



---

**River Nomads [Film]**

*Daniela Vavrova*

Reviews

Journal: Global Ethnographic

Publication Date | May 2017 | No. 1 |

Published by: Emic Press

*Global Ethnographic is an open access journal.*

---

Place of Publication: Kyoto, Japan

ISSN 2186-0750

---

*Global Ethnographic and Emic Press are initiatives of the Organization for Identity and Cultural Development (OICD).*

© COPYRIGHT GLOBAL ETHNOGRAPHIC 2017

The logo for Emic Press, featuring the word 'EMIC' in a bold, white, sans-serif font centered within a solid black rectangular background.

**EMIC**

## River Nomads

---

Eric Komlavi Hahonou (Director and Producer) with the participation of Lotte Pelckmans.

Duration 42 minutes, spoken languages: Hausa, Zarma, subtitles: French, English.

Komlavi Consult (Production), 2016.

“All people here came from somewhere else”

– Sani Boureima

In this documentary film, we are introduced to the Kebbawa fishermen from Northwestern Nigeria, also called Yauri people, who twice a year form convoys of large boats and travel along the Niger River. It is the fishing season, between January and November each year, that sets the Yauri families in motion and they embark on another exciting river journey. They catch fish and gather goods to be given and sold back home to their relatives and other residents. Recent years, however, show a decrease in this travelling enterprise. One reason is the influence of Islam, devotion to everyday prayers and sedentary life. The other reason is the continuous corruption and bullying of Yauri people by the patrol officers along the river. The long Yauri tradition of travelling is rather an existential one. It is a mode of life. One of the points the filmmakers make is the fact that cultures are not static. They continually change. People adjust their practices to current political and economic demands. The younger generation will decide how their tradition will look like in the future. It is up to them. The film effectively shows the

interests of the new generation of river navigators and the concerns of the elderly pinnace owners. Pinnace is a light sailing boat, formerly used in attendance on a larger ship. In this film, it is a larger boat carrying cargo, other small boats, people, and goods.

The film is certainly useful to those who are interested in West African cultures and their myths and rituals. It will also appeal to researchers working on the issues of migration, generation and gender, and also economics and politics. The film is rather conventionally made. Its form is based on a juxtaposition of interviews and scenes from travelling the Niger River. It is beautifully shot and well edited. I was longing to see more scenes without talking; more interactions between people. Most of the unspoken scenes are overlaid by music which puts us into a sentimental mood. The Toure – Raichel Collective has created the soundtrack and given a ballad feeling to the entire film. It is a humanist documentary, allowing us to move through the everyday experience of the travelling Yauri. The aim is to present the daily life of people and their values. The interviews, however, lead our perception a great deal. It is not simply about following a particular lifestyle – we are introduced to the problems of nomadism and survival, of identity and home more

generally, and to the cultural particularities which are not familiar to all. Moving due to having to find more food and re-settling are things to ponder upon. These are also the global issues people around the world tackle and this film is a good example of the larger Anthropocene picture, the current geological epoch marking the enduring impact of human activity on the Earth's ecosystem.

After the written introduction, which starts off the film, we see several people talking about the Yauri. They talk from their memories of being children, swimming in the river, and observing the boat convoys passing by. Their parents and grandparents were saying that these river nomads possess magic, and that they kidnap children. Sani Boureima, the tourist guide, explains how many of the river nomads used to travel before, where they came from, and what they actually do. He continues by explaining how fishing has changed and how there are fewer fish swimming around these days. Sani becomes the main narrator in the film and guides us throughout.

The narrative of the film is held together by several chapters. 'The Navigator' is the first chapter, presenting us with perhaps the most important job when travelling on the river, navigation. We learn about the importance of travelling in groups. We also hear about the tactics and obstacles encountered. Chapter two, 'Nomads', is a deeper account of the history of the nomadic movement. We stop for the night and observe what men and women do when they are on the land and not in the boats. Sani continues explaining why the Yauri do not go to catch fish anymore. We hear that devotees of the Koran do not continue with the old traditions. The history of the nomadic movement continues in the next chapter, 'Settlers'. In the past, the nomads

moved and could settle wherever there was enough fish. Some of them remained deliberately at the places where they could find lots of fish. They settled there and established families. The current decrease in trips is because there are less fish available and the nomads do not catch enough food to sustain their travels. Sani confirms: "This is why people settled down and became citizens of Niger" (18:48 minutes). The last settler in this chapter complains about the wild elephants and hippos destroying their nets and the difficulties with being settled in one place. This moves us to the next chapter entitled 'The Magic' (21:00 minutes). We are told, by one of the pinnace owners, that "even a dead crocodile can cause death", because "some crocodiles are spirits" (22:36). Sani calls Yauri people African animists. But Islam prohibits utilising magic for developing a business. That is when tradition and religion do not go together. One of the navigators is convinced that only God knows what will happen, and so he does not use any magic to protect the boat he navigates, but others still do. The chapter 'The State' presents an economic broker talking in concrete numbers and stating that control officers harass the nomads. He says that around 20 pinnaces travel the river each year in 4 convoys. The nomads get harassed by control officers, and this results in a lower number of pinnaces each year. We see one of the camps, recognizing the troubles the Yauri undergo. Suddenly, in French, a man approaches the cameraperson saying: "Don't film" (28:30). We see the officers and the Yauri discussing the issue with distorted sound in the camera due to a running power generator. One of the pinnace owners and his wife talk about the difficulties and bigger demands of the patrol officers. 'The Future' is the closing chapter. Nowadays, the Yauri are growing rice to be

able to feed their families and counter the lack of fish. One of the young navigators says that he is tired of navigating all the time. He is tired of loading and unloading the cargo. He also explains the complexity of past and present relationships. For example, the Yauri cannot afford not to pay the officers, because it is a practice that is inherited from their parents and grandparents. It cannot be easily changed. We also learn that there is going to be a water dam built. Despite these difficulties, we wonder whether the nomads will continue in making large convoys of boats and travel to known destinations. A young navigator replies: "Yes". They will not stop travelling. The guide, Sani, confirms that the knowledge of river pathways is passed from generation to generation and will not be abandoned just yet. "What will become of Niger river's last nomads? ...Only time can tell..." (37:25). These titles end the film.

River Nomads employs the camera as an investigator. It is a tool for testimonies to be told and for future generations to see how the Yauri people lived. The focus of the film on migration reminded me of Jean Rouch's film *Jaguar* (1957-67, 89 minutes, visit [Ronin Films](#) Australian distributor). It is the same spirit for movement, discovery, and

reconnection that I recognise in *River Nomads* as I do in *Jaguar*. This film is the first edited documentary of a series of three documentaries, which are the foundation of a larger research project. The author's own pondering upon his life movements is mirrored in the film. You can read more about the project and the authors of the film on the [riversnomads.dk](http://riversnomads.dk) website. By underlining the opening thought that "all people here came from somewhere else", the film lingers in my mind not only as a glimpse into the life of great Niger River and the Yauri people, but also as an account of a people's relocation and the skill of navigating due to the unforeseen climate changes ahead of us.

Daniela Vavrova

*The Cairns Institute and College of Arts*

*Society and Education*

*James Cook University*

daniela.vavrova@jcu.edu.au



## REFERENCES

*Jaguar*. (1967). [film]. France: Jean Rouch.