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NEW RELEASES

## **Waiting to Inhale:** The Moral Economy of African Trade

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*Money Has No Smell: The Africanization of New York City.*

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“Africa, whatever it is, is everywhere.” So begins a recent review in *The New York Times* of an exhibition of African art at P.S. 1 Contemporary Arts Center in Queens. “It’s far more than just a continent,” the review continues. “It’s a global diaspora, an international culture, and a metaphor with fantastical associations for the West” (Cotter 2002). This enthusiastic review offers evidence—if any evidence was needed—of the expanding presence and high visibility of Africa in New York City. It also bears witness to a swelling interest among New Yorkers in the arts, fashion, film, music, and cuisine that trace their roots (or is it routes?) to the African continent. Yet, while the *products* of African cultures have been celebrated and consumed across the city, there has been remarkably little interest in coming to know African *people* themselves, whose numbers continue to grow rapidly among the ranks of New York’s multi-ethnic population. In fact, one could argue, it was not until the widely publicized case in 1999 of Amadou Diallo—an innocent Guinean man gunned down by NYPD officers who incorrectly thought he was armed—that many New Yorkers even took notice of African immigrants living in their midst. Interest in that too has passed.

It is curious to note that what has captured the imagination of many New Yorkers is the material culture of Africa which is kept generally behind closed

doors or locked in secure museum cases; while African people, whom New Yorkers see daily walking their streets, driving their cabs, or pressed up against them on a crowded subway car, hold little or no interest. Although it would be possible to never see African art nor sample African food in New York City, it would be nearly impossible to avoid encountering African traders engaged in the bustling mercantile economy of city life: a well-dressed Senegalese hawking “Rolex” watches out of an open briefcase on the corner of 41st and Lexington; a Hausa in flowing damask robes transporting a bag of *kente*-cloth caps on the Lexington Avenue Line heading uptown; a Guinean art dealer selling replica masks and statues outside the Museum of Modern Art; or a Songhay trader peddling music tapes and videos along Canal Street. But while New Yorkers may see these men (and sometimes women) carrying out their daily activities, and might even on occasion purchase goods from them, African immigrants remain anonymous and unknown. As Paul Stoller writes about one such African trader: “Most people who talked to him at the market knew little about his family, his past, his culture, his values, aspirations, or dreams. Although he worked daily on the streets of New York City, he remained, like Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, an unseen person” (p.6).

Making the invisible visible is certainly one of the goals of Paul Stoller’s engaging and insightful new book, *Money Has No Smell: The Africanization of New York City*. At the very least this book brings to light a community of men and women who blanket New York City, yet somehow remain hidden in its shadows and creases. Of course this is nothing new to anthropology. After all, much of the history of the discipline has been concerned with rescuing from the margins those societies whose cultures and existence were either unfamiliar or misunderstood. In the 1900s, for example, Franz Boas brought back his knowledge of the Kwakiutl to New York City where he wrote and published his massive ethnographies. In the 1920s, Margaret Mead introduced Americans to Samoans through her publications and, later, museum exhibitions. Yet unlike the Kwakiutl and Samoans of these early anthropological endeavors, studying the African traders who are the subject of Stoller’s new book does not require distant travel outside of New York City—in fact many of the traders are within a stone’s throw of the Upper Westside offices where Boas and Mead worked. *Money Has No Smell*, then, is not predicated on difficult fieldwork in a remote location in order to bring back knowledge of an unknown people, but rather it requires a close look at individuals who are living and working right in front of us—and perhaps for that reason all the more easy to overlook. In this welcome new book, the eighth of his career, Paul Stoller urges the reader to pause

long enough to see (rather than *see through*) the lives and cultures of some of the many African traders who have migrated to America.

### **Between Narrative and Theory**

Paul Stoller is quite clear at the outset that his book is not a “life history” of traders. Although we learn a good deal about the lives of some of the traders, these narratives are hardly complete or exhaustive. Most life histories are based on extensive interviews in which individuals recount to the anthropologist in their own words the details of their lives—their vicissitudes, struggles, and triumphs. Stoller admits, however, that he never recorded conversations verbatim, and that he rarely took notes in the presence of the vendors. Thus the kind of data he collected through what he calls “hanging out,” “low-key interactions,” and “intermittent fieldwork” would make it nearly impossible to capture the depth and subtleties of an individual’s complete life history.

Part of the author’s unorthodox fieldwork methodology arises from the fact that many of these traders operate on the margins of the law—with dubious migration status they often sell bootleg products, sometimes under the authority of fraudulent vending permits. The stress and uncertainties of such working conditions create an environment in which it would be impossible, and perhaps even rather insensitive, for an ethnographer to go about his business with microphone and tape recorder in hand, or by taking copious interview notes in public. Stoller’s methodology, however, is linked not only to the pragmatic limitations of his fieldwork but also, I would suggest, reflects a conscious choice in his style of anthropological inquiry and writing. *Money Has No Smell* consists of a masterful blend of narrative texture gleaned through participant observation, and theoretical exposition that moves from specific ethnographic data to broader issues of social theory.

