesitant voice asks him in English if there will still be nomads in fifty years' time. Another speaker translates the question into French. Without hesitation, he answers no: the difficulties of keeping animals, the attractive ease of the town, are too strong.

[2: Title]

[3: Drawing water from the well]

A circle of rippling light against darkness reveals itself to be the bottom of a well; a leather water-sack rises past us on its way to the daylight. Above ground, men and draught animals toil to haul the sacks out of the depths and fill metal water butts for cows, camels and donkeys, and plastic tanks for people.

[4: Ediar and Mattahel]

A low building the colour of the earth, with tiny windows near ground level; in front, brightly patterned fabric billows in the wind. Men sit in the shade of a tent speaking in Tamashek, complaining about the behaviour of others. One of them is interviewed indoors, in French: he introduces himself as Mattahel, a retired teacher, settled nomad and former mayor of the local commune. He tells us where we are: in the region of Timbuktu, in Mali, West Africa. He talks of the improvements in nomadic life that he has seen since he was a child in the 1930s: then, his family did not have machine-woven fabric and ate cereals for only three months of the year; their only other food was the milk, cheese, yoghurt and meat of their animals.

[5: Moving camp]

In a scrub desert landscape, under an overcast sky, men and a woman work to tie their belongings – cooking utensils, braziers, rugs, poles, tent, water tanks – onto camels. When all is loaded, the woman is settled with children on a camel-back platform and a train is formed, each camel's halter tied to the tail of another. The camera follows from a camel-back viewpoint as the nomads set off into a windy, hazy wilderness.

[6: Mattahel talks about settling]

Returning to the interview with Mattahel, he talks of what he has gained and what he has lost by settling in one place. He misses the change of place, moving from landscape to landscape; this is very important, he says, for nomads. And he complains that his family, as nomads, don't understand why it is important to clean up after themselves. His animals, too, suffer from always living on the same ground. But he doesn't miss the chore of moving camp and is glad that he can now accumulate as many possessions as he likes.

[7: Arrival at new camp]

The nomads we saw earlier reach a new camping-place and set about unloading their camels, cutting branches off parched, thin bushes and putting up the tent: the last is the women's job, and they dig holes in the sand for the tent-poles with their bare hands. The wind blows relentlessly; the landscape fades into the grey sky.

[8: Milking]

Toddlers play in a rusty metal drum: behind them a flock of sheep gathers. The afternoon's meal is milked from the ewes, and then the lambs are released from the circle of thorny brush where they have been penned. They run in a white stream to the ewes, and a fugue of baaing plays out as mothers and young search desperately for each other.

[9: Butchery]

One of the nomad men stands beside the lamb whose throat he has just cut, commenting in Tamashek on the film-maker's apparently endless fascination with the nomads' activities. He skins the lamb, while others comment in French to a child about the importance of learning such countryside skills. The carcass is hung from a tree as another man joins in with skinning, gutting and butchery, using a small knife and an axe to reduce the animal to a spine. The offal is carefully set aside and washed. Men's hands pick pieces of roasted meat from a metal bowl, helping each other cut it. The men are sitting, squatting and lying on rugs around the bowl under a tent, joking as they eat.

[10: Nomads interview]

A man's head is studied in profile as camels pass in the bright distance. He explains in Tamashek what makes a good year and a bad year for him, and considers whether the prospect of a more comfortable life in town is appealing.

[11: Locusts and life at camp]

Swarms of locusts fly over the landscape and seethe over the ground. A man strides to and fro herding sheep. Another sits outside a tent, patiently weaving together lengths of scrap string, while off-camera Tamashek voices discuss their animals, their neighbours, the film-maker, and what there is to eat. A woman watches nervously. Camels shelter from the midday sun in the meagre shade of a tree. A strip of the desert outside is seen under the edge of the tent canopy; the feet of a woman walking past are seen, kicking up little puffs of sand as they go. Women weave straw into a sieve for making cheese. In the evening, camels mate noisily. The sun sets. In the dark, young men sing the feathers off a large bird's carcass by holding it over a fire; then, in torchlit glimpses, we see them gutting it.

[12: Worming camels]

Mattahel and a younger man walk out across the land; a car races past. They work with other men to pitch pills into camels' mouths, then force the camels to drink water to make them swallow. The camels resist violently, and the herdsman struggles to subdue them as they twist themselves into bizarre shapes in their attempts to escape.

[13: Mohamed Ali talks about town and country]

The younger man from the previous scene is sitting indoors. He introduces himself in English as Mohamed Ali, a programme manager for Oxfam and a son of Mattahel. He explains why he loves life in nomadic areas so much. Food tastes better there, he says, and his view is not cluttered. In town, people are always worried, difficult to trust and suffer from pollution. In nomadic areas, he can trust the people he meets, he can say what he thinks, and life is simpler.

