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# The Sorcerer's Burden

The Ethnographic Saga  
of a Global Family

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*Paul Stoller*



# Palgrave Studies in Literary Anthropology

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The Ethnographic Saga of a Global Family

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## SERIES EDITORS' PREFACE

*The Sorcerer's Burden* is the first novel to be published in our series Palgrave Studies in Literary Anthropology. Our aim in the series is to publish works at the intersection of anthropology and literature that are grounded in ethnographic perspectives. We are delighted to present such a well-crafted story that conveys the experiences of an African scholar navigating between the world in which he grew up, in rural Niger, and the intellectual world of Paris to which he migrated and where he established a family with his French wife. Omar Dia, the protagonist of *The Sorcerer's Burden*, must find ways to reconcile his obligations to these two "homes" when he is faced with his own legacy as son of a great sorcerer. This story resonates with contemporary human experiences of global mobility, especially among those with cosmopolitan aspirations. Paul Stoller explores globalization through the prism of sorcery in Niger, a world seemingly far from that of Parisian academic life, and readers are taken into this world as Omar is drawn back into it.

Paul Stoller is one of the most lauded anthropologist-writers of our time. He has been praised for his ability to draw upon his ethnographic fieldwork to tell emotionally moving stories that deal with broad themes such as family ties, immigration, religious practice, the sensory aspects of living, well being, and death. In addition to two earlier novels 1999, 2005, Stoller is author or editor of 12 other books.<sup>1</sup> Stoller's ethnographic books and his memoirs are as compelling as his novels because he uses narrative ethnographic techniques to incorporate his own

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<sup>1</sup> See Paul Stoller (1999, 2005).

experiences into those texts. Here, with Omar's story, he enters into the subjective experience of another person, which is more possible in the novel genre than in ethnographic writing.

As Kirin Narayan has pointed out, anthropologists have published novels since the early twentieth century. She characterizes the difference between fiction and ethnography as one of two approaches to representations of reality. In fiction, the author is "free to invent" whereas in ethnographic writing the author is accountable to the discipline of anthropology and its evidentiary standards.<sup>2</sup> Fiction frees anthropologists to invent characters and events, and to be creative in telling stories that may or may not be based on experiences or people they encountered during fieldwork. Both narrative ethnography and fiction, however, aim to tell stories that have emotional resonance.

*The Sorcerer's Burden* is informed by Paul Stoller's fieldwork experiences in Niger, a very poor country in Western Africa that lies in the southern region of the Sahara. A number of ethnographies and memoirs by Stoller have addressed his increasing knowledge as both participant and observer of sorcery among the Songhay, an ethnic group inhabiting Mali and Benin, as well as Niger, whose traditional livelihood is based on millet farming. Niger is a former French colony, which gained its independence in 1960. French remains its official language, although Hausa, Songhay, and Arabic are also spoken.<sup>3</sup> Although Islam is the major religion of Niger, as the novel shows us, indigenous religious practices involving magic and sorcery persist among the Songhay.

In one of his early ethnographic books based on fieldwork among the Songhay, Stoller describes his first experience, in 1970, at a spirit possession ceremony. He adds that "Although I understood none of its elements, the power of the ceremony overwhelmed me."<sup>4</sup> Later he would learn that "spirit possession is a set of embodied practices that constitutes power-in-the-world."<sup>5</sup> Diplomacy on the dune informs diplomacy in the Presidential Palace." Stoller paints the following sensuous picture of spirit possession:

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<sup>2</sup> See Kirin Narayan (1999, 135).

<sup>3</sup> See Paul (2014, 2008, 1995, 1987).

<sup>4</sup> See Paul Stoller (1989a, xi).

<sup>5</sup> See Paul Stoller (1994, 636).

It is a white-hot day in June of 1987, and the mix of sounds and smells brings the spirits to Adamu Jenitongo's egg-shaped dunetop compound. Four mud-brick houses shimmer in the languorous heat. From under a thatched canopy at the compound entrance, the orchestra plays spirit music. The spirits like this place. Drawn by pungent smells, pulsing sounds, and dazzling dance, they visit it day and night.<sup>6</sup>

It was Paul Stoller who first formulated an anthropology of the senses in the late 1980s, with the now classic *The Taste of Ethnographic Things*.<sup>7</sup> Back in 1969 when he encountered the Republic of Niger, which was going to be his field site for decades to come, his initial reaction was: "At first Africa assailed my senses. I smelled and tasted ethnographic things and was both repelled by and attracted to a new spectrum of odors, flavors, sights, and sounds."<sup>8</sup> In the long run, though, it was his many returns to the Songhay that, he explains, "compelled me to tune my senses to the frequencies of Songhay sensibilities." He had to learn the language properly and make friends before understanding "that Songhay use senses other than sight to categorize their socio-cultural experience." Eventually, he realized that taste and smell are crucial for social relations, and that sound drives possession ceremonies and words in Songhay sorcery. Stoller even writes about "the sound of words."<sup>9</sup> And in *The Sorcerer's Burden* we also get to know Paris through certain sights, smells, and sounds.

