

REVIEW ESSAY

Narrating Sorcery in the Sahel

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Paul Stoller and Cheryl Olkes. **In Sorcery's Shadow: A Memoir of Apprenticeship among the Songhay of Niger.** Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987. Pp. xviii + 236. \$19.95 cloth, \$12.95 paper.

The authors of this anthropological memoir have made an indispensable contribution to West African ethnography by describing their participation in Songhay sorcery. Beginning in 1976, Stoller made a series of five trips to Niger, apprenticing himself to several Songhay sorcerers. As he pursued his apprenticeship, Stoller and Olkes came to believe that sorcerers can effect fundamental changes in the world through rites and incantations. The authors thus found themselves "accepting fully beliefs and phenomena which our system of knowledge often holds preposterous" (1987:229). By narrating their encounters with sorcery and by refusing to interpret them as mere symbolic projections of personal or collective anxieties or desires, Stoller and Olkes have tried to persuade readers that analytical ethnographies often obfuscate rather than illuminate the lived experiences of ethnographers and their hosts—in this case, those experiences involving sorcery in particular.

Even before Stoller began his apprenticeship as a sorcerer, he had learned the hazards of keeping an "objective," analytical distance from the lives of his hosts. While completing a linguistic survey, one of the first projects he launched in Niger, he discovered that his respondents had lied when asked about the number of languages they spoke. Realizing that these

lies incriminated his own integrity as a researcher more than the honesty of his respondents (Stoller and Olkes 1987:9), Stoller decided to forego offensively intrusive survey techniques. He took the advice of a Songhay and began to "sit and listen" quietly and attentively in daily, informal discussion groups in order to learn about the lives of his hosts (Stoller and Olkes 1987:11). Later, when a Songhay sorcerer interpreted an omen to indicate that Stoller should become the sorcerer's apprentice, Stoller accepted the call. He then recognized that only in intimate contexts such as a discussion group or an apprenticeship could he gain a meaningful understanding of Songhay life. His hosts would reveal themselves to trusted friends, not census takers.

Even as an apprentice, however, Stoller encountered difficulties in understanding others. Initially, his first teacher rebuffed questions about the apprenticeship. Only through time, his mentor told him, did apprentices learn to ask "correct questions" (Stoller and Olkes 1987:37). The same mentor further frustrated Stoller by teaching him incantations without explaining their meaning. Though Stoller pleaded to write them down, his teacher refused the request. Just as Stoller could not learn about Songhay social life without sitting and listening, he could not learn about Songhay sorcery without memorizing incantations. His teachers required him to consider sorcery as more than just the subject of structured interviews. "I had arrived at a crossroads," he writes, "I couldn't refuse an opportunity to learn magic from the inside" (Stoller and Olkes 1987:27). Though sorcery became part of Stoller's everyday life in Niger, his apprenticeship was nevertheless characterized by personal concerns that he seemed to have brought with him from North America. For Stoller, Songhay sorcerers were models for how he himself could become a more resolute person:

[The Songhay] were proud, bound by codes of honor and hospitality, and they were hard. These qualities lured me deeper into the Songhay world, for they were traits that I admired, traits that I wanted to emulate, traits which would make me a more forceful person. (Stoller and Olkes 1987:46; see also 11, 31, 37)

After making a difficult journey to the remote village of Wanzerbe in order to consult with a sorcerer, Stoller appeared to have gained the reputation he desired. "People in Mehanna," he writes, "now began to treat me with a degree of respect, as though my trip to Wanzerbe had demonstrated my fortitude, my hardness, my perseverance. I liked that. I liked that a lot" (Stoller and Olkes 1987:49). Thus, Stoller's ethnographic research was largely a "personal quest for comprehension and power" (Stoller and Olkes 1987:ix), one that appeared to transform him into the "forceful person" he had hoped to become.

Stoller narrates several instances in which his abilities as a sorcerer in particular seemed to prove his acquisition of the personal strength he sought. One such instance occurred near the end of his first research stay, just after he had learned that a European businessman living in Niger had fired the cousin of one of Stoller's friends. The friend, who had noticed Stoller mingling with sorcerers, asked the ethnographer to avenge the firing through sorcery. When Stoller sought advice on how to respond to the request, one of his sorcerer-teachers replied that Stoller had both the ability and the responsibility to act. So, just before leaving Niger, Stoller recited an appropriate incantation without really believing that it would accomplish anything (Stoller and Olkes 1987:109-113). When he returned a year later, however, friends told him that the businessman's sister had suffered severe facial paralysis as a result of the spell. Both she and her brother had returned permanently to Europe where her paralysis, Stoller was told, ended on arrival (Stoller and Olkes 1987:118).

