

# Yaya's story

The quest for well-being in the world

Beth Uzwiak

Paul Stoller, *Yaya's Story: The Quest for Well-Being in the World*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014. 176 pp. (pb). \$24.00. ISBN: 780226178820.

Recently, I lost a close friend to cancer. She was forty-two years old when she died. Since her death, I have been reading Paul Stoller's most recent book *Yaya's Story: The Quest for Well-Being in the World*. This book and his prior one, *The Power of the Between: An Anthropological Odyssey*, are personal meditations on resilience in the long shadow of cancer. Not long after his mentor and teacher, the Songhay sorcerer Adamu Jenitongo, passed away from prostate cancer, Stoller was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. In the thirteen years since his diagnosis, most of which he has thankfully spent in remission, Stoller has asked: what can illness teach us?

In *Yaya's Story*, Stoller weaves the insights he gained from illness with those he attained from long-term ethnographic research to meditate on the human condition. Well-being is elusive. How do we find it in ourselves and understand what it means to others? The way that we understand illness, how we experience it and tell about it, reflects our social framework. And illness, like ethnographic fieldwork, may provide a conduit to create an existential connection that relies on 'what you have in your heart' (p. 6). *Yaya's Story* is part of a constellation of texts in which Stoller engages anthropology's big questions of morality and reciprocity. He suggests that although theories come and go, the heart of anthropology – our human connections and how we make them – remains constant.

Stoller met Yaya Harouna in 1998 while conducting fieldwork with West African traders in New York City, research that became the subject of his 2001 ethnography *Money Has No Smell* and the inspiration for his 1999 novel *Jaguar*. When they met, both men were woven into the complex web of kin relations that characterize West Africa social structures: Harouna as a Nigerien trader with transnational ties to the United States, and Stoller as an ethnographer with more than twenty-five years of fieldwork experience among Songhay people in Niger and in the United States.

In Part One of *Yaya's Story*, 'A Life Story in Commerce', Stoller tells of Harouna's beginnings in Niger. We feel the heat of Niamey. The Harmattan dust stings. At the market, we hear traders and donkey-pulled carts. At the outskirts of town, we see a trackless scrubby plain. We leave Niamey and arrive at a village: Belayara. It's market day in Belayara, the town where Harouna was born. Stoller details how gender and ethnicity shape trade here, along with religion, language, and heritage. He tells us why Harouna left Belayara to join his brothers in Abidjan to trade in African art. Eventually we end up at the 'Warehouse' in New York City, where Harouna now works with a network of traders from West African countries.

In Part Two, Stoller compares Harouna's path as a trader to his own as an American academic. As Harouna memorized the Koran and learned the rudiments of trade, Stoller learned to read and write Hebrew in preparation for his bar mitzvah. As Stoller began his path to understand Songhay spirit possession in Niger, Yaya was immersed in the buying and selling of African artifacts. Both men led lives of restlessness; both often longed for home. Not long after they met, on that day at the Warehouse in New York City, both had their own dealings with cancer.

In a way, Stoller's lifelong engagement with Songhay people in Niger prepared him for his becoming a member of what he calls 'the village of the sick'. From his twenty-year apprenticeship with Adamu Jentitongo, one of the most powerful sorcerers in West Africa, Stoller became accustomed to fear, loneliness, and uncertainty. His contact with the Songhay spirit world meant that fieldwork became a process of shedding the pursuit of universals for the sensory-laden and contingent partiality of existence. In doing so, he learned that Songhay people often expect misfortune and death and betrayal. Yet, it was one thing for Stoller to learn that Songhay people expect misfortune while inside the confines of Adamu Jentitongo's spirit hut, and quite another to accept misfortune in his own life: 'I was not a Songhay person and would never become one. No matter the depth of suffering I witnessed there, I buffered myself in the village of the healthy' (p. 108).

Stoller's experience with cancer treatment changed his fundamental orientation to misfortune. It subsequently changed what he could understand about his field collaborators'

worldview. Likewise, his remission altered his orientation to anthropology as a discipline. Questions began to haunt him: ‘What was the impact, if any, of the books I have written? Would my words bring comfort, insight, or amusement to those who might one day read them?’ He wanted to better align his embodiment of fieldwork, what his mentors and collaborators taught him, with his experience of cancer and his experience as a scholar within the American academy. He would produce accessible works and mentor students and junior colleagues. He would write text that includes the anthropologist’s story: his or her failings, moments of ego, loneliness, and satisfaction.

During his remission, Stoller did – and continues to do – all of these things. Yet one question lingered: is it possible to fully transcend interpersonal difference in fieldwork? While fieldwork can entail moments of shared understanding, it is more often than not a series of frustrations. We must stop and start again. Often, we ask the wrong questions, as Stoller did when he first began fieldwork in 1973. At times, field relationships become marred by betrayal, also something Stoller experiences when a long-term informant steals from him. Political-economic realities shape every fieldwork encounter, another point that Stoller highlights when he recalls the time a friend from fieldwork called him ‘the white man’ when he thought Stoller could not hear him.

Despite these frustrations, in Part Three of *Yaya’s Story*, ‘Awakenings’, Stoller answers his lingering question and suggests that with fieldwork comes a potential for transcendence. I picked up *Yaya’s Story* with the question of how we cope when wellness separates us from those who are ill. *Yaya’s Story* sheds a tender light on the connections we can make to others because of illness. These connections are not given, but hard won through shared subjectivity. They can pierce the heart, even if fleetingly so, and forever change us. However, my hope comes from Stoller’s evocation of the transcendental potential of human relations more generally. As anthropology comes under attack for its presumed lack of real-world applicability, *Yaya’s Story* brings us a true account of what ethnography, and human relations built over decades and across seemingly unassailable boundaries, can achieve.

Fieldwork, like illness, changes us, brings us neither fully here nor there. From it we do not return the same. Life as an ethnographer is one of indeterminacy and contingency. Life in general is this way, of course, and illness will remind us of this. Long-term relationships to the people and places of research open us up to what we will become in the future. Stoller is telling us that in the lives that we must leave behind, in the lives that we are to remember and honor, and in the many selves that we become and then shed, there are moments of transcendence that make the journey worthwhile.

## About the author

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