[14: Milk party and changing a wheel]

Out in the open, at evening, Mattahel and Mohamed Ali sit on rugs and are served milk by a

nomad relative. Another man, in T-shirt and shorts, is changing a wheel on the car. Another of the nomads, herding sheep, looks on from a distance.

[15: Castrating a camel]

This scene is a single take. A camel's jaws are bound tight, its head held down, its legs tied up, and five men heave it onto its side so that one of them can cut its scrotum open with a razor, pull out its testicles and haul on them until the tubes break, as the camel howls and groans. The operation over, the camel is untied and gets up; the men wash their hands and joke about the operation in French and Tamashek.

[16: Mattahel talks about wells]

A boy in charge of a pair of donkeys near the well gazes uneasily at the camera, then drives the animals back to the well. In interview, Mattahel explodes into fury at the undeveloped state of the well system used in the area – the system of water-sacks and pulleys. He angrily argues that in food, in clothing, in transport and in medicine, his people have joined the modern world, but as far as getting water goes, “we are in a primitive condition”.

[17: Going down the well]

A man squats on the ground tying knots in a worn rope. A crowd of men walk to the well and crowd around it, while the man lays out lengths of rope on the ground. Then he is tying loops in the rope beside the well, taking off his outer clothes, stepping into the loops and climbing up onto the well's lip; the rope is passed over the pulley and a team of men stand by, holding the other end of the rope taut. The man, Mohamed Ali and Mattahel all shout commands in Tamashek; the rope team take the strain and the man sinks into the well. The camera peers down the well to follow his descent, the overlapping echoes of his shouts ringing from the well walls as he rotates slowly, hanging in space. The men above gaze down, holding the ropes tight but also sniggering at the well expert's predicament. Then he is rising up, coming into the light, clinging gratefully to the pulley support as he plants his feet back on the well lip. He delivers his report about the condition of the well to Mattahel and Mohamed Ali in Hassaniya.

[18: Quiet time]

The well man, dressed once more, goes through the ritual movements of Muslim prayer. A man and boy are seen against the horizon, the man pointing out something a long way off. At dusk, the camera follows a young man walking into the distance, past a family sitting beside their tent; he starts to run towards a group of camels and hurls a stick at them.

[19: Old man talks about what will be lost]

The old man who opened the film talks about what he likes about nomadic life, why he continues to live as a nomad despite the difficulties of such a life, and the annoyances of life in town. Asked what will be lost if nomadic life disappears, he points out that animals and the skills of rearing them are all that the nomads have; those gone, they will have nothing. And nomads will lose the freedom, the pure air they venerate, the beauty and pleasure of walking on the green dunes.

[20: Credits and night-time singing]

Director's note

I felt rather lost while I was filming the sequences for this documentary. It wasn't the piece I had been planning to make, and at that time there were very good personal reasons for me to be in England and not in Mali at all, but the opportunity to visit the nomads as their guest, expressly to make a film, was one I couldn't pass up. So I found myself in the desert, the nomads' life going on mundanely around me, and I couldn't work out what I should be doing. Where was the story? Where was the structure?

I felt that the rewards of this priceless opportunity were slipping away through my fingers and that – once again – I had set myself a challenge only to find myself, for reasons I couldn't work out, not suited to meeting it. I thought gloomily of the disappointing results of a disappointing art degree course I had completed the year before, of the hope with which I had come with my wife – an English journalist who specialises in reporting from Africa – to Ivory Coast at the beginning of 2004 and in April on to Mali, to establish a career for myself as a photojournalist and video cameraman. The photography had gone quite well, and my next goal was to make a piece that would conform to the norms of television documentary. But my trip to the desert seemed to be sliding into an embarrassing, inexplicable, unforgivable failure.

Then I remembered a film I had seen a little of in a London art gallery a few years earlier: Alexander Sokurov's *Spiritual Voices*, a five-hour documentary about Russian soldiers at a mountain frontier post on the border of Tajikistan and Afghanistan. In the part I saw, at least, very little happens. The men live a hard, basic existence, on which the camera dwells, the astonishing mountain landscape appearing only in the background, the video images denying it much beauty even then. If I was happy to watch that film, I thought, then this situation offers me at least as much as Sokurov had. So I stopped worrying about the story and the structure, and thought simply about making sequences that showed me things I wanted to watch. If I started to record, I kept going, moving around the subject, changing angle, coming closer, pulling back, or simply keeping a steady frame on the action, for as long as the flow of images remained engaging.