This is a compelling novel that inspires reflection upon humanity and our current dilemmas regarding global power, spiritual power, and the power of family ties.

Deborah Reed-Danahay and Helena Wulff  
Co-Editors, Palgrave Studies in Literary Anthropology

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 1994, 634.

<sup>7</sup> See Paul Stoller (1989b); see also Paul Stoller (1997).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>9</sup> Paul Stoller (1989a, 119–121).

# Prologue

In West Africa they say that you can't walk where there is no ground. When Omar Dia was young he thought he could fly, but after having flown over a path that twisted and turned him to distant destinations, he returned to home in Niger, one of the most remote places in the world. Close to Omar's home in Tillaberi, there is an outcropping with a majestic view of the Niger River. It's called *The Place Where Stories Are Told*. For centuries Omar Dia's ancestors gathered there to listen to the old stories that connected the past to the present. Having finally returned to Tillaberi, Omar wanted to make sure that his story was told.

By the turn of the twenty-first century, Omar Dia's family had lived in Niger for more than 1000 years. Not many people have ever heard of Niger. Even though it is distant and unimaginably poor, Niger is a special place. In this little known corner of the world, people like Omar call their ancestors the "people of the distant past." Like those distant ancestors, Omar's people have been millet farmers or have been married to millet farmers. In June, the men plant the fields, and if the rains come when they are supposed to, they harvest the millet crop in October. When there are millet seeds in the granaries, the women pound them, transforming the grains into food—porridge, which people drink at noon, and a thick doughy paste, which, when covered with savory sauces, people eat at sunset. Such has been the way of life for Omar's people—year in and year out.

Omar could have easily lived this tranquil rural life, but he took a different path. Like every young boy in his village, he helped his father and

brothers in the fields. He also shepherded the family flocks of sheep and goats. But he also loved to go to school. Once he learned how to read, Omar devoured every book he could find. His older sister, Salamatou, who was 10 years his senior, encouraged him.

People in Omar's family disapproved of Salamatou's independent spirit. They saw her as wild and bullheaded. Unlike anyone else in the family, she had gone to the Lycée and had even studied in France. When she returned to Niger with a degree, she became an important oral historian. Omar's family tried to arrange for her to be married, but she refused, saying that marriage didn't interest her.

Bolstered by Salamatou's unflagging support, Omar did very well in school, becoming one of the best students in Niger. At least that's what his professors told him. His teachers sent him to Niamey, Niger's capital city, where, like his older sister, he went to the Lycée, where he graduated at the top of his class. Eventually, his academic record took him to Paris, where he studied literature at the Sorbonne. He took to his studies with great passion, and again, the professors said he was one among the best students in France. They urged him to pursue graduate study. After several years of course work, he became passionate about French philosophy. Wouldn't it be exciting, he thought, to extend the insights of French philosophy to the study of African literature and film?

And that's what he did. He used the framework of French philosophy to write a thesis on the controversial West African novel *Bound to Violence*. The thesis soon became *Violence in the African Imagination*, his first book, the success of which surprised Omar. Soon thereafter he began to teach comparative literature in French universities. In time, he published two other books: *Above and Beyond Negritude*, an exploration of black identity, and *The New Griots*, a text on emerging African filmmakers. Critics showered these works with high praise. Radio and television journalists interviewed him. Newspapers invited him to write op-ed columns. His colleagues invited him to present a series of highly publicized lectures. In time, Omar was nominated and elected to a professorship at the Sorbonne.

Meanwhile Omar fell in love and married a French woman, Chantal Martin, an emergency care doctor. Chantal and Omar soon bought a lovely apartment and had two children: a son, Adam, and a daughter, Lilly. What a beautiful life, you might say. What a wonderful story, you might suggest. Alas, things, as Omar's father liked to say, are never the way they seem.

