

Book Review: Yaya's Story: The Quest for Well-being in the World by Paul Stoller

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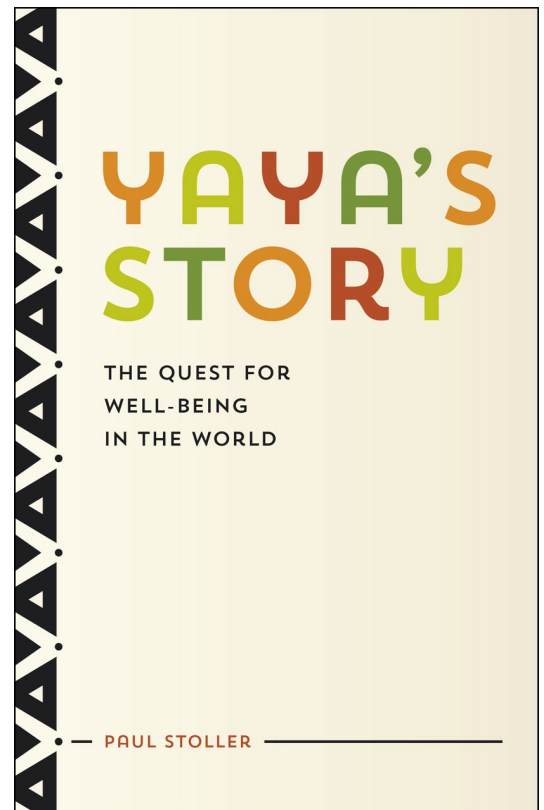
*Combining memoir, ethnography, and philosophy through a series of interconnected narratives, Paul Stoller aims to tell a story of remarkable friendship and the quest for well-being. Whether interested in a study of well-being, of transnational African traders, of spirit possession, of anthropology, or simply of the friendship of two very different men, **Yaya's Story** is a book offering much to a wide readership. It is without doubt a book with a soul, writes Fiona Murphy.*

Yaya's Story: The Quest for Well-being in the World. Paul Stoller. University Chicago Press. 2014.

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Paul Stoller's *Yaya's Story: The Quest for Well-being in the World* is a richly textured, ethnographic tale of the intertwining, 'existential convergences' of two men's lives. This is a story with the power to linger, a story of 'mutual understandings,' intimate bonds, and the virtues of moral intelligence.

Concerned with the intersecting paths of Paul Stoller, the anthropologist, writer and teacher and Yaya Harouna, a Songhay market trader from Niger, the book explores the indeterminate spaces of well-being; humanity's capacity to ceaselessly strive for but never fully recognise the true value of wellness. With global economic crisis and widespread austerity projects, national well-being measures are high on the agenda of a number of EU countries. Such economic measures of well-being are widely critiqued, Stoller's ethnography in its movement towards a fully human, anthropological and philosophical study of well-being thus offers a compelling counterpoint to these debates.



Yaya's Story is also a profound extension of Paul Stoller's long standing anthropological and writing project. Through the ruptures, restlessness, and accomplishments of Stoller's personal and professional life, the development of deeply personal and reciprocal relationships in his ethnographic journeys, *Yaya's Story* seeks (successfully) to be a, 'text that will remain open to the world' (2014: 8). It is this very openness, this conjuring and entanglement of the intimate lifeworlds of other and self, personal and professional, stories and anthropological reflections that makes this book such an important contribution to the social scientific study of well-being. Furthermore, the prism of this ethnography of well-being and restlessness refracts (for the book's readership) the importance of a critical, reflexive, engaged anthropological writing project.

Joan Didion (1979:1) once said that 'we tell ourselves stories in order to live.' It is just this dwelling in the sometimes shadowy, intersecting storied worlds of self and other in the restless pursuit of well-being that forms the cornerstone of Stoller's ethnography. The book maps Stoller and Yaya's shift from the 'village of the healthy' to the 'village of the sick' thus walking the reader through the evolution of a friendship that criss-crosses a multitude of spaces, cultures, times, and emotions. The book's tri-partite structure bracketed by a prologue and epilogue allows for the emergence of a heartfelt dialogue between the inhabitants of two colliding worlds.

The opening prologue is a moving reflection on how the book '*Yaya's Story*' came into being. With lyricism and depth, it signals how the story of two men's friendship carves a pathway into understandings of issues as broad as global commerce, transnational migration, cultural alienation, ethnographic fieldwork and sorcery. Part one of the book '*A Life Story in Commerce*' provides a compelling cartography of the to-ing and fro-ing, the ebbs and flows, and the fortunes and failings of a peripatetic market trader's life. This is followed by Part two '*A Life Story in Anthropology*,' a detailed and at times poetic imparting of Paul Stoller's personal journey into the worlds of anthropology, fieldwork, and the enduring ties that bind the anthropologist-writer to family, friends, research participants, places and times. Part three, '*Awakenings*,' is an emotive meditation on lives touched by illness, specifically cancer. It is in part three that Stoller draws out, indeed often poignantly, the existential convergences of Yaya and Paul. The epilogue concludes *Yaya's Story* with a careful reflection on what well-being means.

Writing against the scholarly grain, Stoller has produced a text that enchants. Over the course of a few pages the reader is brought to places and times that are in the same moment both wounded and spectacular, diverse and engaging. Chapter three, '*New York City and Transnational Trade*', paints a vivid portrait of the everyday lifeworlds of African market traders working in a large warehouse in New York City. At the core of this chapter is a depiction of the complexity of transnational lives where mobility is the central organising frame. Shifting between a yearning for the homeland, a desire to make better economic lives for geographically scattered families, wanderlust, and anxiety about one's African or Muslim background in the post 9/11 New York landscape, the participants in this chapter live the force of the neoliberal project. In capturing the droppings of these encounters during his regular visits to the warehouse, Stoller has to also confront the ethical challenges of how and where such desired and important objects were procured, as well as the suffering endured by African traders attempting to earn a living amidst a groundswell of anti-immigrant sentiment post 9/11.

Stoller pushes his reader to reflect on the frictions of our ever-connected global environment. The beginnings of the anthropological, philosophical and literary underpinnings of his writing project are made particularly visible in chapter five, '*Stumbling into Anthropology in Niger*'. Herein, we meet a young Stoller faced with the challenges of learning new languages, of seeing Niger for the first time, and of his first encounter with spirit possession, an encounter that would begin a lifelong anthropological project. Drawn into the world of sorcery and magic, Stoller learns about healing and power with the help of a spirit priest, a mentor Adamu Jenitongo. Returning frequently through the years to sit and learn from Adamu, Stoller suffers bouts of sickness. It is Adamu who attributes Stoller's ailments to his enemies, and alongside Stoller, the reader begins to discover the perils of such anthropological fieldwork. Sometime after Adamu's death, Stoller suffers a series of mishaps and an illness which precipitated his return home to the US. It would be eighteen years before Stoller would return to Niger.

The lines between the visible and invisible, the scientific and the supernatural, what we proclaim to believe or misbelieve are indeed fragile. The final chapters of *Yaya's story* illuminates this very fragility and vulnerability in our personal and professional lives. In documenting his own and Yaya's journey with cancer, Stoller challenges the reader to reflect on how illness –the great leveller–can make invisible the most profound of cultural differences. Here too, we see some of the premises of ethnographic fieldwork –the depth of the anthropologist's relationships with his/her research participants– being questioned.

Whether interested in a study of well-being, of transnational African traders, of spirit possession, of anthropology, or simply of the friendship of two very different men, *Yaya's Story* is a book offering much to a wide readership. It is without doubt a book with a soul.

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