

In sorcery's shadows: a critical approach to a narrative genre

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This paper is concerned with the researcher/fieldwork relationship as expounded in Paul Ricoeur's thesis about a mutual configuration/refiguration relationship between the verbal and the textual perspective. Although anthropologists may configure textual representation of the studied culture in their narrative, they can also be subjected to the process of refiguration by the surrounding, "local" reality. Using Paul Stoller's project for eidetic anthropology as an example, I seek to demonstrate the boundaries of cognition in anthropology: the limitations of integrating two different cultural perspectives in one narrative, caused by a mimetic reaction typical of the refigurative mechanism.

Introduction: configuration and refiguration

"Configuration is language's ability for self-creation in its own space and refiguration, which expresses work's capability to restructure the world of a reader, upsetting, protesting, re-modelling their expectations" said Paul Ricoeur (2003:248, my transl. from the Polish). A text, which is always anchored in a surrounding reality, is not only configured by this reality, but is also refiguring the world of a reader. Refiguration is said to be mimetic by Ricoeur; this leads us to the statement that the act of reading is a sort of game of two subjectivities: the reader's and the author's (though the intentionality of the latter is mediated by the text). Widening the category of the text beyond an aesthetical experience (the original context of Ricoeur's theory) may give us a fascinating tool for an epistemological analysis. I hope that this tool will allow us to analyse a game between an experiencing subject and the subjectivity of a text, which is also an object of experience. In this article I would like to focus on the relationship between a researcher and his or her field and process of configuration and the refiguration of these two elements. In other words, I would like to attempt to cross the constructivist position to reach the moment when this is a *field of research that refigures a researcher's consciousness*. It should give us a discursive understanding of a cognitive process in anthropology, and another way to overcome the object/subject, passive/active oppositions in field research

The history of anthropological epistemology may be seen as a specific aporia, described in opposite categories of openness and closure. On the one side we have a fieldworker's empathy and sensitisation to the local categories; while on the other – an attempt to describe other cultures in the terms derived from our own system of categories. Anthropological work is a place, where these two different cultures (or culturally based intellectual constructs) meet. Their mutual positioning and interdependency are crucial to understanding the epistemological perspective applied.

Paul Stoller was not the first anthropologist who tried to integrate two cultural perspectives in one narrative. One may remember for instance F.H. Cushing wearing Zuni dress and signing letters as “1st War Chief of Zuni” (Green 1990). Stoller in *In Sorcery's Shadow* (1987) does not hide his emotive attitude behind a scientific shield. In fact even the classification of *In Sorcery's Shadow* as a scientific publication is not so obvious. So what is the argument for undertaking an analysis of a book published over twenty years ago? First of all, Stoller and Olkes' work shows clearly the consequences of an almost total opening of researcher to local categories. It is an extreme application of an *emic* strategy, to quote Pike's (1967) well-known term and detailed account of doing fieldwork. (See also Barnard and Spencer 2005:181-183, Feleppa 1986, 1988, Harris 1976. Formal operation of this idea may be found in cognitive anthropology, see Burszta 1998:129-132, Goodenough 1956, 1970, Harris 1976:336-338, and critiques by Bauman 1973:70-71, Geertz 1973:11). The opposition emic/etic should not be simply understood as a local/external juxtaposition. I understand an emic strategy as the usage of the local categories to build one's own intellectual construction (see Barnard and Spencer 2005:181-183, Feleppa 1986:63); therefore refiguration means also overlapping with an emic strategy.

What is more, *In Sorcery's Shadow* represents a kind of narrative situated exactly between standard ethnographic texts (scientific discourse such as ethnographic monographs or field reports), and anthropological fiction (scientifically based literary discourse). It is easy to simply classify *In Sorcery's Shadow* as an example of a confessional (Marcus and Cushman 1982), or even fictional narrative. Only the reading of other Stoller publications from this period allows us to estimate what a well thought-out and serious enterprise it is. Stoller is exposing himself considerably to H.G. Gadamer's *Fremdheit* – a state of “not being at home in the world” (Weinsheimer 1988:4). He seems to be looking for some stable points, reasonable categorisation of the universe, “notification of resistance”, to quote Fleck (1986:125-126). In this way he becomes more open to different sources of knowledge about the world: from this point of view he gains a more creative attitude. However, his decision to reject standard anthropological methodology not only deprived him of the metalanguage used in communication with other members of the scientific community, as well as an excellent emotional shield, but also made him more impressionable to manipulation. As I will try to show later, the depiction of analysed reality is dominated by synecdoche from that point: a given representative personifies the entire community. Gerard Genette (1980:166) could have classified this structure as the order of *diegesis*: the narrator's presence in the text becomes more and more visible, while the amount of information, in particular meta-information or analysis diminishes. In fact, as reviewers stated, in the entire *In Sorcery's Shadow* we may find an analysis only one sentence in length. Independently from the structure, we can see that the actant activity (to quote Greimas' original category, see Greimas 2004) was refigured by *mimesis*, according to Ricoeur's understanding of the latter term (Drwięga 1998:72-74, Ricoeur 1990).