As Stoller's friends began to attribute magical powers to him, his relationships with them, as well as his own sense of self, changed. After having recounted to Stoller the flight of the two Europeans, the same friend who had asked for Stoller's help now confessed his uneasiness around the young sorcerer: "I fear you and your mind, Monsieur Paul. You are a hard man with much violence deep in your heart" (Stoller and Olkes 1987:119). Hearing these words, Stoller "flung" himself "onto the street" and "dashed . . . into the bowels of the central market" (Stoller and Olkes 1987:119). Once confronted with the fearful reactions of others, Stoller could not help reacting in shock to his own apparent command of sorcery's frightening power.

After that, Stoller recognized himself as a capable sorcerer and did not hesitate to use sorcery when he judged necessary. After being awakened one evening by an invisible presence and finding himself paralyzed below the waist, Stoller recited an incantation that dispelled the presence and freed his legs (Stoller and Olkes 1987:148). Later, while spending an evening in a village of powerful sorcerers, Stoller chanted incantations throughout the night in order to protect Olkes and himself from the sorcerers' attacks. The next day, he learned that a young girl and a friend's uncle had died in the village the night before. "What had I done?" Stoller writes. "People had sent death to my house and in warding it off I had diverted it elsewhere" (Stoller and Olkes 1987:225, 226). Overcome with guilt at the deaths in the village, and suddenly stricken, as was Olkes, with severe intestinal problems, Stoller suspected that a sorcerer had successfully attacked both Olkes and himself and that he could no longer protect the two of them (Stoller and Olkes 1987:226). He decided that they should leave Niger at once.

Such vivid testimony to the power of sorcery has not gone unchallenged. Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan, himself a distinguished scholar of the Songhay, has argued that the authors romanticize sorcery as paranormal and mystical, whereas Songhay themselves take sorcery's existence for granted as an ordinary, even banal, aspect of everyday life (Olivier de Sardan 1988). Stoller claims that the criticism is not well-founded, however, noting that Olivier de Sardan has researched economic and historical aspects of Songhay society but has not studied contemporary religion and magic with practitioners as Stoller has:

Given the differences in our orientations, cultures, research methods, personalities, academic training, field experiences and inventions, it is hardly surprising that we should reach different conclusions about religion in Songhay. The Songhay I know consider religion reverentially—something which is *not* dominated by the banalities of the everyday world. (Stoller 1989a:116)

Moreover, Stoller (1989a:118-120) asserts that he and Olkes could not have written the less engaged, more "objective" account of sorcery that Olivier de Sardan would have appreciated; theirs is a description based more upon what Olivier de Sardan calls "the author's fantasies" than upon "the usual Songhay ways of managing the supernatural," which appear to Olivier de Sardan to be "particularly relaxed" (Olivier de Sardan 1988:530, my translation). Stoller maintains in his own defense that different ethnographers can never perceive the same reality among their hosts. Because their subjective perceptions permeate every observation that they make, ethnographers are incapable of objectively representing others.

In a subsequent response to Stoller, Olivier de Sardan (1989) laments the absence of any standard apart from Stoller and Olkes's own subjective perceptions according to which their account of sorcery may be judged. While denying the possibility of establishing absolutely objective standards, Olivier de Sardan still argues for some shared datum of accuracy: "If the reality of others can never be attained, what is at stake for anthropology is nonetheless to approach that reality with the least possible inaccuracy" (1989:134, my translation).

Many who sympathize with Stoller's attempt to acknowledge the power of Songhay sorcerers may, like Olivier de Sardan, question his postmodernist and phenomenological agenda of narrating rather than critically analyzing his experiences of sorcery. As a "postmodern phenomenologist," Stoller argues that his narrative portrayal of sorcery stands, for all practical purposes, beyond critical analysis: "there are no right or wrong representations of the world," he writes, "there are only texts that capture fleeting moments of what is. . . . The contingency of

language and ethnographic fieldwork limits us to making interpretations which are neither true nor false; rather, they are either convincing or unconvincing" (Stoller 1989a:116). After having testified to the tangible, transformative effect of sorcery in his own life, he hesitates to conclude that his portrayal of sorcery is more truthful—though not less convincing—than that, say, in which sorcery appears as a mere epiphenomenon of supposedly more real social or psychological forces. Rhetorically, Stoller seems to stop short of treating his subjective experiences as the truthful revelations they seem to have been for him while in Niger. Stoller's position thus recalls the ambiguity of Evans-Pritchard's personal reflections on Azande magic. While among the Azande, Evans-Pritchard assented to Zande ideas about witchcraft, if only temporarily. "I had no choice, " he writes:

in their culture, in the set of ideas I then lived in, I accepted [witchcraft beliefs]; in a kind of way I believed them. Azande were talking about witchcraft daily, both among themselves and to me; any communication was well-nigh impossible unless one took witchcraft for granted. You cannot have a remunerative, even intelligent, conversation with people about something they take as self-evident if you give them the impression that you regard their belief as an illusion or a delusion. Mutual understanding, and with it sympathy, would soon be ended, if it ever got started. . . . If I wanted to go hunting or on a journey, for instance, no one would willingly accompany me unless I was able to produce a verdict of the poison oracle that all would be well, that witchcraft did not threaten our project; and if one goes on arranging one's affairs, organizing one's life in harmony with the lives of one's hosts, whose companionship one seeks and without which one would sink into disoriented craziness, one must eventually give way, or at any rate partially give way. If one must act as though one believed, one ends in believing, or half-believing as one acts. (1983:244)

Much as Stoller could not understand the Songhay without adopting many of their ideas about the world, Evans-Pritchard found it impossible to understand the Azande without assuming, at least momentarily, the reality of witchcraft. Nonetheless, both Stoller and Evans-Pritchard hesitated to attribute analytical importance to their experiences. Evans-Pritchard obscured his involvement with magic behind excuses of "half-believing," and Stoller, while believing wholly in sorcery's irreducible reality, ultimately claimed that his understanding of it had no truth value beyond the limits of his subjective experience.

Here one arrives at an apparent contradiction. How can Stoller acknowledge sorcery as existing independently of himself among the Songhay and then profess not to make any anthropological claims about it beyond the realm of his own subjectivity? Is one to believe that Stoller intended his narrative only as grist for contending ethnographic

interpretations in an endless, indiscriminate production of subjectivist positions (Stoller 1989a:116)? On the contrary, one must recognize Stoller's revelatory account of sorcery as more than just a "fleeting" interpretation, if only on the grounds that Stoller's challenge to reductionist academic theorizing merits a thoughtful response. What, one might ask, is the nature of Stoller's subjective experience of Songhay sorcery, and did it in any way resemble how Stoller's hosts themselves experienced sorcery? In other words, have Stoller and Olkes done more in their memoir with regard to sorcery than recount their subjective experiences? Have they also revealed something of the nature of sorcery as perceived from Songhay points of view?

Stoller readily admits that he "will never become a Songhay" (Stoller and Olkes 1987:228). Therefore, one may assume that Stoller could never have known sorcery in the same way as Songhay sorcerers, even though he "penetrated a world that few Songhay know directly" (Stoller and Olkes 1987:228). An ethnographer's adoption of a new worldview—as Stoller reminded Olivier de Sardan—is always, in part, a matter of contextualizing that view within the ethnographer's own way of understanding the world. One thus recalls that Stoller's encounters with sorcery emerged in the context of his personal quest for forcefulness, a quest whose source lay not only in his research situation in Niger but also, it would seem, in the circumstances of his personal life in the United States. An omen interpreted by a Songhay marked Stoller as a sorcerer's apprentice, but the ethnographer's desire to develop a more resolute character compelled him to heed the omen. Had Stoller devoted more critical attention to this personal desire, he might have also revealed more not only about his own perceptions of sorcery but also about those of his hosts.

If ethnographers inevitably help to invent the cultures that they purport to describe (Wagner 1975), then a fuller consideration of Stoller's search for power would contextualize his perceptions of sorcery more thoroughly and thus help identify those moments when his and Olkes's expectations of sorcerers were upset by the sorcerers' actions. By bringing such moments to the fore, Stoller might have conveyed more precisely how his subjective perceptions of sorcery infused his portrayal of it. Readers might have then discovered the ways in which Stoller's narration of his apprenticeship divulges not only his own subjective perceptions of sorcery but also those insights into sorcery that existed apart from his novice understanding, that is, those learned from his more advanced teachers.