I went back to England and some months later began to edit. For a long time I tried to trim and weave my material into that standard form that I had had in mind before I went to the desert. I persuaded myself I could distil a theme, set a cracking pace and hold it all together with a voiceover. But the result was unconvincing. So I watched through all the footage again and tried to discern the film was that was already in there, waiting to show itself, if only I would accept it. I remembered why I had recorded it the way I had. I picked out the things that I never tired of watching and the things that communicated something pithy and gave them the time they needed to say what they had to say. It seems to have worked.

Production notes

On 4 August, 2004, about dawn, Mohamed Ali Ag Mattahel's pickup truck, a well-travelled white Toyota Hilux, pulled up outside my house in Bamako, the capital of Mali, as planned. Mohamed Ali's brother, Jamal, loaded my bags in the back, squashed tight beneath rope webbing. We drove out of town across the submersible bridge over the river Niger and took the road to Ségou. Jamal was driving; he was a driver by profession. Mohamed Ali, Oxfam's regional pastoralism programme manager, took the front passenger seat. In the back seat, Bakary, who worked for Mohamed Ali, Jamal's teenage brother-in-law Hassani, and Mohamed Ali's younger teenage son Baba, squeezed me half off the seat against the door in

an extremely uncomfortable position. Sitting on a stack of towels made the edge of the seat less painful on my behind, but the extra height meant that my head hit the bodywork unless I kept my neck craned awkwardly.

The journey took three days. From Ségou we crossed over the Niger again by the dam at Markala. The tarmac ran out at Niono, and the earth road ran north along the canal. Then we left the road and drove across a perfectly flat landscape, following a track between trees and bushes growing in sandy soil. Darkness fell and we drove on for a few hours until we came to a small settlement, where we were welcomed by a man Jamal knew. As there was no light except for torches and a small lantern, the stars were bright. We lay on rugs in a fenced-off area in front of a house and I fell asleep. I woke up when we were brought pasta and milk, and after eating we all slept again. Before dawn we got up and set off again. We reached Bassikounou, in Mauritania, where Jamal lives. Jamal spent the day disassembling and reassembling the gearbox. Leaving Bakary there, we set off again before dawn the next day, as Jamal and Mohamed Ali were worried about the engine overheating if we drove in the middle of the day. Heading east, back in Malian territory, the track passed into the more arid zone of the southern Sahara desert where we were to spend the next three weeks: light-coloured sand, occasional thorny trees and bushes, and, improbably, thin grass. When a puncture stopped us for a while, I dug a little way into the sand. It was damp beneath the surface, as the rainy season had started. Eventually we reached Édiar, the settlement where Mohamed Ali and Jamal's father, Mattahel, lives, a spot roughly two hundred kilometres west of Timbuktu – N 16° 37.388', W 4° 55.044', if you want to find it on a map, in the *commune rurale* (country borough) of Ras El Ma.

I first met Mohamed Ali when my wife, Lara Pawson, an Englishwoman then working for the BBC World Service Africa Service in Mali, interviewed him about the problems of water supply in that country. I thought that the process of desertification, and how people cope with it, would be a good subject for a documentary: a human story with a scientific angle and lots of visual possibilities. Mohamed Ali is from the nomadic Tuareg people who live in and around the desert, and through his job he is in contact with agricultural communities throughout the region, so I asked him if he could help me find locations and make contacts for the documentary. Instead, one day he came to our house and told me he was going to take me to the desert to see how nomads live. He later told me I would need to bring a camp bed and a transformer so that I could charge my camera batteries from the car battery, but otherwise he proved rather elusive before our departure, so I knew very little about what I would be seeing.

At Édiar I recorded the working of the family well, interviewed Mohamed Ali and his father and observed them giving worming pills to Mohamed Ali's camels, which are looked after by his family. Then we set off to spend some time with their nomadic relatives. Mohamed Ali dropped me off at a camp just as they were loading up the camels to move. As none of them spoke French or English, and I spoke no Tamashek, he told me to mime drinking if I was thirsty, and then left. I recorded the loading, then was shown my camel. We set off, myself with camera in hand, for several hours across the desert to a place where there was fresh pasture. Mohamed Ali was already there, with the car. I forgot his instructions on what to do when the camel knelt down to allow me to get off – it kneels with its front legs first, so you have to lean back to compensate – so I was pitched forward into the air but managed to keep my right arm up as I hit the ground and so saved the camera. For the following fortnight I stayed in various nomad camps, recording whatever would make an interesting sequence, occasionally returning to Édiar by car for the luxury of unlimited well water to wash with and drink. There was another camel journey, rather less comfortable than the first, problems

