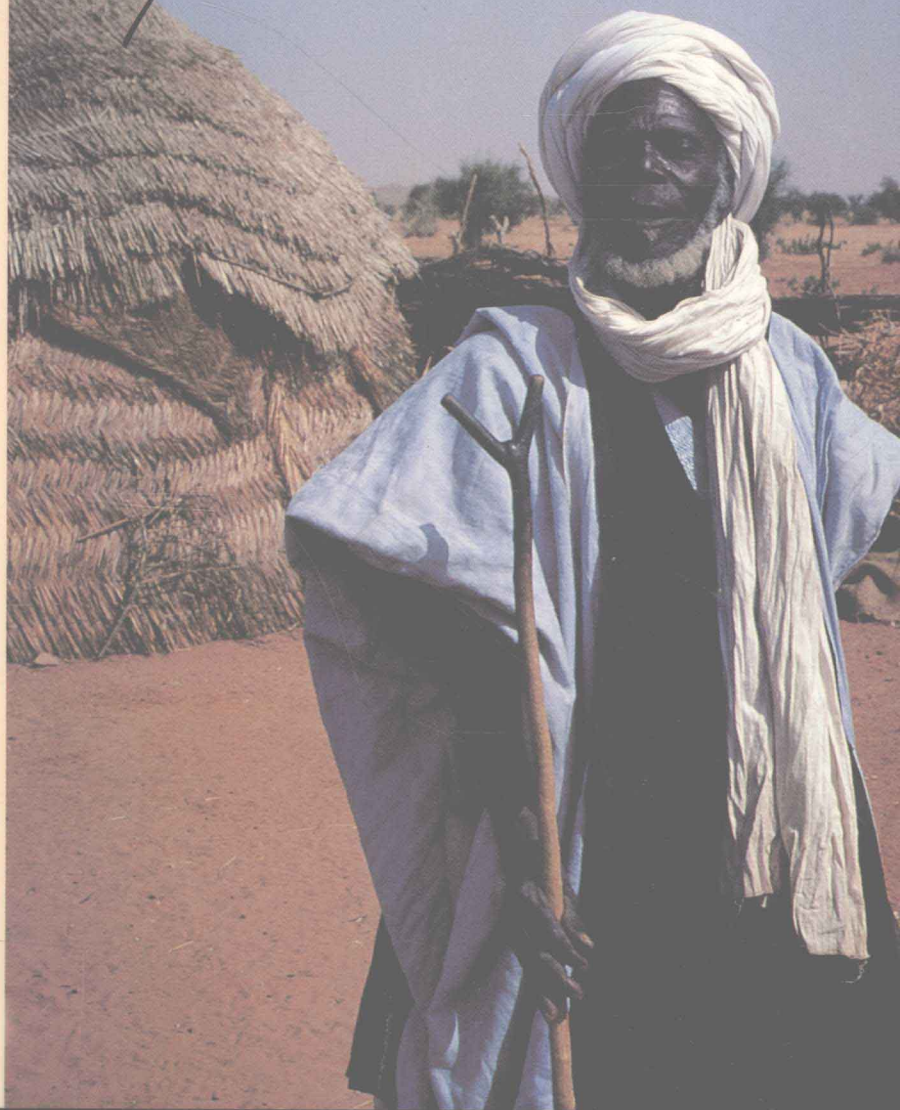


In Sorcery's Shadow



Paul Stoller and Cheryl Olkes

In Sorcery's Shadow

A MEMOIR OF APPRENTICESHIP
AMONG THE SONGHAY OF NIGER

Paul Stoller and Cheryl Olkes

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IN SORCERY'S SHADOW



Koda Mounmouni, Sorko of Mehanna

Bundu si te kaare

"The (floating) log never becomes a crocodile."

SONGHAY PROVERB

"We see the straight highway before us, but of course we cannot use it, because it is permanently closed."

