

# Everyone a wrestler

The sun was reaching full strength as bare-chested wrestlers paraded in a large circle one day at harvest end in Hamra village, Southern Kordofan, readying themselves to fight.

Accompanied by supporters, wrestlers belonging to the Hawazma tribe marched around, stopping every now and then to emit frightful cries while tensing their bodies in a show of courage and strength.

Once a wrestler picked a partner, the match began with a judge watching from two-three metre's distance. As soon as one of the wrestlers threw the other on the ground, the colourfully dressed audience burst out singing and cheering.

Wrestling was a Nuba Mountain tradition that served various functions, including giving thanks for a good harvest, Girham Abdelgadir, director of information and promotion at the Ministry of Tourism and Wildlife, said in his Khartoum office.

Some of the greatest matches happened at the Konyinar festivities celebrating new crops between September and October (depending on when the rains ended), said the tourism director, who originally hails from the Nuba Mountains.

During the year, matches also took place between numerous villages competing for a designated flag, the symbol of championship. For these tournaments – some lasting up to two months – villages nominated their best wrestlers, who had a special way of preparing for the event.

"No connection is allowed between the wrestler and ladies for a given period," said Mr. Abdelgadir, adding that a wrestler's diet consisted of meat marinated in goat milk, grains roasted in oil, wild fruits and even animals like gazelle and guinea fowl.

Becoming a wrestler was predetermined, according to the director. All young men between the ages of 14 and 24 were considered wrestlers, and until about 40 years ago even women participated.

In the Nuba Mountains, Mr. Abdelgadir went on, responsibilities and entitlements were based on age groups. Boys between the ages of seven and 12 took care of cows and goats and then moved out of the village and into the cattle camp.

"To keep fit, they practise wrestling," he said, and as soon as the last harvest day came, the Konyinar took place, offering wrestlers a chance to show their strength and tactics, which had been passed down to them by family elders.

The greatest reward for the largest tournament's champion was not the goats presented to him by neighbours and relatives, said Mr. Abdelgadir, but songs of praise composed about him by the ladies.

The tradition of wrestling was all but isolated; as the Nuba were living together with Arab tribes, including the Hawazma, they passed on the culture of wrestling as well.

The two tribes' relationship was based on interdependence. Some Nuba trusted the nomadic Hawazma to take their goats to El Obeid for better grazing in the rainy season, and offered to tend Hawazma farms in return, Mr. Abdelgadir said.

Today Nuba who have moved to Khartoum continue to practise wrestling in the capital's Haj Yousef area, where a new stadium is also being built for the purpose. "It is the continuation of our culture," the former wrestler noted, adding that lacking its natural context, it was more like "urban folklore". ■

*Story and photos by Eszter Farkas*



Nomadic women watching wrestlers, Hamra, Southern Kordofan.

## Coming up

### Movie night – Khartoum, 24 December, 7 p.m.

The French Institute is showing the 2008 film *Séraphine*, directed by Martin Provost, which follows the lives of painter Séraphine Louis and German art collector Wilhelm Uhde through the First World War, peace and the Depression. The film won the 2009 César Award for Best Film.

### Christmas and New Year's Eve Parties – Khartoum, 24 and 31 December

The Coptic Club has its door open for those with their dancing shoes tightly laced to celebrate Christmas Eve and New Years. The DJ-party goes from 11 p.m. till early in the morning, and repeats itself on New Year's Eve. Be sure to book a table early in advance.

### WaPi in Khartoum and Juba, various dates

The British Council has recently brought Words and Pictures (WaPi), begun in Nairobi in 2006, to Sudan in celebration of the arts. On a monthly basis, WaPi offers a forum for young talent to show their skills at breakdancing, fine arts, poetry and music. Juba is scheduled to hold the first WaPi on 20 December and Khartoum gives floor to it again on 9 January (date subject to change).



Hawazma men wrestling in Hamra, Southern Kordofan.