While the text contains some significant contributions to anthropological scholarship (some of which I will attempt to elucidate below), it is by no means a learned monograph intended exclusively for specialized or academic readers. Stoller uses the drama of individual stories to illustrate and bring to life more sober theoretical arguments on such topics as the economics of the informal economy, ethnicity and globalization, the social construction of space, and the politics of Afrocentrism. Throughout the text he uses individual experiences to locate and anchor more complex discussions of macro-scale processes. Positioning himself against some of the more dry or callous strains of sociological writing on “the new immigration,” Stoller notes that although their analyses are illuminat-

ing they “seldom do justice to the stories of the real men and women who have left their families to come to places like New York City to earn a living” (p.6).

Again, none of this is new to anthropology. Most ethnographies are built up from the experience and insights of a few “key” informants who provide a human dimension to larger, impersonal processes. Most anthropology positions itself against the detached empiricism of traditional sociological inquiry. Yet very often, even in anthropology, the individuals that lie at the heart of the ethnographic experience become lost ultimately in the fabric of theoretical model-building and the pattern of analysis. Stoller, however, resists this kind of dehumanization. Rather than collapse the individual stories he collects into sweeping statements about “the culture of African traders” or “the immigrant experience in America,” he concentrates on just a few (pseudo)named individuals as vehicles toward understanding global-local interactions. Although the book introduces the reader to well over a dozen different traders in New York City, it concentrates primarily on two individuals: Boubé Mounkaila, who sells leather goods, watches and baseball caps at the Malcolm Shabazz Harlem Market; and Issifi Mayaki, a textile merchant who comes close to financial ruin but manages to bounce back. Why Stoller chose these two individuals as opposed to any others is never made entirely clear. Are they “typical” experiences that were selected out of scores of similar examples that the author collected? Are they illustrative because they are particularly dramatic and, therefore, not so typical of the African migrant experience in New York City? Or were they just two traders that Stoller came to know through happenstance or luck?

### **Dollars and Scents**

In his discussion of the circulation of commodities in *Capital*, Marx notes that “When one commodity replaces another, the money commodity always sticks to the hands of some third person. Circulation sweats money from every pore” (1906 ed.: 127). Marx’s vivid bodily metaphor suggests the possible contradiction between the unsavory qualities of money and the “sweet smell of success” associated with the accumulation of capital. Viewed in the context of this Marxian perspective, Stoller’s title phrase, “money has no smell,” might well be taken as a form of resistance to the evil stench of capitalism and commodity circulation – not unlike the indigenous resistance to capitalism in Bolivia as documented in Michael Taussig’s classic work *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America* (1980). Coined by Muslim traders operating in the transatlantic

mercantile diaspora, the phrase “money has no smell” refers to the fact that traders must sometimes (perhaps even often) engage in practices that go against their religious and moral convictions. Muslims sell to Christians and Jews. African vendors buy pirated music tapes from the Mafia. Traders handle the “fetishes” and “idols” of African art that fly in the face of Islamic doctrine. And pious old men retail pornographic videos that appeal to the degenerate appetites of urban youths. But the African traders carry on their business in spite of these ethical dilemmas and spiritual contradictions, for they must support their families and return to Africa. They suspend judgment and, as it were, hold their breath—when waiting to inhale, one might say, money has no smell.

Paul Stoller illustrates this fascinating concept in several places throughout the book. In one particularly intriguing example, he recounts his conversation with El Hadj Harouna Souley, a forty-three-year-old trader from Niger who sells T-shirts and baseball caps in lower Manhattan. Stoller describes this trader as a devout and righteous man who is outraged by the immorality of Americans. El Hadj Harouna is quoted as saying: “It is accepted here that some men have sex with one another. Men and women think nothing of adultery. Children have babies. People use foul language and show no respect to one another—especially their elders” (p.xi). During one of his conversations with the trader, Stoller pointed to a baseball cap he was selling in his stall. Emblazed on the cap’s front in bold silver letters were the words: “Fuck Off.”

I asked El Hadj Harouna if he knew what that meant.

He said he didn’t.

I explained and then asked how a self-proclaimed pious Muslim could sell an item featuring such foul language.

Seeing no dissonance between his views on Islamic morality and his business practices, he said: “We are here in America, trying to make a living.