WITTGENSTEIN

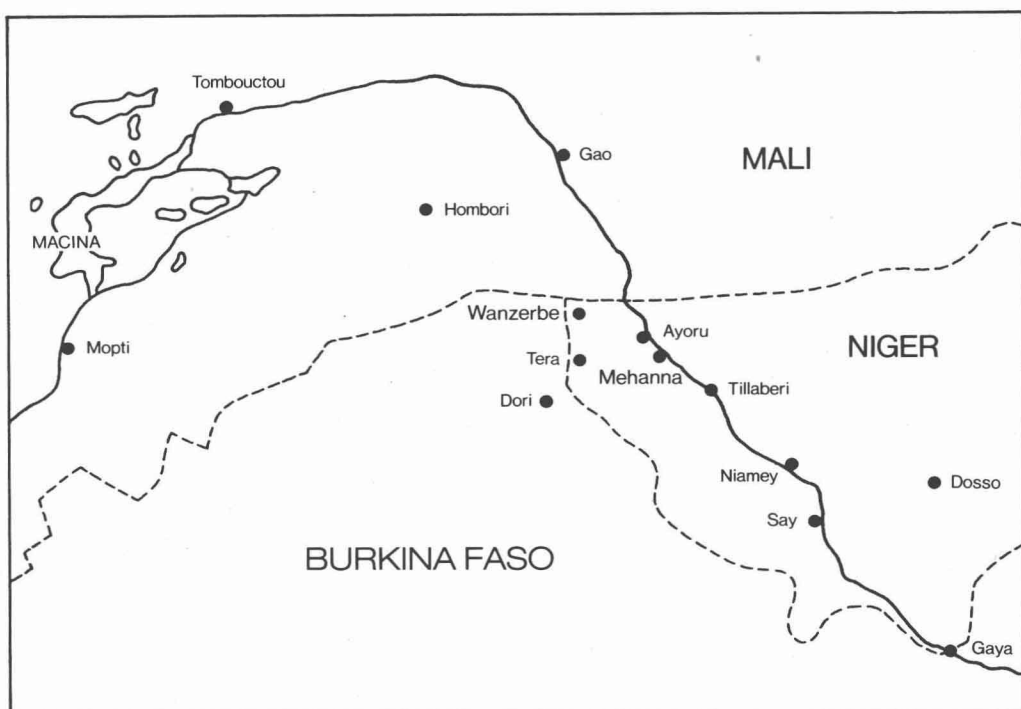
PROLOGUE

From 1976 to 1984 I was the apprentice to Songhay sorcerers living in the villages of Mehanna and Tillaberi in the Republic of Niger. The Songhay, inhabitants of the region since the eighth century, were once the fierce rulers of an extensive, powerful empire; now they are subsistence millet and rice farmers. My apprenticeship, which was spread over five field stays, took me also to Wanzerbe, which is situated in the far northwestern corner of Niger. The inhabitants of Wanzerbe, most of whom are descendants of Sonni Ali Ber, the Magic King of the Songhay Empire (1463–91), are feared and respected for their feats of sorcery.

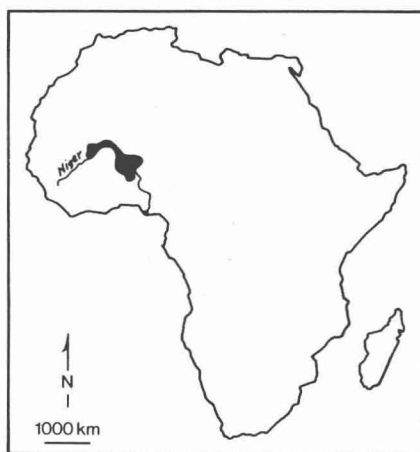
As an apprentice I memorized magical incantations, ate the special foods of initiation, and participated indirectly in an attack of sorcery that resulted in the temporary facial paralysis of the sister of the intended victim. As I traveled further into the world of Songhay sorcery, practitioners attacked me, causing on one occasion temporary paralysis in my legs. After that experience in 1979 I learned to eat the powders and wear the objects that would protect me from the will to power of antagonistic sorcerers, and I felt secure enough to return to Niger for subsequent lessons. After Cheryl Olkes and I visited Niger in the summer of 1984, I could no longer pursue my personal quest for comprehension and power; the world in which I had walked was too much with me.

The Representation of Sorcery

My experiences as an apprentice are by no means unique in the community of anthropologists. It is altogether likely that sorcerers have attacked other anthropologists in other societies. And yet, those anthropologists who have observed or experienced something beyond the edge of rationality tend to discuss it almost exclusively in informal settings—over lunch, dinner, or a drink. Serious anthropological discussion of the extraordinary, in fact, transcends the bar or restaurant only on rare occasions (e.g., in Jeanne Favret-Saada's *Deadly Words: Witchcraft and Sorcery in the Bocage*; or Larry Peters' *Ecstasy and Healing in Nepal*). In formal settings anthropologists are



Principal Villages in Songhay Country



Songhay Country

supposed to be dispassionate analysts; because our confrontations with the extraordinary are unscientific, we are not supposed to include them in our discourse. It is simply not appropriate to expose to our colleagues the texture of our hearts or the uncertainties of our "gaze."

