

## Intersecting Destinies of an Anthropologist and His Interlocutor

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*Yaya's Story: The Quest for Well-Being in the World.* By Paul Stoller. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014.

Paul Stoller is one of the most compelling ethnographic writers of our time. He pulls off an extraordinary feat in all of his writing; he examines issues of life and death with philosophical depth while telling beautiful, moving, and memorable stories. He is the embodiment of what a humanist anthropologist should be, and his newest book, *Yaya's Story: The Quest for Well-Being in the World*, is a superb example of his unique approach and style. In this spare and poetic text, Stoller offers a thoughtful rumination on his friendship with Yaya Harouna, a Songhay Muslim trader from Niger whom he meets in New York City, while providing an elegant tale about the intersecting destinies of an anthropologist and his interlocutor.

Ethnographic stories unfold in specific settings and in unrepeatable historical moments. One of the toughest challenges faced by ethnographic writers in the era of the internet is how to provide a sense of place and context when it is so easy to Google any location in the world. Stoller has the added difficulty of needing to conjure not just cities and towns in Niger, a corner of the world that he has known since his youth as a Peace Corps volunteer, but also the warehouses and markets of Chelsea and Harlem, where West African traders have carved out a home away from home. With sensual and precise language, Stoller manages to capture the feel of these distant locations, putting them on an equal plane, neither exoticizing nor assuming too much familiarity.

Stepping into an enormous building near the Hudson River, known as the warehouse, on a February day, Stoller vividly recalls, "Men in heavy coats and ski caps loaded and unloaded cargo—African masks and statues, bolts of printed cloth, and large sacks filled with grain." Once inside the warehouse, he finds himself in "a dim, dank space with a corridor populated by African art traders and stuffed with their goods—wooden statues and masks that smelled of smoke" (2–3). This is where Stoller meets Yaya, in a space of commerce and trade, where works of African art wait to be moved into the hands of buyers who can pay the highest price.

As a successful long-distance trader, Yaya dwells in this complex space for many years, moving in the opposite direction to that of Stoller, the anthropologist, who as a young man goes to Africa and enters into the world of Songhay spirit possession in western Niger. Taking lessons from Adamu Jenitongo, the most powerful sorcerer in the region, Stoller also achieves success. He comes to inhabit a place thought to be

too "desolate" for Europeans and gains knowledge about medicinal plants from his mentor, learning, for example, "that if you picked a plant during daylight, its leaves or stems would have one kind of bodily impact, and that if you picked the same plant at night, its leaves or stems would have a different curative effect" (95).

By the time their paths cross in New York City, both Stoller and Yaya have lived for extended periods of time in each other's cultural universes. The passing of the years has made them conscious of their mortality and the gift of good health and life. Drawing from techniques used in fiction, Stoller creates parallel chapters, telling Yaya's story first, then his own, and, in the third and last part of the book, showing the remarkable convergences in their lives. Both men are world travelers, Yaya a marketer of African art and Stoller a marketer of ethnographic tales, and both find themselves having to face the frailties of age and the onset of cancer. As Stoller notes, "Most of us live in the village of the healthy, which means that we take good health as a normal state of being," but having lived among the Songhay, where medicinal plants cannot cure all illnesses, he knows what it means to enter into "the village of the sick, a place where illness and death become your constant companion" (108–109).

One of the most moving moments in the book is when Stoller, still undergoing chemotherapy sessions, is invited by his Nigerien friends in New York to come and visit. He tells them about his cancer treatment, and they insist that "the trip will be good for [him]." Together with Rachel, his partner (who remains a mysterious character), he makes his way via train and subway to the Malcolm Shabazz Harlem Market. As soon as he arrives, seven of his Muslim Nigerien friends make a tight circle around him and offer the *Alfatia* prayer, a prayer of protection. As Stoller writes, "My friends extended their arms in front of their bodies, opening their palms toward the sky." Afterward, they told him, "Paul, you'll be fine." Stoller felt uplifted by the deep love of his friends, "whose humanity seemed boundless." Even though he had experienced the painful solitude of being in "the village of the sick," the ceremony made him aware he "wasn't completely alone in the world" (111–112). Earlier in the book, Stoller describes growing up Jewish in Silver Spring, Maryland, learning to read and write Hebrew in preparation for his bar mitzvah. In a future book, I think it would be fascinating if Stoller elaborated on the role his Jewish identity plays in these friendships with Muslim men, just as it would be exciting to hear him meditate on the meaning of masculinity and the unique ways in which men express their sense of intimate connection.

