

Culture, Embodiment, and the Senses

Tuesday, 22 November 2005

Reading

- Paul Stoller, *Sensuous Scholarship*, prologue, parts one and two, pp. ix-73.
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Student presentation

Stoller's focus: Africa, ethnographic film, anthropology of religion, culture of cities.

In this book, Stoller ties to focus on his theory of sensuous scholarship and incorporates examples from Songhay people to support his theory.

Prologue – anthropologists need to use sensuous scholarship to understand cultures

- ☞ Sufi story in which there is a **fusing of the heart and the head** contrary to Western tradition (recall Descartes and how he said you can't really trust your senses)
- ☞ also gives theories he's trying to refute (rationalism)
- ☞ quotes Merleau-Ponty saying that rationalism is flawed because knowledge can also be obtained from unobservable phenomenon – reason has come to be confused with the knowledge of conditions and causes
- ☞ Stoller's goal: challenge social theorists and cultural critics who followed in the rationalist tradition and who treat the body as a text instead of an organic whole

In the attempt to describe the body's role in social thought, body has been treated as text that can be read and organized. Stoller proposes the use of sensuous scholarship which links analytical and sensible approaches – only possible with the **rejection of mind/body duality** and acceptance of interconnectedness.

Songhay people use the senses to fuse body and being. Basic beliefs: stomach as basis of personality and agency, social relations in terms of eating.

Professor's commentary: In Haiti, something similar in that the term for eating is also used to describe feeling fatigued (as if something ate energy or soul). Also used in terms of using up resources – exploitation by the rich who “eat too much” of economic resources.

First few chapters, Stoller mixes theory with his Songhay experiences.

Ch. 1 – refute disembodied view of sorcery

- ☞ **disembodied view** comes from two ethnographers, **Levi-Strauss** (power of sorcery is symbolic) and **Evans-Pritchard** (witchcraft as set of beliefs).
- ☞ Sorcery with Songhay is dangerous because sorcerers need to consume power to remain healthy and alive which leads to intense rivalry between sorcerers.
- ☞ Sorcerers have to make potion impenetrable to knives – make potion and try to cut themselves which leaves evidence of sorcery beliefs.

Stoller presents own personal experiences as apprentice to sorcerer – he was able to learn some

basic magic and able to attack and be attacked. When he was attacked, he realized sorcery is more than a belief because it has **bodily consequences**. (One way to be attacked is through magical bows and arrows [of the spirit]. Sorcerer speaks name of victim and shoots the arrow he's made and the corresponding spiritual arrow will puncture victim.)

Social consequences of Stoller's sorcerer-mentor's death = family members who didn't inherit any possessions were resentful that Stoller was favored, and told Stoller (who had experienced misfortunes) that his path had been cursed and that he should return home.

∞ used this story to show the **importance of bodily experience** and that certain things can be learned only *through* the body.

∞ p. 23 – “metaphorical meaning to our experience,” “we are consumed by the social world”

Ch. 2 – encourage science to use the griot qualities in their communication. (A griot is a keeper of Songhay oral history who studies for 30 years and has to learn how to embody the power of history and become the forces of the past. They are similar to sorcerers that they “eat” history but they also have to be eaten by it.)

Professor's commentary: If Stoller is advocating that anthropologists should be as dedicated to their ethnography as much as a griot, how practical is it? What do you think of his method?

The fact that he is identified as someone who was taught sorcery, is similar to Desjarlais' becoming a shaman. *This contrasts rationalist scientific objectivity [and early ideas of the removed anthropologist] with visceral phenomenological experience.* Recall Desjarlais and trance – even though he states that he experiences trance in the context of ritual, he notes that it isn't the same as how the Yolmo experience it themselves. It takes time for the *sensibility* to become real to him. Stoller has gone further than Desjarlais – he's asking broader questions about how do you know what you know, what is the nature of research, taking anthropology in a more creative direction.

Griots give histories during performances and when they're telling the stories they don't care about the theoretical basis – what they care about is how the story is told, that people can realize the past and discover the future. Stoller argues that ethnographies should not be transparent because they are based on text but instead should combine history/economics/past/present to be accomplished through **sensuous writing** as a synthesis of narrative and economic exposition.

Professor's commentary: Stoller emphasizes that ethnographers should perform a function similar to griots, almost have a moral purpose. Stoller is bringing anthropology to the moral/ethical domain. What is produced should further the cause of all of us and shouldn't be just bland texts.

Ch. 3 – spiritual possession, can entice spirits to enter body through different media (dance, poetry, music). When spirit enters, body is physically transformed because it is consumed by forces, smells, textures, and other sensory things that trigger **cultural memories**.

There are three **types of Songhay history**: written, oral, spiritual possession/ceremonial.

Through spiritual possession, cultural memories are produced because involved are replicas of ancestors that embody past and make contact with present and influence the future. Witnesses of

possession will experience a “**second contact.**”

Professor's commentary: We've been exploring **questions of representation**. In first contact between peoples, there is a strong confrontation with the Other. But in that contact there is also representation going on on both sides. E.g. European spirits now part of the pantheon of gods – this can be seen as the past becoming incorporated. What happens when individuals confront another, how do they negotiate this? Spirit possession and the ceremonies that evolved are ways of thinking through how the Songhay negotiated their contact with other groups during different historical periods. **Ritual practice as form of history**. History as text, as oral history but also as these embodied performances.

In Haiti there is a similar thing – gods/goddesses who stem from historical figures from Haitian past. The **history lives** – each time historical/spiritual form is embodied it brings the history to the present. Ritual practices can be ways of thinking through moments of **crises** in a society.

Second contact – those who are formerly colonized embody the sense of order. *Mimicry of colonial forms of order through ritual*. Psychological theories of repression, reappropriation could be applied...[to be explored next time]

Ch. 4 – Stoller analyzes the text, describes how **memory** is defined. His first example is from movies – “sensuous power of cinematic images,” how cinema can send universal shocking images that make the audience aware of other environments. Stoller argues that movie makers can't forget the **ethical/political responsibilities** that they have because they have the power to trigger cultural memories. “Cinema heightens senses but also numbs nervous system” – this **cultural anesthesia** can be used by state against others who might resist.