



Kunama Wedding Dance
Berentu, Eritrea



Annual Perahera Festival
Tissamaharama, Sri Lanka

Celebration Time Again

All Around the World

Story and photos by Richard Brackett

People get ready! It's time to rise for the occasion. There's another grand event coming to entertain.

All throughout my travels I've come to realize that cultural pride is very much alive. The last four out of five years I have been quite fortunate to thoroughly explore the deep-rooted lands of Africa and Asia. While in search of natural wonders and ethnic splendors, it seems as if all of my most enchanting dreams have come true.

My discovery trail presented me with more than one hundred special cultural celebrations. The majority took place in electricity-less remote regions where tribal community bonding is exceptionally energizing. Guest lists, fences and security forces are non-existent. Anyone coming from near or far could join in to express their joy. All ages know by heart the tradi-

tional songs and the dance styles. No one is too shy to clap along, stomp their feet to the solid drum beats or let their voices soar in group harmony. During my seemingly endless ceremonies tour, "no distance too far" became my theme as I backpacked across ancient heartlands. The most valuable possessions in my lightweight sack, which could always spark enchantment with anyone along my merry way, were a frisbee, bamboo flute, Sony tape recorder with built-in speaker for highly approved playback, a 35 mm camera and my pleasurable photo collection of captivating people displayed in my world tour flip-book album.

Whether it be a harvest festival, a coming-of-age ceremony, a first day of rain dance or a celebration of great religious importance, one thing for certain was that everyone became cheerfully receptive to me. Smiling faces paved my way...

Olodum Members
Bahia, Brazil



Masai Enduruj Ceremony
Lengijave, Tanzania





**Hamer Tribe's Manhood Initiation Dance
Southwest Omo Region, Ethiopia**



**Children's Sing-Along
Miandrivazo, Madagascar**

TANZANIA

The first two manhood initiation ceremonies I attended were so culturally outstanding I could write a full book about Masai tribal pride! But the third ceremony would be impossible even for Hollywood to duplicate. One hundred million dollars could not provide the power to re-enact what I witnessed on that unforgettable Christmas Day! The event of my life was the Enduruj, a giant step above the former two Emuratare ceremonies I had just become mesmerized by in the previous days.

Whoa, was that an earthquake!? Can thunder start from ground level?! Was Mt. Kilimanjaro about to erupt?! The roar was out of sight and I was the only one baffled. Within minutes the answer appeared from all four directions and more! The in-unison tribal chants raged harmoniously. The deep voices of thousands of Masai warriors were all heading toward me. And the high notes of the virgin girl choirs were directly behind. Masses of bopping bodies approached, streamlining inwards. Tribal boogie wonderland was in full swing! Up to the summit and in and out of the circumcision corral the task forces of mighty leather shield-wielding warriors arrived. That's when the wind began to howl and the dust began to thicken the air. Overcast cloud cover came out of nowhere. High-jumping pride raised my brows. Foot-stomping marching