Ricoeur's threefold mimesis could be shortly characterised as a reference to pre-understanding of the order of action, its symbolic structures and narrative temporality (*mimesis*₁); entering to the kingdom of poetical fiction, that is rendering symbolic structures in the text (*mimesis*₂); and a new configuration obtained by a poetical refiguration of pre-understanding of the action structure (*mimesis*₃) (Drwięga 1998:72-74, Ricoeur 1990:XI). *Mimesis*₂ is a kind of mediation between the world of text and world of a reader. According to Ricoeur, the mimetic process per se,

expressed as an act of a story's narrativisation, refers to a temporal character of human experience as such. This connection constitutes the "transcultural form of necessity" (Ricoeur 1990:53). Ricoeur's understanding of mimesis is an attempt to acquire a hermeneutical depiction of actions, through which authors, works and readers encounter each other in a real experience. Textual configuration, which mediates between prefiguration in the *praxis* area and refiguration during the reception of the work, is a basic point in this analysis. The reader is the one who links the transgression from mimesis₁ to mimesis₃ in the act of reading and experiencing mimesis₂ (Ricoeur 1990:53).

The main reason for using Ricoeur's theory of mimesis is its processual character: to apply this category to the epistemological situation of the researcher, we have to avoid the use of static analysis. The understanding of Ricoeur's mimesis₃ that I propose here is also close to Gadamer's *Undifferentiation* (Gadamer 1975:86). The medium of a researcher's expression is the text, and simultaneously the field of research is reduced to the text. In other words: scientific narration is concerned with social reality per se, but it uses a fixed picture of reality. In this sense a subject of social research is not noumenon but phenomenon.

Before moving on to the story, let me re-emphasise one of Ricoeur's ideas: in whatever way the text is being configured during the act of reading, it may also refigure the reader's horizon. Stoller often refers to Ricoeur, the author of *Le symbolique du mal* – in particular when he emphasises that the contemporary social sciences perceive a culture as a text, an attitude which he demands we should reject. But I think that Stoller – the author generally opposed to the "textual turn" in anthropology – was not only not able to liberate himself from this necessity of reading a culture as a text, but also put Ricoeur's threefold model into practice and let himself be reconfigured by the text. In the following sections I will seek to analyse Stoller's narrative as refigurative process.

The story

Stoller and Olkes' (1987) *In Sorcery's Shadow* is a record of five journeys to Niger, undertaken by the authors between 1976 and 1984. All the time Stoller is the narrator, speaking in the first person, from here on I will be referring mostly to him.

At first Stoller plans to undertake conventional ethnographic research from an etic perspective. His subject is the relationship between language usage and local politics; the first part of the research is a language-attitude survey among selected respondents (Stoller and Olkes 1987:8). Everything goes fine until the moment of the first respondent confrontation. It turns out that a declarative knowledge of languages is drastically different from the real one: Stoller's interlocutors attributed a significantly better language knowledge to themselves than they actually had. Questions about why they would mislead the anthropologist always triggered the same answer: "What difference does it make, Monsieur Paul?" (Stoller and Olkes 1987:8-11). Stoller enters the field with already assumed categories that are not shared by Mehanna citizens, who consequently did not see anything harmful in what is often (unreflectively) called "respondent lies" by anthropologists. The consequences of this collapse are interesting. After one week spent checking 180 informants, Stoller finds that a laboriously calculated degree of multilingualism is worthless. Then he goes to the old *marabout* Abdoulaye. "Luck brought me to Adboulaye" (Stoller and Olkes 1987:11)

says Stoller. The Muslim clerk gives him following advice: “You must learn to sit with people, Monsieur Paul. You must learn to sit and listen” (Stoller and Olkes 1987:11). What will the anthropologist do? He will start his refiguration process; to sit and listen.