We have to do this to look after our families. Money has no smell.(p.xi)

### **Savoring the Ironies of Globalization**

Just days before I sat down to write this review, I found myself standing at the Customer Service Desk of the local supermarket in the small town where I live in rural Connecticut. I was there because a few days earlier I had received an urgent call from an African art trader and longtime friend, Alhadji Gabai Baaré—a trader who features prominently in my book *African Art in Transit* (1994) and in the film *In and Out of Africa* (1992); he is also mentioned, ironically, in the

pages of *Money Has No Smell* (p.15). Baaré was phoning from Niger to borrow money in order to buy sheep for the celebration of the Muslim holiday of Tabasci—*la fête des moutons*. Filling out the Western Union form, I caught the eye of the clerk behind the counter and said, “I’ll be amazed if this actually gets to Niger.” “I’m sorry sir,” she responded, “I don’t know what you’re talking about.” “I just think it’s amazing that I can send money from here to somewhere deep in the heart of Africa,” I said hoping to spark a dialogue on the mysteries of a high-tech international monetary transfer between such a seemingly low-tech point of origin at this rural A&P, and an equally unlikely destination somewhere in the arid Sahel. “Yeah,” she responded, “as long as there’s a code number listed for the country I can wire your money there.” My hopes of exploring with her the ironies of globalization were dashed; and I was left to ponder by myself the apparent strangeness of wiring money from this country grocer to purchase some unsuspecting sheep in Niamey, who in the days ahead would be slaughtered, roasted, and feasted upon by Baaré, his family and friends.

In *Money Has No Smell*, Paul Stoller shares with us many similar ironies that result from equally strange encounters and juxtapositions within the framework of modern globalization and transnational migration. Consider, for example, the history of marketing *kente* cloth in New York City. In 1993, a steady supply of reasonably priced *kente* was available to African traders in New York from Asian operated textile factories in northern New Jersey. Ghanaian manufacturers, however, quickly responded with a higher quality *kente* reproduction which they made available at a cheaper price. Asian merchants, fearing that they were being cut out of the lucrative *kente* market from which they had been profiting, purchased bolts of “Ghanaian” *kente* from African traders uptown where they were brought to Korean sweatshops downtown to be sewn into *kente* caps. These caps were then purchased by African traders and sent back uptown. The irony of entangled ethnic identities in the global swirl of this commodity network becomes even more evident when one considers it this way: African traders in Harlem, decked out in Tommy Hilfiger and the latest American hip-hop styles, are marketing imitation *kente* to African Americans seeking to recapture their lost heritage through the consumption of an “invented” icon created by Asian seamstresses from fabrics made by savvy Ghanaian factory workers who are undercutting their competition somewhere in New Jersey.

While *Money Has No Smell* suggests some of the ironies of globalization and ethnic identity such as these, it also offers some ironic examples of the interplay between reality and its imitations in urban New York trade. Stoller documents quite clearly, for example, the extent to which African traders deal in inau-

thetic products—from bootleg videocassettes of first-run Hollywood movies, to counterfeit designer baseball caps and clothing, to fake African masks and sculptures. Furthermore, many of the traders who sell these products do so under the license of forged vending permits and stolen, rented, or bogus identification cards. “During one of my visits to New York City in 1997,” Stoller recalls, “a woman circulated among the West African vendors at the Malcolm Shabazz Harlem Market with a large stock of counterfeit Social Security Cards. ‘Anybody need a Social Security card?’ she asked” (p.103). What does this extraordinary scene tell us about the culture of truth in the moral economy of immigrant traders? Selling phony Social Security cards with the apparent insouciance of a water vendor in a Moroccan *suq*, this woman plots a dangerous course between the informal sector of African trade and the formal bureaucratic structures which regulate the lives of the traders.

In several places throughout the book, Stoller draws explicit comparisons between African traders in New York City and their counterparts on the African continent. Citing such well-known works as Abner Cohen’s *Custom and Conflict in West Africa* (1969) and Claude Meillassoux’s *The Development of Indigenous Trade and Markets in West Africa* (1971), Stoller situates his text within the tradition of classic ethnographies on West African trade and trading communities. He suggests both similarities and differences in the structure and organization of trade on either side of the Atlantic. What distinguishes Stoller’s ethnography, however, from those of Cohen and Meillassoux is that in *Money Has No Smell* we come to know not only a good deal about what is “African” in New York’s African trade but we also learn an equal amount about the labyrinth of U.S. government bureaucracy through which the traders must navigate in order to survive.

The traders sometimes called upon Stoller to assist them in filling out official forms and reading legal documents. Ironically, during these encounters, the anthropologist often appears lost within the official channels of “his” own culture. Thus, in a curious ethnographic twist, the African traders teach Stoller not only something about their own “African” lives, as it were, but also guide him through the anatomy of a bureaucracy about which he appears to have known little or nothing. To be sure, the interaction of the traders with the INS and other regulating agencies contribute to the character and constitution of these “official” cultures, yet at the same time these entities exist prior to and quite apart from the lives of any of the African traders. As readers of Stoller’s ethnography, we come to understand not only the culture of African trade, but also the exotic and sometimes bizarre regulatory commissions within which the traders’

lives are entangled. Unlike the world of the traders which seems quite reasonable and rational, the culture of American bureaucracy often appears to confound logic. Consider this. After “helping” Boubé Mounkaila through a maze of legal forms and questionnaires at the INS in lower Manhattan, Stoller reports with an air of delightful surprise: “Even though we were in the INS offices, they insisted that the forms be mailed to them” (p.112). Where is Karl Popper when you need him?