Should I write about being paralyzed in Wanzerbe? Should I describe how a priestess sent spirits to attack me? Is it appropriate to include in ethnographic discourse personal and bizarre accounts? In 1979 my first inclination was to answer these questions with an emphatic "No!" Indeed, in my first article on Songhay sorcery, I scrupulously avoided mentioning the fact that I had learned much about Songhay sorcery as an initiated apprentice. In that text the only mention of my involvement was relegated to a footnote in which I described how a sorcerer in the village of Mehanna came to accept me as his student-apprentice. Why did I edit myself out of that account? The answer is that we do not usually write what we want to write. In my case I had conformed to one of the conventions of ethnographic realism, according to which the author should be unintrusive in an ethnographic text. There are many other conventions of ethnographic representation to which ethnographers tacitly adhere. Writers like Rabinow, Favret-Saada, Crapanzano, Dumont, and Riesman, among a few others, have tampered with some of these conventions in their works.

In *Tales of the Yanomami* Jacques Lizot has suggested a relationship between the length of fieldwork and the form of ethnography. Lizot spent six generally uninterrupted years among the Yanomami Indians. The result is an ethnography in the form of stories about life, death, hunting, love, jealousy. These stories involve explicit dialogue and vivid description—techniques that sweep the reader into the Yanomami world.

Like *Tales of the Yanomami*, this book is the result of a long and intense association with one people, the Songhay in the Republic of Niger. For personal reasons Lizot refused to include himself as a character in his Yanomami stories even though in his book's preface he acknowledges his central presence in the ethnographic situations he describes. In this book I am a character in the text; it is an account of my experiences in the Songhay world.

Every ethnographer is a character in the story of his or her fieldwork. In some stories, the best narrative strategy is to distance the narrator from the text; in other stories the presence of the narrator is a source of narrative strength. Michel Leiris is present in the text of

PROLOGUE

his monumental *Afrique Fantôme*, a personal journal that is also an ethnography. The same might be said of Favret-Saada and Contreras' *Corps Pour Corps* or Read's *High Valley*, Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, or even Lévi-Strauss' *Tristes Tropiques*.

In Sorcery's Shadow is a memoir fashioned from the textures and voices of ethnographic situations. This book is not a standard ethnography; it is a memoir. There are no Songhay informants in this story—there are individuals who behave in very particular ways. Woven throughout the text is the theme of confrontation—the clash of two worlds of reckoning. How far can we go in the quest to understand other peoples? Is it ethical for ethnographers to become apprentice sorcerers in their attempt to learn about sorcery? And what are our motives as ethnographers? Are we seekers of knowledge? Self-actualization? Power? *In Sorcery's Shadow* attempts to explore these questions.

The Nature of the Book

The book follows the chronological sequence of my apprenticeship among Songhay sorcerers and is divided into five parts, describing events in 1976–77, 1979–80, 1981, 1982–83, and 1984. A key feature of the book is dialogue. Longer narratives like those of Adamu Jenitongo were tape-recorded and translated. Other scenes in the book involving dialogue are reconstructed from my fieldnotes. Generally, *x* would occur and Olkes or I would record in our notebooks the occurrence, including the dialogue. Sometimes we could not write notes during a given rite. In those instances we recorded the event as best we could as soon as we were able. There is no fool-proof method for reconstructing subjective experience. Tape-recorded conversation is better than reconstructed conversation. But even tape-recorded conversation must be transcribed and translated. And as linguists well know, even tape-recorded texts suffer from the “exuberances and deficiencies,” to use A. L. Becker's apt phrase, of the transcriber and the translator.

The deeper our experiences in the field, the more sensitive we are to distant texts and our reconstructions of them. For my part, I have known some of the characters in *In Sorcery's Shadow* for more than seventeen years; others are more recent acquaintances. We have learned about one another's talk; we have learned about one another's motivations—good and bad—as human beings. We have

been pleased with one another and we have been disappointed, and these myriad experiences are the foundation of our reconstruction of the episodes of *In Sorcery's Shadow*.