with the car, thunderstorms at night, heat, sand, tedium, a lot of milk and yoghurt, pasta, rice and butter, some boiled and roasted lamb, mutton and wild birds, visits to relatives and nights under the stars. The skin on my face erupted, and I learned how to wear a Tuareg-style turban, but I didn't learn any Tamashek. One night, when a lot of the 'brothers' and 'cousins' were in camp, I was awoken by their singing. There was no light to film by, so I just recorded the sound, which is what plays over the end titles of the documentary. When the time came to return, we spent a morning digging the sandy soil round the well at Édiar to prevent the filthy puddles that formed in the hollows caused by the animals standing round to drink. It took us three days to get back to Bamako. The rains had increased, and between Bassikounou and the earth road to Niono we had to dig the car out of deep mud twice.

People featured

Old man interviewed at beginning
and end of film

Man working pulley at well

Man driving bull at well

Retired teacher interviewed

Woman loading camel

Man butchering lamb

Man changing tyre and cutting up meat

Nomad man interviewed in tent

Boy carrying metal tub

Man weaving string

Woman weaving with Fadimata

Oxfam manager interviewed

Man who serves milk to Mattahel
and Mohamed Ali

Boys helping cook bird at night

Traditional vet

Man who goes down the well

Also appearing

Ibrahim

Oumar

Bilal

Mattahel Ag Mohamed

(nicknamed Doli)

Fadimata (nicknamed Doudou)

Moctar

Jamal Abdel Nasser Ag Mattahel

Haratine

Haddulaye

Mahmoud

Khadijatou

Mohamed Ali Ag Mattahel

Almahadi

Baba Ag Mohamed Ali and Hassani

Sidi Mohamed

Sidi

Sidi Mohamed, Yazid

Credits

Produced, directed, photographed and edited by Julian Richards

Translations: **Mohamed Ali Ag Mattahel, Aboubacrine Ag Rhissa, Stéphane Mayoux and Ousmane Ag Sadidi**

Sound advice: **Dan Jones**

Production info

Title: With the Nomads (English version)/Parmi les nomades (French version)

Length: 120 minutes

Languages spoken in film: French, Tamashek, English, Hassaniya

Language of subtitles: English or French in respective versions

Shooting locations: Édiar, Tiwarwarène, Iwalen and Hajyar, in the commune of Ras El Ma, northern Mali.

Shooting dates: 8–18 August, 2004.

Year of completion (current version): 2007

World premiere: 11 May 2006, Ritzy Cinema, Brixton, London, in the Mosaiques festival of the Institut français, London.

Other screenings: PocketVisions, London, 2006; Document 4 film festival, Glasgow, 2006.

Shooting format MiniDV PAL

Aspect ratio: 4:3

Camera: Sony DCR-TRV900E

Microphone: Sennheiser K6/ME66

Editing system: Apple Final Cut Pro

Director's bio/filmography

Julian Richards was born in Liverpool, in the north-west of England, the United Kingdom, in 1967. He studied philosophy, and ancient Greek and Latin literature, at university. After a successful sporting career in rowing, he took up photography seriously in 1987. Since then he has worked as an artist, photojournalist, teacher and sub-editor. *With the Nomads* is his first documentary.

Photojournalism and documentary video

Freelance Photographer for BBC News Online, Associated Press, Agence France-Presse, European Pressphoto Agency, BBC *Focus On Africa* magazine and the Dutch newspaper *NRC Handelsblad*, in Ivory Coast and Mali, January to September 2004

Freelance Video Cameraperson for Associated Press Television News and BBC in Niger and Ivory Coast, January and February 2004

Solo exhibitions

Early Starings, The Photographers' Workshop, Oxford, February 1991

Monuments/Numina, The Photographers' Workshop, Oxford, February 1993

London Beach, Two-monitor video piece, Lux Cinema, London, November-December 2000

Udha Pa Mbarim/Road Without End: documentary photographs of Albanian artist Genc Mulliqi, Woolwich Town Hall, April 2001

Collaborative projects

Writer and Video Artist, *Ocean* – a multimedia music-theatre work, Minema Cinema, London, June 1997

Script Editor, Directors' Assistant and Researcher, *Hand on the Shoulder*, drama, 45 minutes, directed by Breda Beban and Hrvoje Horvatic, for Arts Councils of England and Ontario, broadcast in Channel 4's Midnight Underground series, July to October 1997

Video artist and performer, *Calvino Project*: an experimental collaboration between video artists and performers, BAC, October 2002