If Evans-Pritchard could not live among the Azande without adopting many of their beliefs about witchcraft, it must also have been impossible for Stoller, as an apprentice to Songhay sorcerers, to leave Niger without adopting many of his teachers' attitudes. To the extent that Stoller's portrayal of sorcery configures both personal and adopted insights, his

account indeed reveals more about Songhay sorcery than intuitive impressions. Had Stoller's theoretical approach to his research been more grounded in the intersubjective rather than the subjectivist vein of "American sociological phenomenology" (Stoller 1989a:114), perhaps this aspect of his memoir would be more apparent.

Stoller and Olkes patterned their approach to ethnography after Paul Riesman (Stoller and Olkes 1987:xi; Stoller 1989b:91, 92). Riesman affirmed the intersubjective nature of social life and took his personal experience to be as valuable a source of anthropological insight as any other. In *Freedom in Fulani Social Life* (1977), he attempted to understand Fulani personal interaction from as close to a Fulani point of view as possible. The purpose of his research was thus to make himself "subject to approximately the same social pressures" as the Fulani (Riesman 1982:3). Knowing that he could never become Fulani, Riesman compared—through dialogue, observation, and introspection—his "feelings and reactions in particular situations" with what he thought "Fulani feel in those situations" (Riesman 1977:2). From his own interactions with Fulani, he drew inferences about their lives, testing the validity of his conclusions against Fulani explanations and against his own observations. In so doing, he both affirmed the autonomy of his hosts from his subjective perceptions of them and devised an approach to subjective experience that retains analytic rigor. Though Stoller and Olkes did not theorize their reflexive methodology as explicitly as did Riesman, examining *In Sorcery's Shadow* from Riesman's perspective reveals how Stoller's experiences reflect Songhay perceptions of sorcery. Just as Riesman sought to know how it feels to be a Fulani, Stoller sought to become a "forceful person" in the way he judged Songhay sorcerers to be. Though Riesman and Stoller conceded the impossibility of becoming either Fulani or Songhay, respectively, each emulated as closely as possible the people whom they studied, and both attempted to live under the same social conditions. Thus, just as Riesman's interactions with Fulani resembled Fulani sociality, Stoller's experiences with Songhay sorcery resembled those of a Songhay apprentice. More important is how Stoller and Riesman employed this resemblance to understand the lives of their hosts.

If one's self lies embedded within one's relations with others, as Riesman believed, then that self will change as those relations do (see Mead 1943:164-173 and Miller 1973:46-51). It follows that when ethnographers go elsewhere to do research and initiate new relationships, they become—or "half-become," as Evans-Pritchard might have added—new selves. As regards Stoller, Songhay sorcerers informed his understanding of sorcery during his apprenticeship; and, while in Niger, Stoller was "subject to approximately the same social pressures" (Riesman 1982:3) as his teachers. Therefore, Stoller may claim to have experienced and perceived sorcery in

ways similar to his mentors. Thus, if readers comprehend fully Stoller's narration, they will learn about more than just Stoller himself, precisely because Stoller perceives his experiences the way his mentors taught him. If we accept that ethnographers can systematically compare their own reactions in research situations with their hosts' reactions, thereby revealing their hosts' cultural assumptions, then Stoller's practice of ethnography as subjective memoir and Olivier de Sardan's desire for some more or less objective controls on ethnographic imagination are not incompatible. The reactions of the ethnographer's hosts may serve to control his or her own observations, and one way to highlight these reactions is to contrast them carefully with the ethnographers' own.

Even though Stoller did not explicitly compare his conceptions of sorcery with those of any one of his teachers, nor consider how contemporary North American assumptions inform his portrayal of his apprenticeship, he and Olkes have enriched the anthropological investigation of Songhay magic and religion initiated by Jean Rouch (1960). Because they narrated their personal experiences of sorcery—and not in spite of having done so—they conveyed as truthfully as possible the profound appreciation that Songhay have for sorcery's instrumental power; the patience and vigilance that sorcerers require to obtain and maintain that power; the often burdensome responsibility accompanying sorcery's use; and the depth of knowledge and force of character that successful sorcerers must inevitably cultivate.

In Sorcery's Shadow is a welcome and challenging contribution to West African ethnography. While in Niger, Stoller and Olkes found that uncommitted relativism proved incompatible with their appreciation of sorcery's palpable power. They concluded that in order to respect a radically different worldview, they needed to accept that view as their own. Given Stoller's long-term association with and intimate knowledge of Songhay sorcerers, this conclusion deserves critical discussion among ethnographers. *In Sorcery's Shadow* will thus engender needed reflection and debate, not only upon the relation between subjective experience and objective insight in ethnographic research, but also on the interplay of belief, understanding, and respect for others in anthropology.

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