PART I

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Paris, 2000

## CHAPTER 1

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Omar's carefully manicured life in Paris seemed perfect—a prestigious University Chair, a successful and beautiful wife, two lovely children, and a terrific apartment in a trendy Parisian neighborhood. What could be better? Then one day in November of 2000, he began to doubt himself. As he strolled into a hushed lecture hall to teach his class, he had the sudden and unexpected inclination to pinch his forearm. For some reason, he wanted to make sure this lecture event was more than a dream. His left eye began to twitch. A deeply repressed thought surfaced. How could Omar Dia, the oldest son of a millet farmer from Niger, have become an esteemed professor of comparative literature at the Sorbonne? Standing there before hundreds of people, another repressed realization swept into his consciousness: like most people in the world, he used external appearances to camouflage internal doubts. In public, he covered his body, which is as tall and thin as the desert trees that grow in his parched homeland, with the latest Parisian fashions. He liked suits of muted black and dark gray fabrics. Protected by these elegant clothes, he carried himself with grace, moving with calculated deliberation and speaking with quiet eloquence.

People said Omar was a handsome man. His face had smooth black skin, high cheekbones, and a strong square chin—all offset by black eyes. His wife liked to say that Omar's eyes suggested openness as well as vulnerability. People said he was cool and cosmopolitan. He used to believe what people said of him. How things can change—even in one day! Why would people want to sit and listen to him talk about literature and contemporary culture? His left eye continued to flutter, a tick that had plagued him



during his childhood in Niger. How many years had he experienced the embarrassment of his eye flutter? Why was it twitching now?

Thinking these uncharacteristically uncomfortable thoughts, he steadied himself behind the lectern and took out his notes. As he looked up at the full house audience, his eye stopped fluttering. Omar took a deep breath.

That year the university had given him an enviably light schedule: one lecture a week from October to the end of June. His theme in 2000–2001 was “The African Intellectual,” which was then a very hot topic in Paris.

The students liked Omar. After his lectures, they hovered around, asking many questions. Some days he’d invite one or two of the lingerers for coffee. His female students knew he was married. Even so, they sometimes flirted with him. If a female student crossed the boundary of respectability, Omar would always try to gently re-establish it.

Despite the light schedule, his academic duties took up too much of his time. He wanted to be a better father to Lilly and Adam. When he could, he took time from his schedule to watch Lilly dance, both at her classes and at her performances. She had the potential to become a graceful ballerina, but complained about having to practice too much. Adam loved to swim and joined a team at the neighborhood pool near the Bastille. During swim meets, Omar would shout encouragement to him and his teammates. Like any father, Omar tried to help his kids with their homework. Even so, Omar felt only a partial connection to his children. Would they ever learn about the African side of Omar Dia?

Omar could have bought an apartment in another part of Paris, but preferred to live near the Bastille. Many West Africans lived near his home. Mosques and Muslim butchers could be found on his street, the rue de Charonne. These elements gave Omar an indirect and mostly anonymous connection to his African roots. That’s the way he wanted to live in Paris—comfortably close to his roots, but not entangled by them.

During his student days, Omar would return to Niger during summer breaks. As time passed, he found it increasingly difficult to visit home. The difficult conditions in Niger didn’t bother him that much. Omar loved the Nigerien countryside—especially the glitter of the Niger River in late afternoon sunlight and especially *The Place Where Stories are Told*. None of these bucolic pleasures reduced the bitter animosity that his presence triggered in the family compound. His younger brothers, the sons of his father’s second wife, called him a white man with black skin. They accused him of abandoning time-honored family traditions. Weary of this

venomous rancor, he soon decided to spend his time in Paris. When he got married and had children, his visits to Niger stopped altogether. Even when his beloved mother died, he remained in France. In his mind he had become a French intellectual, an authority on the French philosophers no less, who was comfortable in his skin.

Or was he?

On the day he began to doubt himself, Omar realized that his indirect and anonymous connections to things African were insufficient. Somehow, somehow Omar needed something to fill the gaps, to be more fully connected to his wife and kids, to complete himself as a human being. Little did he know how that autumn day would forever change his life!

“Good afternoon,” he said in a voice, which, since adolescence had been deep and resonant. He always taught late in the afternoon, spending most mornings at his apartment or at his café, which was on the corner of the rue de Charonne and the Boulevard Voltaire. Sometimes Omar would meet his colleagues there.

“My topic today,” he announced, “is *La Sape*, which, as you may know, stands for *Society of Revelers and Elegant People*. Looking at the way I’m dressed, you could say that I myself am a potential *sapeur*.” He paused for effect. “Given my very conscious presentation of self, some people might take me for a sapeur, a young African immigrant living in Paris, who spends most of his money on the latest fashions.”

“Today I’d like to talk about the cultural aspects of ‘la sape.’ Imagine yourself as a young African man or woman in a Baongo neighborhood of Brazzaville, Congo. It is the early 1960s, the era of independence. Life has limitless possibility. You’ve come to the city, you’ve learned French. You go to the cinema. Your young life is full of dreams. And yet, your lot is hard. You are poor. You come from a country of limited opportunity. What can you expect?”