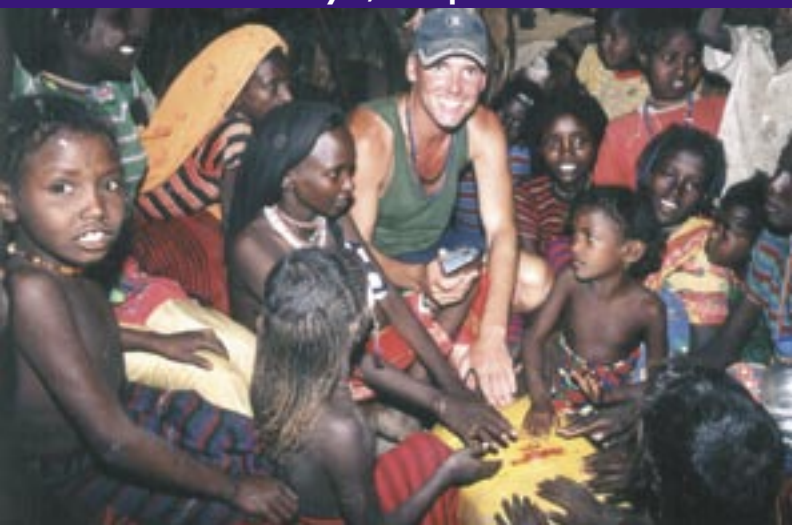
hit my chest. There I was, smack in the middle of the intense action. Anywhere I turned was a spectacle to behold – red ochre hair, attractive facial paint, bead necklaces galore, sticks so high to the sky. Community pride came from all regions of the Mt. Meru foothills to unite! The voice level in the open-air forum could rival any Rolling Stones stadium show. Those warriors came to play! Many became entranced, going into convulsions and had to be carried away. I became so enthralled that I forgot to find my way to the celebratory corral center to observe the cow slaughtering ritual. Two bombastic hours worth of hardcore dance-a-thon later – at the stroke of sunset – suddenly the youth brigade departed swiftly. Only the elders remained, all united in surrounding the mud dung huts to carry the spirit on until wee hours. Was I tired? No way! The oil-lamp-lit enchantment inside those packed, earthy huts was pure tribal dream world. The elders, men and women alike, proved their experience, all taking turns to stand to do their solos as the tight-sitting circles delivered the chorus with solid gusto – reciting their folkloric tall tales – no room for error. I squeezed in with them sitting arm in arm to enjoy their upper body-thrusting groove. Their slow rhythm was therapeutic joy. Their friendly smiles all pointed my way gave such delightful mental massage. All night long I drifted from one hut to the

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**Annual Drum-a-Thon, Pooram Festival
Thrissur, Kerala, Southern India**



**Spontaneous Groovin' with Afar Youth
Hadalayta, Ethiopia**



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next, getting drunk on their gifted community pride. My buddy Josia was always there to assist my desire to record the Masai ceremonial classics. He'd glide around the circles to catch his fellow tribes' folk songs so I could bring back their wondrous vibes and share them with the other side of the world.

ETHIOPIA

Deep in the Omo region of Southwest Ethiopia, Ukuli ceremonies of the Hamer tribe are out of this world! I was quite fortunate to be invited to and/or stumble upon seven of them! I was respected kindly as a firenji (white foreigner) guest by all the host families, as word spread like jam that I was the lion man traveling solely by foot to distribute genuine photos all across their land. Their boy-to-manhood events last up to three days, attracting hundreds of clan folk of all ages who will be sponsored plenty of food and drink served out of giant community calabash gourds and clay pots. Sorghum porridge and nuree yogurt are daytime fillers, while lamb chops and cow chunks are devoured at night. The fermented sorghum home brew is what really stirs the party though. Age groups sit in different clusters but my "all-access pass" had me jokin' and jivin' with all generations! Often they requested that I record their harmonious songs to uplift them with knockout sensations. After the buck-naked gazelle-like youth successfully completes his four runs up and over the row of bulls' backs, his elder relatives do a slow, group boogie with him up front, introducing him into manhood. Ukuli rituals are wondrous to see! The ensuing night dances prove their pride! First, interlocking arms over shoulders, the huge circle of men sing about the Ukuli boys' new importance in their society. Then they each step up to do their high jump jolts while all participants clap the beats loudly. Duos then shoot up together in tune with foursomes following. Then it's time for the bell chimin' babes to do their feverish grooves. In the middle of the thumping circle they bop up to the young man they dreamed to dance with, signaling him with a direct head notion and the tribal rave really begins to heat up. They sure loved it when I interlocked arms with them and memorized their roaring words. What a rush when a hot Hamer honey gave me the sign to join her in the circle to strut and shake down as everyone smiled our way. Elders, especially women, often persuaded me to take a break from the younger set festivity to join their sit-down pow-wows under their parsee brew pavilion. "Bring out your black box, catch our spirit..." They loved hearing their group chants played back, boosting their output level for higher energy on their next songs! Gadee faiya!

