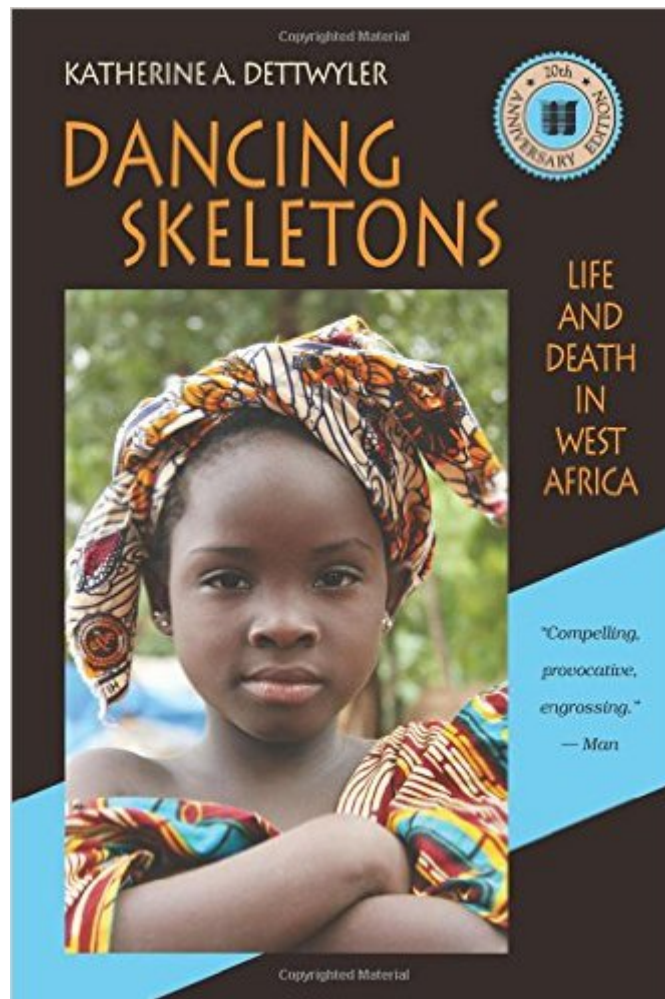


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# Dancing Skeletons: Life And Death In West Africa, 20th Anniversary Edition



## Synopsis

One of the most widely used ethnographies published in the last twenty years, this Margaret Mead Award winner has been used as required reading at more than 600 colleges and universities. This personal account by a biocultural anthropologist illuminates not-soon-forgotten messages involving the sobering aspects of fieldwork among malnourished children in West Africa. With nutritional anthropology at its core, *Dancing Skeletons* presents informal, engaging, and oftentimes dramatic stories 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 facing emotionally draining realities. Readers will 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. The 20th Anniversary Edition includes a 13-page "Q & A with the Author" in which Dettwyler responds to typical questions she has received individually from students who have been assigned *Dancing Skeletons* as well as audience questions at lectures on various campuses. The new 23-page "Update on Mali, 2013" contains facts about economic and health conditions in Mali as well as a brief summary of the recent political unrest. Not-for-sale instructor resource material available to college and university faculty only; contact publisher directly. Title also available by Katherine Dettwyler: *Cultural Anthropology and Human Experience: The Feast of Life* (ISBN 9781577666813). Title of related interest also available from Waveland Press: Holloway, Monique and the Mango Rains: *Two Years with a Midwife in Mali* (ISBN 9781577664352). "Its vivid descriptions and the pathos that lies at the book's heart will touch many readers." *African Studies Review* "An outstanding, well-written book that should be read by students preparing to work in anthropology. It reflects what I would like to think is anthropology at its best." Mark Cohen, Distinguished Professor, SUNY Plattsburgh "... a sobering, painful look at problems of a still-poor, developing country that will be particularly instructive to international public health workers, nutrition educators, planners, and clinical nutritionists concerned with Third World problems." *Ecology of Food and Nutrition* "Dettwyler has used the reflexive style that our students love to read and that our colleagues in public health or international development would be well advised to hear." *American Anthropologist* "Katherine Dettwyler does an excellent job of weaving together the realities of fieldwork with the discipline of nutritional anthropology. This is a book that, at times, reads more like a novel than a text, making it

all the more enjoyable as an introductory text." Journal of Nutrition Education "A compelling, provocative, and engrossing book." Man "The anniversary edition has excellent recent materials on Mali to make this a much more up-to-date study for my Crosscultural Medicine course." Dominique Coulet du Gard, Western Washington University

## **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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