



In Sorcery's Shadow: A Memoir of Apprenticeship among the Songhay of Niger

By Paul Stoller, Cheryl Olkes

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The tale of Paul Stoller's sojourn among sorcerors in the Republic of Niger is a story of growth and change, of mutual respect and understanding that will challenge all who read it to plunge deeply into an alien world.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

The tribal sorcerer is both hunter and hunted in a world of power seekers. The ominous sense of a narrowly oppressive quest for power is captured in this startling field report by an anthropologist who was himself initiated into African sorcery. Stoller made five field trips to study the Songhay, proud, fierce subsistence farmers of Niger. Becoming an apprentice, then a practitioner of the black arts, he took part in one ritual attack that, he claims, paralyzed the face of the intended victim's sister. After hostile sorcerers' spells temporarily paralyzed the author's legs, he began carrying around protective charms. On his last field trip, he was joined by his coauthor wife, a sociologist; she adds a measure of objectivity to this firsthand account. Although the narrative unfolds slowly and doesn't measure up as the metaphysical adventure it might have been, it is nevertheless a responsible attempt to pierce a hidden realm.

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From Library Journal

In the last decade, anthropologists have allowed personal concerns to become an acknowledged part of their ethnographic work. In this vein, Stoller "learned much about Songhay sorcery as an initiated apprentice," and consequently his book is more "memoir" than standard ethnography. Still, the account contains incisive information about fieldwork in Niger and about Songhay sorcerythe incantations, power attributed to plants, antagonisms between sorcerers, and details of daily life that both he and, later, Olkes collected. A good presentation of many of the ethical dilemmas anthropologists face when doing fieldwork for informed laypersons and specialists. Schneebaum's book is again more autobiography than ethnography, but in contrast to Stoller's, it contains sketchy ethnographic information. Though Schneebaum incessantly interviewed the Asmat during his four years in New Guinea, little of that information is conveyed. The book is more a search for identity: Schneebaum knew the Asmat as no other ethnographer has (or would admit to); as "an exchange friend" he developed intimate bonds with male friends. The lack of detailed cultural information is therefore the more regrettable. The book does, however, give us clear descriptions of Schneebaum's anthropological encounter and subsequent personal questions. Winifred Lambrecht, Brown Univ., Providence, R.I.

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From the Back Cover

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