The six stickmen whose duty is to whip the proudest female relatives of the Ukuli initiate, knew me well. They were never too surprised to see me at another ceremony which they all must attend to satisfy the rock solid Hamer beauties with ceremonial back-lashing, high-rise scars. Those stickmen immensely enjoyed me recording their special private budi gem-



Recording songs with the Masai girls choir at the annual Emurate ceremony, Olkakola, Tanzania

bel initiation songs. They tightly circled and kept putting their hands out to the middle, stacking them up and then raising them to the night sky when the words "budi gembela" came around again. That Hamer phrase expresses "all is peaceful!" Wonderful world, beautiful people... we're all players, performers and portrayers. "Let's put aside the alienation and get on with the fascination" became my underlying theme as I tagged along with the posses of unmarried bugle blowing, sweat-drenched Hamer girls singing their hearts out along all those distant bush treks to Ukuli sites. Dilay Baina, Wenyarke, Keski, Kaina, Argude and Zimbele initiation grounds will never be forgotten.

INDIA

Boom, boom, boom! In the culturally rich south of India, the gods sure go crazy at Kerala State's annual raging Pooram elephant festival! The three-day spectacle spreads out over the massive Thrissur Temple grounds with summer's intense sweltering heat massaging your soul as your ears throb to the contagious loud drum and horn section songs. Teams of bare-chested, saronged men do delightful synchronized boogies, while blasting out amazing solid beats over and over and over, all day long below the row of elegantly costumed elephants, who each have groups of four barefoot boys displaying their pomp and glory to satisfy the temple gods. Those boys wave colorful flags, interchange fluorescent, homemade umbrellas and swirl staffs of white horse tail hair. The sandwiched crowds of guys go delirious each time the boys rise to stand upon the elephant backs in unison, to stretch out high just as the drum battalions climax each of their dynamic songs.

I usually found advantageous temple walls to observe from just overhead the packed-in musicians. Amongst crowds of 150,000 Hindus, I was the lone westerner and naturally a big hit with the wild ones in the bulging throng as I often grooved just as fanatically as they did, bopping my head to the hypnotic rockin' beats! The musicians also smiled my way as I constantly gave them thumbs-up to boost their positive vibrations igniting the crowds surrounding me with jaws a droppin' and eyes a popping. Hey, this foreigner got hooked! At the end of each day the two competing groups

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of eleven dazzling elephants unite and the heights of ecstasy double as the musicians play the same old songs in perfect booming harmony.

BRAZIL

And what about Carnival in Salvador. it's dynamite! The grandest block party in the world with an estimated three million fanatics takin' it to the streets, lettin' their ya yas out, going crazy! Party spirits soar around the clock for five consecutive days. Good luck trying to sleep; cease of energy not allowed! Salvador boasts a one-of-a-kind gala event featuring a vivid caravan of "concerts on wheels." About 30 huge neon-lit, creatively painted, mega high-rise bandstand trucks called "trio electricos" present Bahia's best, popular, energizing music groups. Each group has its own "cult following" of a few thousand paying members who dress in silly, wild-colored theme gowns who lead the trios, follow the trios and sandwich the trios for 'round the clock boogies. They move at a snail's pace around an intensely jam-packed downtown circuit, igniting the foot-loose, free-roaming crowds to spark wildly, dancing feverishly like never before seen. It seemed as if each music group had the same song list, making it possible to hear the "greatest hits" repertoire about 50 times per day. Although repetitious, the songs become so familiar as everyone learns the lyrics and sings their hearts and lungs out creating a dizzying, hypnotic state! You gotta' love the Bahianan pride reflected in their jovial songs! Everyone living it up, engaged in the throng! It's one massive slam dancin', free-for-all party singing at their highest heights, waving their hands in the air like they just don't care... Bahians can dance! They sure have style with a smile. Every day the songs got louder and louder in booming harmony. And the people watching is incredible as participants of all colors, ages and sexual preferences sure shake 'n' bake! How the sweat comes pouring...