The idea of writing *In Sorcery's Shadow* was conceived by Stoller and Olkes in 1981. After many false starts and discarded drafts, we completed a first version in June 1984, but we found it unsatisfactory, as if it lacked some subtle micron of an ingredient. After we returned from Niger in August 1984, Olkes suggested that we rewrite the manuscript. In collaboration with Olkes, Stoller expanded considerably the text of *In Sorcery's Shadow* in the fall of 1984. In the winter of 1985 Olkes rewrote substantial sections of the manuscript. Through the spring of 1985 we worked together to produce the final version.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book is the result of the collective efforts of many people. We could not have traveled to Niger without the support of numerous foundations and institutions. Fieldwork in 1976–77 was financed through generous grants from the Fulbright Doctoral Dissertation Program (G00-76-03659) and from the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research (No. 3175). Research in Niger in 1979–80 was made possible through a NATO Postdoctoral Fellowship in Science. Stoller's work among the Songhay in 1981 and in 1982–83 was made possible through grants from the American Philosophical Society and West Chester University. Grants from the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research and West Chester University made possible field studies in the summer of 1984. Among the many things Stoller's anthropological mentors, Annette B. Weiner and Joel Sherzer, taught him at the University of Texas was how to write a fundable research proposal. In Niger we must thank S.E. General Seyni Kountché, President of the Republic, for granting us numerous authorizations to conduct ethnographic field research among the Songhay. At the Institut de Recherches en Sciences Humaines of the Université de Niamey we have received warm encouragement and support from Djouldé Laya, Djibo Hamani, and Harouna Sidikou—past directors—and Boubé Gado, the present director. After months in the bush, Jean-François Berger, Tom and Barbara Hale, and Jim and Heidi Lowenthal invited us into their homes and treated us with graciousness and kindness. Paul Riesman, Jeanne Favret-Saada, Martin Murphy, Dan Rose, Judith Gleason, Jim Fernandez, John Chernoff, and Theresa and Chris Soufas all read the manuscript and made useful comments. John Chernoff's comments were especially helpful. Customarily, ethnographers thank their informants in a section of acknowledgments. We hope that the text that follows demonstrates their contribution to this book.

PERSONAE

Tillaberi People

- Adamu Jenitongo:* a powerful sorcerer and ritual priest
Kedibo Jenitongo: sister of Adamu Jenitongo
Moru Adamu: son of Adamu Jenitongo; a drummer in the Tillaberi possession troupe
Moussa Adamu: son of Adamu Jenitongo; a tailor
Djebo Zeinabou: the wife of Moru Adamu
Djemma: wife of Adamu Jenitongo
Hadjo: wife of Adamu Jenitongo, also known as Moussa Nya ("Moussa's mother")
Daouda Godji: the monocord violinist of the Tillaberi possession troupe
Djingarey Sodje: a sorko who is also a soldier stationed at Tillaberi
Halidou Gasi: the nephew of Adamu Jenitongo and a drummer in the Tillaberi possession troupe
Oungunia Harouna: the best bus driver in Tillaberi
Salou: a drunken dispatcher at the bus depot

Mehanna People

- Idrissa Dembo:* a gardener and farmer who is caretaker of Stoller's borrowed house
Jitu: wife of Idrissa Dembo
Harijetu: daughter of Idrissa Dembo and Jitu
Djibo Mounmouni: a sorko living in Mehanna and Namarigungu
Zakaribaba: a herbalist who is Djibo Mounmouni's brother
Mounmouni Koda: the father of Djibo Mounmouni and Zakaribaba; died in Mehanna in 1980
Maymuna: wife of Djibo Mounmouni
Moussa Djibo: a civil servant now living in Diffa, who is Djibo Mounmouni's cousin
Abdu Kano: a shop owner

PERSONAE

- Aboulaye:* an Islamic cleric
Amadu Zima: a powerful sorcerer and ritual priest; died in 1984
Bankano: the best cook on the western bank of the Niger River in the Republic of Niger
Fatouma Seyni: a market woman and diviner
Hamidou: a Niger boatman who paddles people between Mehanna and Bonfebba
Mamadu Djamona: owner of a motorized dugout; died in 1984
Tondi Bello: the chief of Mehanna

Wanzerbe People

- Kassey Sohanci:* the most renowned sorcerer in all of western Niger
Hassane Sohanci: the son of Kassey Sohanci
Mumay: daughter of Kassey Sohanci and the best cook in Wanzerbe
Dembo Moussa: the father of Idrissa Dembo. Also known as "Kundiababa"
Dunguri: a priestess and sorceress
Mossi Sirfi: the *guunu* or circumciser of Wanzerbe; died in 1984
Djibril: a driver on the route from Dolsul to Markoy via Wanzerbe

Others

- Howa Zima:* the priestess of the possession troupe in Ayoru; died in 1984
Olkes, Cheryl: wife and collaborator of Paul Stoller; a sociologist and student of the Songhay
Stoller, Paul: an ethnographer and longtime student of the Songhay
Susan: a Peace Corps Volunteer who once lived in Ayoru

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