The next turning point in the narrative is the beginning of learning with *sorko* Djibo, a healer. This “point” was in fact anecdotal. Djibo enjoyed spending a lot of time sitting in Stoller’s hut, while the latter was typing. By a twist of fate two small birds lived in the hut’s thatch, stubbornly polluting the anthropologist’s possessions. One evening they managed to hit the head of the author of *Taste of Ethnographic Things*. Djibo recognized this act of defecation as a sign that Stoller was to go on the *sorko* track (Stoller and Olkes 1987:23-24). Let us consider the anthropologist’s reaction to this, *par excellence*, marking. Stoller has the possibility of obtaining direct contact with Songhay sorcery. He immediately reminds himself that Evans-Pritchard, during his research among the Azande, faced a similar situation and decided to send his cook to learn instead of facing this experience himself. Everything was done to aid the scientific distance from observed reality. Stoller’s second association was Castaneda, with whom he “did not want to be compared” (Stoller and Olkes 1987:25; though indeed he was: for instance, Frank proposed the chain Cushing – Castaneda – Stoller in Frank 2000:13-31, see also Brenner 1989). Here we can assume that accepting Djibo’s proposal marks the implementation of a new epistemological model in this narrative: Stoller starts to adopt local categories, abandoning the rationality that he was educated in. We should not be surprised by the anthropologist’s fear: fear of embarrassment in the eyes of the scientific community and of the influence of this experience on his own identity. The *sorko*’s offer caused both fear and fascination, said Stoller (Stoller and Olkes 1987:26). Fascination seems to win at first, but the fear will come back, reinforced.

The *sorko* training consists of the laborious memorising of complicated incantations, connected with different plants used in magic. After some time Stoller goes through the *sorko* initiation. He eats *dugu nya*, “food of *sorko*”, which will be carried in his stomach up to the end of his life. Incidentally, if we treat Rayfield’s critique (quoted below) as reasonable, we must agree that the ritual consumption of *dugu nya* has nothing to do with the *sorko* initiation, but is an element of a kind of show played by Djibo. We can only guess that the anthropologist could have been perceived as the source of money or of prestige.

The next step to become an initiate of Songhay sorcery (that we can see as a stage of the refiguration process) is studying Adamu Jenitingo’s teaching, the powerful *sohanci* from Tillaberi. It is easy to see that Adamu and his family adopt Stoller. “God has blessed you,” a woman says to Adamu’s wives, “with a white-man son from America” (Stoller and Olkes 1987:125). “You are like the son I never had,” says *sohanci* to Stoller (Stoller and Olkes 1987:173). This is not an “informant – researcher” relationship, but rather that of master – student, or father – son (and it resembles the similar relationship between Cushing and the Zuni headman, see Green 1990). Therefore Stoller, as a literary character, consists of two opposing personalities: a strong anthropologist, feeling at home on the banks of the Niger River, and the neophyte of esoteric knowledge, more and more obedient week by week. Stoller is himself again “here and now”, moving away from the academic community as a reference group. However, as he is a professional social scientist, he analyses this process. The Adamu plot shows how the anthropologist starts sharing local categories, finally experiencing local community fears. This process forms a kind of trajectory:

Stoller's experience is marked with a growing intensity, so that finally he is immersed so deeply in the world of sorcery that the model of understanding previously treated as external, local and irrational dominates his scientific perception and forces him to withdraw.

As I mentioned before, Stoller's first overview was captured in "external" or "professional" categories: Songhay magic should surrender to the educated anthropological mind. During the first part of Adamu's teaching Stoller gives the following notice: "This sorcery and philosophy I had been learning had to be illusion ... I realized at that moment that I must not relinquish my role as objective observer, no matter how involved I might become in the Songhay world of magic ... I was certain that after a time I would truly understand the Songhay, perhaps better than they understood themselves" (Stoller and Olkes 1987:100, my emphasis). (*Nota bene* this phrase resembles one of the main postulates of Schleiermacher hermeneutics.) This epistemological shield weakens after contact with Djibo, and is finally crushed during Adamu's teaching. I think that Stoller's emphasis on his permanent and strong fear is crucial. Stoller mentions the fear just at the beginning of his *sorko* path. The *sohanci* has warned him: "In the world of war, every person on the path is a target for the bad faith of others... You must be prepared" (Stoller and Olkes 1987:101).