Stoller tells us that Yaya never liked to talk much about his wife and children (and Stoller, for that matter, likewise reveals little about his present-day family life). When Yaya also becomes ill with cancer, he withdraws and refuses to reveal his feelings, following the Songhay tradition of not speaking of illness or personal pain with those who are not members of the family. Nevertheless, Stoller gracefully finds

a way to connect with Yaya. As part of his research to learn about the families of the traders from Niger, he travels to the hometown of Yaya in Belayara and, on a lively market day, goes looking for Yaya's house, although he does not find it. Stoller telephones Yaya in New York to tell him where he is, and Yaya is deeply moved. Yaya says, "It's good to hear your voice and to know that you went to my hometown and phoned me from there. It means a lot." Stoller learns that Yaya, who is weak and frail, dreams of returning home to Niger. At that moment, however, it is Stoller who is back in Yaya's home, the anthropologist lighting the path for his research subject.

A year later, Yaya decides he no longer wants to "manage" his cancer through the biomedical system in New York, and he tells Stoller solemnly, "I'm going home." The two men hold hands, which Stoller says is a sign of deep friendship in West Africa. Drawing from Martin Buber's "I-Thou" philosophy, Stoller states, "I knew what he knew and he knew what I knew" (135). That is their last goodbye. Yaya returns to Niger and to his family. The cancer quickly consumes him, but he spends his last days being honored by those close to him, talking about his life as a traveler.

Stoller, no less vulnerable than Yaya, goes on to write the book. That is his responsibility as an anthropologist, to carry the story forward, so Yaya will continue to live in the hearts of those who knew him in the flesh and those, like me, who are grateful to have had the chance to know him in print.

## What Agriculture Will Support Human Life?

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*Balancing on a Planet: the Future of Food and Agriculture.* By David Cleveland. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2013.

The human capacity to leave traces and impact the world is not limited to modern times. Archaeologists are trained to identify these signatures across the landscape. Indeed, intensity of and change in land use is revealed in the archaeological remains from hunters and gatherers on the California coast to the magnificent ancient tells of the Fertile Crescent. Demand on and distribution of resources are not new problems, but in the past, they were localized. Today, however, the demand and distribution are disproportionate. There is a consumption bias toward the industrialized nations, accompanied by associated health risks, compared with the developing world, which David Cleveland, in his thought-provoking book *Balancing on a Planet*, maintains as the Third World.

In this tour de force, Cleveland marshals and sustains impartiality on topics that are lightning rods for challenge and debate: the origin of the current world food crisis. In eschew-

ing direct definitions of the fundamentals, he argues forcefully that the topic of sustainability is subjective and dependent on individual values. What we should be scrutinizing is the basis of our values. By building on the continuum of values and assumptions set out in the beginning, he engages the reader in a deep and compelling account that weaves together personal experience, basic facts, empirical examples, and, most importantly, objectivity.

This is accomplished though his emphasis on critical thinking. The mantra of the book is to examine the subject of sustainability using critical thinking as the framework, to challenge assumptions, and to look for positive synergies. He accomplishes his lofty goals by parceling his book into two parts. The first part, with four chapters, is a broad overview of the history and future of agrifood systems, which are those systems that, since the Neolithic, have transformed the world's landscapes by managing species, ecosystems, and humans.

Part 1 begins by defining the nature of the agrifood system, reviewing its prehistoric and historic development, contrasting traditional farmer knowledge (FK) with modern science knowledge (SK), emphasizing the role of culture and behavior, and underscoring the importance of understanding the social context of population growth and the food crisis. Cleveland considers the problem of sustainability from the standpoint of supply and demand, reviews the historical views of Malthus and Boserup, and plays out scenarios to understand limits. Advocating a holistic approach with realistic models, he outlines the divide between the mainstream scientific perspective on food security and the Third World alternative perspective of food sovereignty. Table 3.1 is especially valuable as a framework for critical thinking; it provides definitions and elements, evaluates assumptions and models, and incorporates analyses and conclusions. In addition, Cleveland contrasts FK and SK, which vary in their goals, with FK seeking stability in the long term, and SK promoting maximization in the short term. He asserts that FK and SK are both universal and local in nature and contends that there is much to gain from comparing FK with SK. He returns to this comparison as a basis of collaboration in the second part of his book.

The second part of the book examines cases and situations around the world and considers field production yields, biodiversity, community welfare, climate change, and localization. Cleveland deftly integrates data from diverse interdisciplinary sources, using creative and clear prose, informative figures, and detailed tables to provide a neutral basis for evaluating assumptions and deriving conclusions of mainstream and alternative perspectives. Cleveland's assessment breaks down the relationship between crop yields and diversity and provides evidence that polyculture has much to contribute to the future of agrifood systems.

The potentials of polyculture are detailed in chapter 6 using the land equivalent ratio (LER) to consider alternatives to the mainstream monoculture, which narrows diversity with the assumption of increasing yield. Cleveland shows that LER is a powerful way to assess yields and build col-