Carnival was blessed with clear, warm, blue skies all week long to enhance the orgy of color. Outrageous costumes were sizzling! Countless men's "wise guy" groups strolled dressed as the silliest flirting women, using artificial wigs and boobs, most in bikinis and tutus, going about teasing men in the crowd with their wildest exploitations, having a gay, old time. Transvestite creatures come out to "strut their stuff," not one bit timid. They adore attention and get turned on by catcalls and rude gestures from the crowd. During Carnival, girls and young women's bodies are easy targets for unauthorized "touchies and feelies" from horny boys and drunk men on the prowl who just can't resist temptation. Frolicking hair, pinching, kissing and grabbing girls from behind all seemed to be fair game, but surprisingly I didn't see many slap back responses. The girls know it's bound to happen. The general populous wears barely anything at all – it's a sea of shorts, bikinis and bulging eyes! Just about every given space on sidewalks, alleyways, park grounds and plazas are invaded by vendors of every sort. Literally thousands of mini beer

gardens, refreshment and munchie stalls are crowded as the poor locals capitalize off the colossal event, working overtime. Popsicle vendors with their little styrofoam coolers strapped on are found everywhere "saving the day." Sugar cane juice squeezers made a fortune off me! The local residents and invited guests hang out their apartment building and office windows. They party off mini balconies. Kids sit perched on every high post, fence top, traffic signal, rooftop, monuments, tree branches... you name it!

My favorite part of Carnival was the congregation of African "roots" groups that feature drum battalions leading their processions with dynamic beats that rock the soul! They only come out at night in full force and boogie until dawn in a brilliant array of realistic "tribal" color – what a sight! The most spectacular groups are Olodum, Araketu, Muzenza, Ilyhe and Filhos de Gandhi. Carnival provides the opportunity to unite all races and classes of people and make an abundance of new friends. Carnival time is lunacy. Carnival is fantasia, it's outrageous, it's carefree, out of control... and I got caught up in the "eye of the storm," catching the spirit, watching it all blend together. Carnival in Salvador is a fabulous wonder of the world! I give it two thumbs up and a long, cold shower when it's over!

MADAGASCAR

It's official! Madagascar, you're the best! No country can match your level of jolliness. Never mind your rank as one of the poorest places on Earth, you take the prize for pure pleasure! Aleifa! People get ready, the new kid in town has come to play! Step on up, don't be shy. It's time to strut your stuff. I wanna' give you an "A" for originality! Day after day my merry-making sessions introduced me to such a falifali selection of talent-search participants. Come on and show me a good thang! Hey, how about you afaka mihira vey yanow?! Sing me a song I've never heard before. Can you recite one with traditional tone? Go get your mama and tell her I'd enjoy a tune from way back when.

Many times I would initiate the song circles with my cheerful flute play. I mastered a new style to make anyone smile my way. I could now blow out catchy rhythms through my right side nose hole! "Hey, you with the 'please-choose-me' eyes, I know you're ready, come on and thrill me no matter what your size!" The songs kept coming. Everyone is granted a festive chance to shine. I could go on and on and on until finally my stomach tells me it's prime time to dine. "Can someone please show me where I can score a bowl of rice? I don't care if it's cold, clumpy or from the very bottom of the pot. If there's beans or boiled bananas to add, it sure would be extra nice!" Once I got a belly full, I usually relocated to another side to catch another slice of village life. By now everyone wants a piece of my action, a special opportunity to step on up to my mic! As usual, girls were always so sweet and orderly with harmony, not skipping one beat. But boys would always act goofball and crazy. Many of those rowdy recordings I'd simply delete. I could easily convince the loosest of the troupe to take over

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and start a dance party that had everyone head over heels and knocked off their two feet. Clear the way, this kid can move. Let's clap together to make him bust out some crowd-pleasing groove! Take a good look around. During my smiley song and dance festivals I could paint a myriad of pictures of the whole entire town. "Hey, let's take a group portrait!" You should see them all runnin' over and then settling down. Proud parents standing in the background made sure every one of their offspring had a happy face. It's another cherishable team photo I'll treasure forever on top of my showcase.