The next turning point is a ritual, conducted (successfully!) by the anthropologist. A native asks him for help in taking revenge on a European, who has fired him and wrongfully accused him of theft. Stoller, with an evident sense of dissonance – "Had I become too involved in the world of Songhay sorcery?" (Stoller and Olkes 1987:100) – goes to the *sohanci* for help. Adamu's advice is detailed: "You take the ____ of a ____ chicken and bury it under the threshold [and secretly] recite the incantation" (Stoller and Olkes 1987:111). And so the "____ of a ____ chicken" is buried under the threshold, the incantation is secretly recited, the anthropologist collects a gift for casting the spell (Stoller and Olkes 1987:113) and – hoping that the magic would be ineffective – leaves Niger. After one year he comes back to learn that the European's sister's face has been paralyzed. The illness has been serious and required treatment in Europe. "I was frightened of this power as well as of the notion that sorcery was real. Up to that point I had had an academic interest in sorcery. I had never accepted the possibility of entering the Songhay world of sorcery, having considered myself a detached student of sorcery, not an engaged practitioner" (Stoller and Olkes 1987:123-124). But Stoller seems to see the world through Songhay rather than a researcher's eyes from now on.

This can be seen in the description of his visit to Ayoru. Stoller visits Ayoru to meet *zima* Howa and Susan, his old-time acquaintance from the Peace Corps. Adamu has ordered him to ask *zima* to send the *sohanci*'s son, who was working as a musician for Howa, back to Tillaberi. So we have a conflict between prominent sorcerers here. After meeting with the *zima* Stoller goes back to Susan's house. That night, "I heard a loud thud at the other side of Susan's grass-screened porch. Something was moving along the sand. There was a deep roar. The thing come closer and closer ... I crept around the edge of the grass screen and leaped into the enclosure, my left arm outstretched, my protective rings [received from the *sohanci*] in front of me" (Stoller and Olkes 1987:132-133). The next day, to Susan's great surprise, Stoller decides to leave Ayoru. In fact he escapes to Tillaberi and Adamu. The latter interprets the nocturnal noises as *zima* Howa's attempt to show her power to the stranger. We can see that Stoller had already internalised Songhay optics and that the mimetic binding of two cultures was in process.

After the Ayoru experience Stoller goes to Wanzerbe, a village commonly respected due to the magic powers of its inhabitants. Stoller's goal is to meet with the great *zima* Kasey. And here we have the climax point of the drama, which has become its mark of identification. Kasey has already left for three weeks, and Stoller apparently without success tries to meet with another *zima* Dunguri, but finally goes back to the rented house and goes to the bed. I will quote the thorough fragment again:

I awoke to the tattoo of steps on the roof of the house ... I did not move, and I heard nothing more. Suddenly I had the strong impression that something had entered the house. I felt its presence and I was frightened. Set to abandon the house to whatever hovered in the darkness, I started to roll off my mat. But my lower body did not budge. I pinched my leaden thighs and felt nothing. My heart raced. I couldn't flee. What could I do to save myself? ... I began to recite the *genji how* [protective incantation]. And so I recited and recited and continued to recite it until I began to feel a slight tingling in my hips. ... My voice cracked, but I continued to recite. Slowly, the tingling spread from my legs to my feet. I pinched my thigh – it hurt – and tested my response along the length of my legs. (Stoller and Olkes 1987:148)

Absolutely sure that it was Dunguri who was behind his temporary paralysis, Stoller went to Dunguri's hut the next morning only to hear the following: "Now I know that you are a man with a pure heart... You are ready. Come into my house and we shall begin to learn" (Stoller and Olkes 1987:149, Stoller 2004:10).

