

Are you ready for

Millenium?

by Ira Nayman

Djajejo, a member of Niger's Wodaabe tribe, paints his lips black, colours his face and puts on a clothes intended to attract a mate (his third). He and the other men in town looking for a mate dance before a crowd of women, who will choose a man for themselves. Fajima, who is unhappy with her arranged marriage, gets her sister to arrange a meeting with Djajejo, which will culminate in a flight from her husband through the desert on camel and a second, "love" marriage.

A strange way of mating? Perhaps. But, seen through the eyes of the Wodaabe, our practice of serial monogamy and our wedding rituals might seem equally strange.

One of the greatest strengths of the 10 part documentary *Millenium: Tribal Wisdom and the Modern World* (Global Television, starting Sunday, February 23) is its ability to make you question everything in your culture that you take for granted. The juxtaposition of Canadian marriage rites with those of the Wodaabe, who practice polygamy, and the Nyimba of northwestern Nepal, who practice polyandry, forces viewers to consider ways of life which, while different from their own, work.

The series is about how different cultures deal with common human experi-

TELEVISION

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hosted by David Maybury-Lewis
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ences. Each episode deals with a single philosophical topic: how we determine who we are ("Mistaken Identity"), the attitude of different cultures towards power ("The Tightrope of Power"), the search for a meaning for life ("Touching the Timeless"), our relationship with the environment ("An Ecology of the Mind"). *Millenium* is a rich smorgasbord of ideas.

The series is not, however, overly academic. The customs of various aboriginal peoples are told in two or three stories within each episode. Aside from their educative function, the stories have captivating narrative lines. The visuals are actual aboriginal practices, filmed as they happened; the voice over narration, although based on Native experience, is clearly spoken by actors. While this blurring of documentary and fiction techniques is problematic (how can we be sure what we are seeing is real?), it is informative and arresting.

"*Millenium* is not primarily an informational series," said co-producer Richard



Djajejo, a member of Niger's Wodaabe tribe, in full makeup, is prepared to dance in a local ritual where he will be chosen by a woman to be her husband. Although the custom may seem strange to us in North America, our marriage customs may seem just as strange to the Wodaabe. photo by Carol Beckwith

Meech, who studied under Maybury-Lewis at Harvard. "It is an experiential series." Producer Michael Grant, who has been involved in the film industry since he graduated from UWO in the mid-seventies, added: "At the basis of the series was the notion of storytelling." Since most indigenous cultures have an oral tradition, the producers felt that the story form would best represent their experience. "We wanted to capture the emotional truth of the event," Meech explained.

Anthropological documentaries have, in the past, tended to be patronizing, with the unspoken assumption that "quaint" aboriginal cultures were inferior to our "civilization." *Millenium* takes the opposite approach: in the first episode, host David Maybury-Lewis points out that North American/European culture has produced unhappy people who may well be moving towards their own destruction. The intent of the show is "to discover what the 'modern' world can learn from the ideas and values of traditional peoples — peoples whose lives are so unlike our own."

For this reason, aboriginal traditions are constantly being contrasted with our own. "Strange Relations," the episode about how different cultures see love, opens with Maybury-Lewis explaining how modern European notions of courtly or romantic love were created by troubadours in 11th century France. As he traces the development of love, its co-option by church and state to support the institution of marriage and how it came to denote possession rather than compassion, the viewer begins to realize that he doesn't really know enough about his own dearly held beliefs. This softens his hold on them, making it easier to consider Native ways.

In "Strange Relations" Maybury-Lewis, unlike most other anthropologists, admits to his own feelings of passion. This willingness to challenge his own beliefs, to, in effect, make himself the object of study, is

highly commendable. The first episode, "The Shock of the Other," is, in fact, about how Maybury-Lewis, doing his anthropo-

logical thing, came to accept that, as Meech put it, "There is no historical inevitability" to any single way of life.

Maybury-Lewis is intelligent, witty and willing to ask himself hard questions. He is the perfect host. He is also President of Cultural Survival, Inc., an organization dedicated to the preservation of indigenous people and their cultures. One reason Meech cited for doing the series was to get people thinking about Natives: "One reason they disappear is because people don't care enough about them."

He went on to say that the series is "one small attempt by us to change our society." This might give the impression that *Millenium* is a political show, but it is not. "The Tightrope of Power" is about two recent clashes between Canadian Natives and the government: the incident at Oka and Elijah Harper stalling the Meech Lake Accord. The show is commendable for focusing entirely on the Native community, their goals and strategies; it is a point of view which has not received nearly as much attention as it deserves. However, the complex political issues are only superficially dealt with; perhaps a second

series looking more closely at the relationships between cultures is called for.

If *Millenium* has a political message, it lies in the show's sub-text. "Through understanding other cultures..." Meech says, "you can make better choices" in developing your own. He raised the spectre of a mono-culture, in which everybody lived the same way; Grant countered that, "There is no single right way to live — tolerance of diversity and variety" is essential is the human race is to survive. Meech suggested helping Natives hold on to their land was a key action; when the ties have been severed, Native cultures withered.

Grant was optimistic. There are between 200 and 600 million indigenous people in the world, he pointed out, close to four per cent of the world's population. Adaptation to modern technology was not necessarily incompatible with cultural preservation, Meech added. "The Romantic notion of the (Native) Tribe," has to be abandoned for Europeans to see Natives more clearly.

Millenium: Tribal Wisdom and the Modern World is, as Meech says, "A celebration of different ways of life." If you come to it with an open, inquiring mind, you will be richly rewarded.



David Maybury-Lewis, host of *Millenium: Tribal Wisdom and the Modern World*, consults a member of western Brazil's Xavante people whom he befriended when he contacted the Xavante early in his career as an anthropologist. Maybury-Lewis is an excellent host for the show, which is about how North American civilization can learn from indigenous people around the world: intelligent, witty, and, unlike most anthropologists before him, willing to question his own assumptions about the way the world works. photo by Thomas Kelly



Millenium: Tribal Wisdom and the Modern World "raises the question of what it means to be human," says producer Michael Grant. "There is no single right way to live..." he adds, "tolerance of diversity and variety" is essential to the survival of any culture. "Tribal societies are at the margins" of our world, states producer Richard Meech, but by understanding the choices they made about their lives, we can better understand our own. photo by Thomas Kelly