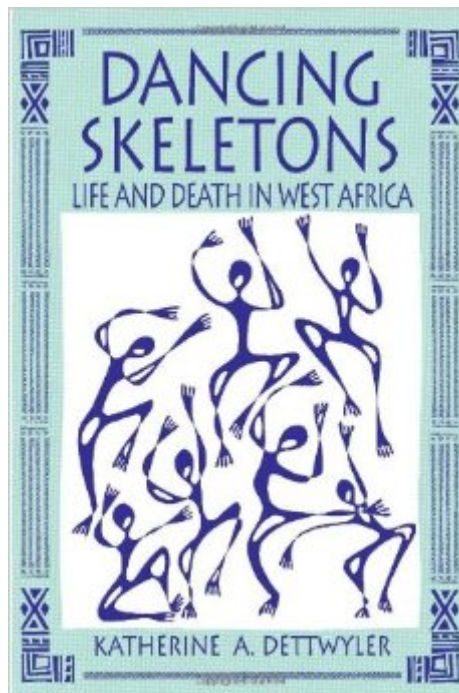


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Dancing Skeletons: Life And Death In West Africa



Synopsis

1995 Margaret Mead Award winner! This personal account by a biocultural anthropologist illuminates important, not-soon-forgotten messages involving the more sobering aspects of conducting fieldwork among malnourished children in West Africa. With nutritional anthropology at its core, *Dancing Skeletons* presents informal, engaging and oftentimes dramatic stories from the field that relate the author's experiences conducting research on infant feeding and health in Mali. Through fascinating vignettes and honest, vivid descriptions, Dettwyler explores such diverse topics as ethnocentrism, culture shock, population control, breastfeeding, child care, the meaning of disability and child death in different cultures, female circumcision, women's roles in patrilineal societies, the dangers of fieldwork, and the realities involved in researching emotionally draining topics. Readers will alternately laugh and cry as they meet the author's friends and informants, follow her through a series of encounters with both peri-urban and rural Bambara culture, and struggle with her as she attempts to reconcile her very different roles as objective ethnographer, subjective friend, and mother in the field. (Not-for-sale instructor resource material available to college and university faculty only; contact the publisher directly.)

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Dancing Skeletons is a different kind of ethnography. Katherine Dettwyler's story, nonfiction though it may be, cannot be equated with other ethnographies documenting women in Africa. Quite frankly, she doesn't document their lives at all, she interprets them. While this book can definitely be appreciated for its emotional appeal to help the malnourished children in West Africa, I do not

believe it should be used as an academic authority on the matter. For one thing, Dettwyler relies heavily on comparisons with Western culture, which invariably place Malian culture on the losing side of the duality. In Malian culture, women are circumcised according to custom. She says that "people seemed to accept it without question" (27), that women who she asked about sex often didn't understand "the point" of her question, and that women "had other problems to worry about; they couldn't concern themselves with the issue of sexual pleasure, or lack thereof" (29). All this rhetoric implies a superiority of female sexual practices in the West because our women are allowed sexual pleasure and understand what it means to have sexual rights. While Dettwyler immediately turns to an amusing anecdote about the Fat Lady from Timbuktu, I was left a little miffed at her treatment of this practice. While no one I know would condone it, comparing the practices of the West with Malian custom in a way that privileges the Western perspective will never help Malian women. Dettwyler repeatedly creates this dichotomy between the way things are in Mali and the way they would be back in America. While this comparison is understandable given her social context, it has no place in an academic ethnography.

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