The Wanzerbe experience turned Stoller's world "upside down" (Stoller and Olkes 1987:153). Even though he was aware of possible scientific explanations, his "unwavering faith in science vanished" (Stoller and Olkes 1987:153). Interestingly, it was the *bodily* experience that made the anthropologist aware that he "had crossed an invisible threshold into the Songhay world of sorcery" (Stoller and Olkes 1987:153). Stoller, conscious of losing a certain distance from the observed phenomenon, explicitly declares that from now on his target is not a research study on sorcery, but sorcery itself. "How I longed to be like them!" he cries (Stoller and Olkes 1987:153). This situation brings him into the obvious cognitive dissonance, which can be observed during one of the rites of passage: the ritual eating of *kusu*, "*sohanci* food". It resembles the *sorko* "initiation" depicted above, though *kusu* is claimed to be stronger than *dugu nya*. By the way, evocatively described gastric complaints caused by these specimens only increase our respect for Stoller's hunger for knowledge. This participation in sorcerers' rituals has nothing in common with anthropological practice. "While I hoped that eating *kusu* would *increase my personal power*, I avoided considering what it could contribute to my research" (Stoller and Olkes 1987:184-185, my emphasis). So we reach the moment when that esoteric knowledge has become the only target. Twenty years later Stoller noted that in Wanzerbe he "had fallen into a physically vulnerable situation and had somehow found the strength to overcome [his] helplessness" (Stoller 2004:11), and that temporary paralysis "had triggered in [him] the fear of death" (Stoller 2004:39).

The entire story ends with the next visit to Wanzerbe. Stoller lives under constant threat (Stoller and Olkes 1987:222). It is hard to identify unambiguously the source of the threat: Stoller suspects that local *zimas* are secretly performing a ritual. The tension reaches its climax.

The evening was cool and humid. ... What I did feel was vaguely but increasingly sick. Fever. Pain in my side when I breathed. General uneasiness. What caused my discomfort? Our water came from an artesian

well. The food? True, others – unseen – had prepared it. But Cheryl seemed untroubled. Perhaps it was the silent killer – sorcery. ... What text was Dunguri reciting over her altar? What was Halidu saying to the spirits that he controlled? ... At nightfall I grew progressively weaker, but I resisted sleep. To sleep, I reasoned, was to place us in mortal danger. (Stoller and Olkes 1987:225)

Stoller spends the night reciting the preservation incantation. In the morning he learns that two Idrissa's relatives have died that night. "One night and two deaths. What had I done, I agonised. People had sent death to my house and in wandering it off I had diverted it elsewhere. The world of sorcery was too much with me" (Stoller and Olkes 1987:225-226). Stoller in panic takes Olkes and runs from Wanzerbe, ending his 17 years of adventure with the Songhay (though Stoller will visit Niger again after Adamu's death, in 2004). In this reaction we can see a strong mimetism that causes the scientist to finally leave, ending the process of refiguration.

In Sorcery's Shadow

The anthropologist is incorporated in the narrative, he appears in all dialogical situations. The narrative is focused more on the researcher than on the Songhay, however a clearly scientific target was established. Maybe this made Nigel Barley say about *In Sorcery's Shadow* that "this is at once an anthropological and an anti-anthropological book" (Barley 1989:190). Robert Baum notes that this work "provides deep insight into Songhay sorcery and one of the most perceptive accounts of that distinctive social world created through the process of fieldwork itself that [Baum has] ever read" (Baum 1990:298). Baum states that Stoller reaches the boundaries of scientific cognition. Along with a growing knowledge about beliefs in sorcery, his anthropological scholarly training turns out to be less and less useful (Baum 1990:298).

However, in the reviews severe criticism can be found. T.O. Beidelman notes that the book's construction is based on not-registered conversations, so it constitutes a kind of reconstruction, raising doubts about the reliability of cited dialogues (Beidelman 1989:438-440). To be honest, while reading *In Sorcery's Shadow* I had the impression that this book was too fictionalised, too "smooth". Still, Beidelman's accusation, however severe, is only partially justified. On the basis of information enclosed in the text itself we are able to assume that Stoller was usually using a tape recorder. Many dialogues however have not been saved on tape or in a notebook: we learn this from Stoller's own notes or these dialogues' special character. But let me return to Beidelman: "There is little ethnographic detail and no coherent account of the actual beliefs and morality underlying these practices of sorcery. The characters themselves are mere caricatures ... Reading this conveys little about how Songhay live or what it means to do competent social anthropology" (Beidelman 1989:439-440).