Omar walked to the left of the lectern and continued. “You expect to join your comrades in the cafés. You go with them to the cinema. You dress like Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus or Simone de Beauvoir. In more recent times you might take on the persona of Roland Barthes or, better yet, Michel Foucault. You become one of the ‘intellectuals,’ and you try to make your club the place where people wear the most elegant clothes. Dressed as intellectuals, you debate *Being and Nothingness*, or *The Stranger*, or *The Order of Things*, and you enter a space that knows no boundaries. In your club, you are ‘condemned to be free,’ to borrow from Sartre, but you don’t care, because you breathe deeply the air of

expectation and promise.” Omar paused for dramatic effect and scanned the audience to measure the effectiveness of the lecture.

“But like life, fashion is fleeting,” he continued. “Just as existentialism or structuralism as an intellectual fashion faded in France, so the existentialist clubs disappeared in Brazzaville. Independence swept the whole region into the tide of political intrigue and social violence. The young “existentialists” threatened the State. And so to protect themselves, they drifted into the surrounding bush. The State did not put out the fire of their youth, however. Several years later, Bacongo youths, single, unemployed, and alienated by state politics, triggered a new round of prestige dressing. Like the existentialists, they formed new clubs in which they displayed their sartorial flair. By dressing in the latest French designer clothes, these young people competed to become “The Great Man.” In this way, *La sape* was born.”

Enjoying his connection to the audience, Omar went on to describe how *la sape* was no longer confined to Brazzaville, but had taken on global dimensions. He discussed how it had become a rite of passage for young Congolese men who would leave Brazzaville with little or no money and travel to Paris. They would arrive at Roissy Airport and take trains to the Place de la République. There they would meet other Congolese young people and find lodging and work. Therein would begin a yearlong adventure in which they would work and save money to buy the latest fashions, which they would show off at African dance clubs. At the end of their year, they would return to Brazzaville, the latest fashions stuffed into their suitcases, and would proudly attend a ball at which judges would select the best-dressed young man who would become the “King of the Sapeurs.”

A student raised her hand. “Mr. Professor,” she said, “is the *sapeur* phenomenon an exercise in masculine vitality?”

Omar appreciated this question. “Indeed it is,” he responded. “These young men are alienated from their ethnic traditions, which are disappearing with the deaths of elders. They are also alienated from mainstream European culture. They are, after all, young, black, and relatively poor. This modern rite of passage enables them to feel strong here in Paris and re-integrates them into their own emerging societies. By dressing in the latest fashions, they are saying: Look at me. I’m cosmopolitan.”

Omar, of course, could say the same thing about himself. Feeling the alienation of the *sapeurs*, he too dressed to say: “Look at me. I’m cosmopolitan.” In a flash, he wondered: Who am I? What am I doing with my life?

That day, there were many more questions: some good, some confused. They provided the impetus for a vigorous give-and-take of ideas. Omar attempted to discuss the questions that provoked them to think and perhaps to ask additional questions. In such circumstances, time usually moves on in a flash. And so, the class session came to an end.

Students hovered around the lectern and asked more questions. Usually he welcomed further discussion, but on that day, fully experiencing the sour taste of discomfort, he didn't want to linger and didn't want to have coffee. For a moment, he no longer wanted to be "The Professor." He simply wanted to gather his things, rush to the Metro, and go home.

## CHAPTER 2

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Freed from the public responsibilities of being “The Professor,” Omar hastily made his way to the rue des Écoles. The street glistened with the remains of a passing shower. Thick gray clouds gave the sky an ominous sheen. A cold northwest wind ripped down the street. Chilled to the bone, Omar reached the Boulevard St. Michel—wide, busy and full of vehicular and pedestrian traffic. Turning right he made his way toward the Seine and descended into the Paris Metro’s warm embrace. He entered a packed car and stood among a motley assortment of passengers: tall, short, fat, thin, clean, dirty, white, brown, yellow, and black. Some of the passengers wore business clothes-suits, which, like Omar’s outfit, had been crafted from muted black and gray fabrics; others sported jeans and tee shirts, which, from their sheen and odor, hadn’t been laundered in a very long time. Omar noticed a young African man, who, like him, stood tall in the car. Like Omar, he had put on a charcoal gray sport coat. When their gazes locked, Omar nodded, silently signifying a bond between them—two sapeurs acknowledging their camaraderie.

In the Metro car no one knew Omar, which gave him a feeling of reassurance. Although most people in the crowded Metro car were, “dazed and confused,” to borrow from a popular American film title, Omar wondered about the total strangers cohabiting his space. Who were these people? What were their life stories? Were they happy, sad, upbeat, or suicidal? And if, by chance, they looked at him, what judgments would they make? A few of them might make racist judgments. They might see him