SRI LANKA

Over in the tropical wonderland island of Sri Lanka, elephants are supposedly respected like gods, but are tamed and dressed like toy dolls at the important annual Buddhist religious festivals. I was present at the famous Perahera celebration, a fascinating full moon night parade in Tissamaharama where 48 regional traditional dance troupes dazzled under the moonlight. Additional glow was provided by hundreds of sweaty men along the sidelines of the five-kilometer village circuit holding long, fiery torch baskets fueled by coal and coconut oil. The rural folk, who obviously rarely observe a foreigner like me in their lifetime, stared as if I was the main attraction! But my eyes were upon the extra-colorful costumed dancers. Most exotic were the fluttering peacock-winged girls doing flirtatious, stimulating gyrations. There were fire twirlers, in-sync stick beaters, jazzy horn ensembles, stilted goofballs and pumped-up rock-steady drum battalions. The elder troupes of dancers appeared most energetic of all, doing dizzying spins in their silver-plated outfits. The following morning I visited the sprawling, gardened grounds of Kataragama, a "one love" worship complex where Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims all merge to respect each other and do numerous rituals and flower presentations. I stayed in the shade to record the sweetest devotional songs sung continuously by the long row of flower vendor girls who excitedly lifted their voices to the sky so high.

ERITREA

Since I only had three days left to return to Asmara to catch my plane flight back to the western world, I packed up come morning time, and just as I hit the road, my Kunama buddy Idris Fukak came running over to delay my departure. He had wonderful news that I must stay one extra day to be his special guest at a Kunama tribal wedding dance party, starting now! Let's go! The all-Muslim crowd received me delightfully as half of them had family ties who I had already gifted fine portrait photos to. Kunama women, who don't use the Islamic veil and don't hang their heads low, sure got a kick meeting me as my photo album of cultural women of Eritrea and across-the-border "enemy tribes women" of Ethiopia made their eyes bulge with talkative curiosity. Muslim men in their traditional, full-white body cloaks and customary stick-in-



Kunama wedding dance in Berentu, Eritrea

hand kept busy off to the side chopping up and dissecting a ceremonial cow. They didn't mind one bit that all their wives were swarming me with smiles! I was easily given their go-ahead to photograph them once the song and dance rituals began. The circle grew and grew and was at first reminiscent of Sudani Sufi style with actors and leapers waving their sticks in the air, but the big difference proven later, was the pleasing participation of women. Yes, Muslim women! They had no shame to sway their bodies and express their emotions. With temperatures soaring way over 100 degrees and the Kunama foot-stomping boogies stirring up a dust cloud too thick to shoot my camera through, I said forget the recording of their actions till later. Someone give me a stick! How could I resist not joining their positive energy flow and chanting whatever they were proclaiming out loud. For five solid hours the circular grind went clockwise with a sweaty, hardcore drum quintet of elaborate women in the middle swiveling their necks to let their gorgeous beaded hairweave lengths add a captivating percussion sound. Around and around I hopped and bopped with tape recorder in one hand, stick to the sky in the other, Allah looking down with two thumbs up! I could see their supreme one saying "I think it's finally time. Let's make some amendments to the Koran and give all Muslim women worldwide their long overdue equality!"

Born in Berkeley, CA, Richard "The Globetrotter" Brackett has spent 12 of his last 20 years thoroughly exploring all seven continents via overland backpack travel. Richard's passion for sharing universal goodwill finds him adventuring to our earth's most remote cultural wonderlands to interact with diverse ethnic peoples. Richard enjoys entertaining people who might never otherwise experience meeting a foreigner. He loves to stimulate happiness with his flute playing and fun-for-all frisbee flinging. Richard's daily eventful talent searches across tribal lands allow him to record inspirational folklore songs and capture beautiful smiley portraits on color film. Richard's most gratifying pastime is to make return visits to hand deliver gift portraits. Every photo opens many doors where hearts of joy are certain to shine. His traveling motto is "A spirit with a vision is a dream with a mission." Richard's photography will be on display at the Sierra Nevada World Music Festival and his extensive collection of 40,000 portraits is for sale. If you would like to receive newsletters of his world travels send him an email at theglobetrotter@hotmail.com or call 510/635-0926.