Brenner simply refuses to accord *In Sorcery's Shadow* the status of a scientific book, though it is clear that his criticism stems from a particular paradigm's point of view (Brenner 1989:115-116). He justifies it by pointing to the lack of footnotes or bibliographical references, as well as the author's emotional account. The theoretical summary proposed by Stoller is limited to one phrase only: "If I have discovered anything from my experience of Songhay sorcery, it is that sorcery is a metaphor for the chaos that constitutes social relation" (Stoller and Olkes 1987:229). By the way, it is hard not to find here a strong influence of social anthropology under the banner of

Mary Douglas (Douglas 2001, 2003, Stoller 1989a). Severe charges can be found in Rayfield's (1991) review, where she compares Stoller and a classical research study conducted among the Songhay by a French ethnologist and filmmaker, Jean Rouch. According to Rouch the rank of *sorko* is hereditary, so Stoller's initiation into this position was not possible. Rayfield concludes that Stoller's method does not bring anything more than classical ethnographic fieldwork, and *In Sorcery's Shadow* has "little value for the anthropologist" (Rayfield 1991:347). It should be added that in Stoller's *Fusion of the Worlds* we may find a note which says that Stoller was initiated into the position of *sorko benya* (literally "sorko slave"), which constitutes a line of defence (Stoller 1989a:122).

This simple juxtaposition of several reviews proves how controversial the book is that we are paging through. However, I am deeply convinced that there is nothing, or almost nothing accidental in this "controversy". Stoller is consistently conducting his methodological project, according to theoretical frames described in his earlier works.

A project of eidetic ethnography

In "The negotiation of Songhay space" (Stoller 1980b), Stoller quotes the story of an anthropologist who carried out research among the Songhay and who lived in Niger for 30 years (from the first footnote in "The epistemology of Sorkaterey" we learn that this must have been Jean Rauch; Stoller 1980a:120). This story concerns Songhay space perception. Rauch found his way of seeing space typically Western when he discovered that for Songhay there are no road intersections, but only forks, places where new roads originate from (Stoller 1980b:419). This story gives Stoller a starting point for developing a project for eidetic (phenomenological) anthropology, which would avoid the danger of entanglement in etic categories. Stoller claims that this entanglement (considered here in relation to space perception) is due to the deep-rooted legacy of post-Socratic philosophy. The social sciences, including anthropology but first of all sociology and psychology, are going to work out "the static reification of the social and/or symbolic order by searching for static universals of social life" (Stoller 1980b:420, 426). It may "delude the [anthropologist's] perception" (Stoller 1980b:420) and lead the scientist to see something "which has no importance or meaning to the [studied] people" (Stoller 1980b:420). Stoller emphasises that Western epistemology tends to deduce (starting from Plato) or induce (Aristotle) a set of invariant principles, "which might explain observable natural phenomena" (Stoller 1980b:426). This tendency causes knowledge idealisation and separates it from the experience. According to the author of *The Taste of Ethnographic Things*, thanks to critical eidetic observation a scientist can reject thinking about data as an external subject of analysis and see instead that perception is dynamically connected with consciousness. And so the scientist becomes aware of his or her philosophical and cultural conditioning, stemming from socialisation. Consequently he or she is able to attempt an observation from the ethnographical Other's point of view (Stoller 1980b:427). Of course, even phenomenological analysis will not allow an anthropologist to see the world with the Other's eyes, but an analysis corresponding more closely to the Other's experience will be possible. "Critical, phenomenological analysis can help anthropologists overcome the blindness that can result from their post-Socratic dispositions, so that they are able to see forks as well as intersections along the road" (Stoller 1980b:430).

It is easy to see, for instance when reading research described in “Signs in the social order” (Stoller 1982), how consistently Stoller carries out his programme. In this article he refers to “Deep play” by Clifford Geertz and the category of “thick description” (Geertz 1973), according to which the researcher should “read” the signs. Due to his or her careful consideration, he or she learns to interpret “the discourse of social action” and “a set of symbolic actions that reinforce a corresponding set of ... cultural conceptions” (Stoller 1982:751). Stoller is not too precise here and he does not elaborate on what “discourse of social action” or signs are. The latter seem to be understood in Ricoeur’s terms, but Stoller does not refer in particular to Ricoeur’s texts, where this category is defined. He merely mentions the Oracle of Delphi, which was also brought up in the last phrases of Ricoeur’s (1975) famous essay *The symbol set us thinking*. By choosing an eidetic anthropology, social scientists “will be more able to proceed profoundly and accurately toward an understanding of those signs that form the foundation of sociocultural life” (Stoller 1982:751). And so in the way that passengers are seated in a bush taxi we may discern social stratification, corresponding to the history of Songhay. Social positions suit modes of behaviour. Stoller comes to this conclusion by “deeper experiences in the Songhay world” (Stoller 1982:760); in Ricoeur’s language: by an act of reading, which consists in catching the text semantics and making them his own. An anthropologist is “reading” the culture, but this reading may lead from an absolute dependence on their own prejudices and ethnocentrism to gradually entering into emic categories.

Practically, Stoller translates it into a demand for “tasteful ethnography”: a researcher should not only analyse structures of kinship, exchange or symbolism, but also “describe with literary vividness the smells, tastes, and textures of the land” (Stoller and Olkes 1986:348). This idea drives anthropology close to travel literature, which, according to Marcus and Cushman (1982) has been a negative point of reference for anthropological writers from Malinowski’s times. “Tasteful ethnography” is “descriptive, nontheoretical, and memorable. Writers of tasteful ethnographies mix an assortment of ingredients ... to create a narrative that savours the world of the Other” (Stoller and Olkes 1986:350). Later Stoller noted that the formulation “reading of the culture” may be a Western construction. In fact, this hermeneutical postulate lets us down when we deal with a body in ritual, in a non-European or non-North American community. A textualised body “is robbed of its movements, odours, tastes, sounds – its sensibilities – all of which are potent conveyors of meaning and memory” (Stoller 1994a:639). So if “tasteful ethnography” is not a “reading of the culture”, it is – to some extent – exposing a scientist to the influence of the analysed reality. As one may see, *In Sorcery’s Shadow* is just a fulfilment of the postulate of tasteful ethnography. Stoller wants to “write ethnographies that describe the sensual aspects of the field” (Stoller 1989b:9). As I will try to show later, this way leads nowhere. In Stoller’s case, the internalisation of “native” cognitive categories leads to a strong mimetic and, in consequence, emotive reaction. After this, Stoller’s scientific activity among the Songhay seems to reach its end. It turns out that the taste was the only visible feature of the dish.

The style of *In Sorcery’s Shadow* makes us think of fiction. Intentionally, I suppose. After all Stoller is also a novelist. However, his style does not resemble the anthropological novel, such as the writings of Eleanor Smith Bowen (Laura Bohannon) or Colin M. Turnbull (Bowen 1964, Turnbull 1967). So is *In Sorcery’s Shadow* a scientific book or a novel? It meets no imaginable requirements of what is usually recognised as a solid scholarly publication: there are no references, no

bibliography, no systematic lecture on an idea or description of regularly conducted research according to a defined method; we will not find a clearly stated hypothesis, or conclusions. The book could equally well be placed among adventure/travel literature. Let me repeat that in my firm opinion this is the result of the author's conscious effort. The structure does not affect the book's cognitive value. In the afterword to *Jaguar* we find the following statement: "The ethnographic writing style sometimes muffles the drama of social life as it is lived. The tendency pulls the reader away from the excitement and trauma of lived reality and limits the depth of characterization" (Stoller 1999:212).

Eidetic ethnography as mimetic process

In Sorcery's Shadow lets us track the evolution of anthropological attitude when the anthropologist is going native. In this case it started with etic cognitive categories assumed a priori and later evolved towards the scientist's complete exposition to *Fremdheit* and surrender to the local categories. From the point of view of literary tropes theory, it can be noted that the language in which the researched community is described is gradually changed from metaphor into synecdoche (in a *pars pro toto* sense), which naturally fits the perception of the situation as experienced through the researcher's "here and now". According to Lakoff and Johnson (2000) the metonymies – I treat synecdoche as a special kind of metonymy (Fernandez 1974, Jakobson 1987) – create a coherent system, just like metaphors do. What was Songhay sorcery for Stoller? The more the author is concerned with the world of sorcery, the more the entire, intricate socio-cultural complex is being analysed from the angle of the particular experience. Maybe that is why the heroes of *In Sorcery's Shadow* – this could have been noted by a literary critic – seem to be one-dimensional characters. We can eventually ask if these characters are "reflectors", to refer to the original Henry James term quoted by Wayne Booth: the mirror images of an author's intentionality, the mere actors playing ascribed roles according to the scenario written by an author (Booth 1961:149-165).

The language used in the description of the research field is metonymic. Strong "sensitisation" makes the author, at least intentionally, use an emic apparatus. In fact this is not a question of sensitisation, but rather of a strong internalisation of a set of "local" phenomena and, by consequence, an emotive reaction. The fear and actions undertaken after the two experiences in Wanzerbe are the strongest emotional signs of the scientist's change in attitude. This is Stoller's mimetic moment: if we assume that any particular area is analysed as a text by a researcher, we can speak here about *Horizontverschmelzung* (fusion of horizons) in a new dimension. The scientist's attitude becomes refigured; the reality of a research area (the culture treated as a text) is internalised and brings a strong emotive reaction.

The trajectory outlined in *In Sorcery's Shadow* may be divided into three phases of mimesis in Ricoeur's sense. The first one – prefiguration of the field of experience: an attempt by the anthropologist to read the Songhay world from the angle of an assumed research target and determined, a priori cognitive categories. The second – becoming receptive to local categories and the blurring of two discursive areas: understanding of the reality from both a scientist's and a sorcerer's point of view. The last one – a refiguration of the reader's/researcher's horizon is visible in the dramatic emotive reaction. The Songhay cognitive categories, initially set to be translated into researcher language, came to dominate his perception of reality and gradually

replaced the scientific model of cognition. A total opening to the text resulted in plunging into it; consequently we cannot speak about cognition or understanding (to quote Dilthey's [1996] distinction) to help achieve the previously determined targets. The anthropologist dominates the scene, but mostly as a passive subject.

We can assume that Stoller's escape from Niger is a desperate attempt to save his own sense of identity, but I do not know if Songhay culture allows for such a reaction. In the shamanic vocation as described by Mircea Eliade (2001) we may find many examples of escapism, but a marked candidate usually subjects him or herself to the ancestors' will at the end. Similar cases may be found in the third chapter of Stoller's (1989) *Fusion of the Worlds*: Stoller himself shows that for a native escape is not possible. The anthropologist leaves, whittling undoubtedly very deep cognitive dissonance away, but probably this is something only a foreigner can do.

It could help us understand the polarisation of opinion shown in the reviews quoted above: *In Sorcery's Shadow* is neither a bad nor a good anthropological book in the sense of a field report or a monograph. It is a story about doing anthropology in the world of the "ethnographic Other", which tells us a lot about an anthropologist's experience. Stoller's epoche, an attempt to open fully to the external categories, has led him to a blind alley. The implementation of a postulated anthropology free of prejudice or any kinds of "-centrism" led to the negation of anthropology's primary aim since Evans-Pritchard and Geertz – the translation of the others' experience. (This understanding of anthropology is, however, presented in the works of authors influenced by Stoller, for instance Michael Jackson 1982 or Robert Desjarlais 1992.) *In Sorcery's Shadow* shows the changes in a researcher's attitude step by step. It is an anthropology of an anthropologist. In this sense it can be treated as a flagship example of a confessional ethnography (Marcus and Cushman 1982). It can also be interpreted as a fulfilment of Haim Hazan's (1995) idea of text-oriented anthropological writing: the scientist changes into the writer, being conscious of his or her influence on the reality representation. The narrative is a kind of autobiography, where "the anthropologist's own experiences, deliberations, and existential problems unrelentingly impinge upon the presentation" (Hazan 1995:398). But as already noted, Gadamer has stated that completely getting rid of prejudices (in the hermeneutical sense of the word) is not possible.

In Sorcery's Shadow shows the limitations of a phenomenological attitude to ethnographic research. Thanks to the author's openness and self-reflection, we can see the threat of wearing the skin of an ethnographic Other. Shall we assume, then, that the Other's world is inaccessible? Absolutely not: Stoller's case shows that it is possible to get in, but difficult to mediate between experiencing the Otherness (or a fear of the Otherness) and keeping the distance. Obviously the refiguration through local reality is not the only influence on an anthropologist's work. As we have known since the "linguistic turn", anthropology is a function of history, paradigm, politics, and so on. It is always produced within a wider, social context, and so consumed. By engaging in this critical approach to Stoller's ethnography I did not want to place one paradigm before another (let us say modern before postmodern). Taking the social constructivist point of view, we may say that it is not a matter of better or worse, but of different paradigm approaches (Kuhn 2001, Sady 2000). The role of phenomenology in the development of anthropological epistemology and methodology was unquestionably crucial; in particular when we are thinking about gaining access to the Other's perception of his or her own culture. The question it

raises is how – from a methodological point of view – to reduce the fear and to see what an Other sees, but through our own eyes.

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