### **Modeling Transnational Culture**

Since the foundations of anthropology in the late nineteenth century, there has been keen interest in finding metaphors or models that might capture the essential qualities of “culture.” For Franz Boas and the historical particularists, culture was envisioned as a sandpile, where civilizations accumulated cultural traits that gathered up by chance over time. For Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict writing several decades later, the Boasian model of culture was re-fashioned into a spider’s web. Unlike the sandpile, the spider’s web suggested that cultures were complex configurations with unique character and patterns. But the spider’s web could not account for change; cultures in this model were “ensnared” by their own fixed structures. In 1966, Clifford Geertz introduced the notion of culture as an octopus, “whose tentacles are in large part separately integrated . . . and yet who nonetheless manages both to get around and to preserve himself, for awhile anyway, as a viable if somewhat ungainly entity” (1966:66). Although this model was still bound to the Durkheimian notion of an organism, its tentacle-like appendages allowed for some independent movement within the fixed “body” of a cultural whole. Claude Lévi-Strauss, for his part, suggested in *The Savage Mind* (1966) that culture (at least as it was embodied in myth-making) could be modeled after what he called the *bricoleur*—a kind of cultural handyman or tinkerer who creates cultural products and traditions with whatever is at hand. Like all the other models of culture, this one is closed and largely unable to account for either change or dislocation. “The elements which the *bricoleur* collects and uses are ‘pre-constrained’ like the constitutive units of myths, the possible combinations of which are restricted by the fact that they are drawn from the language where they already possess a sense which sets a limit on their freedom of maneuver” (Lévi-Strauss 1966:19).

During the 1980s, Richard Fox urged anthropologists to abandon all of these models of culture that “presume that culture exists in advance of human his-

tory and action” (1985:196). For Fox, as well as others writing at the time, culture emerges through social action and from the sum of social relationships composing a society.

Culture then is not a house already constructed in which minor changes in décor and some repairs are permitted. The culture of any single time is a selective construction from the debris and standing structures of the past—contemporary individuals and groups take pieces, not the pattern, of the past and form them into new arrangements. They do so as they gain consciousness of their material conditions and interests and work to further them. (Fox 1985:197-98)

Since the emergence of transnationalism as a central theme in anthropology during the 1990s, attempts to create models of culture have largely given way to less ambitious (and perhaps more reasonable) intellectual projects. Yet in reading Stoller’s *Money Has No Smell*, I found myself asking in several places throughout the book, where do we locate “culture” in this local-global mélange? And how could we develop a model of (trans)culture that could account for the complexities and nuances of such a ridiculously intricate cultural universe? Nowhere does Stoller explicitly offer a new model for transnational culture, yet I find the ethnography pregnant with possibilities.

One of the traders to whom we are introduced in the pages of the book is Idé Younoussa, a thirty-five-year-old Songhay man from the Republic of Niger. He is known among Harlem’s West African street vendors as “the *chauffeur*.” Although he has lived in New York City since 1989, he spends much of his time on the road transporting itinerant African traders across America in his white Ford Econoline van. “I have been to more than twenty states in America,” he tells Stoller, “Florida, Indiana, Illinois, Texas, Missouri, Tennessee, Oklahoma, even New Mexico. Very beautiful, New Mexico. It’s like Niger.” Idé finds meaning in his life on the road. “I don’t get tired on the road,” he says. “Driving is my life; it gives me strength. I like the feeling I get on the road. It makes me feel free” (pp.79-80).

If one needed to locate a model or metaphor of culture that could account for the complexities of transnationalism and the global networks of commodity exchange, perhaps it is embodied in Idé Younoussa, the *chauffeur*. Unlike Lévi-Strauss’s *bricoleur* who combines and recombines what is already within reach, the *chauffeur* forges his own cultural itinerary through travel, boundary-crossing, and displacement. Culture in the transnational sphere, as James

Clifford (1997) has suggested in some of his recent works, is uprooted, reconfigured, and unstable. Traders like Idé move between fixed locations, changing and configuring these locations as they move in and out—from their homes in Africa, to the fragile and shifting communities in which they live in America, through the bureaucratic cultures which permeate and control much of their lives overseas, and all the while cutting across the cultures of Afrocentrism, art connoisseurship, mass media, and high fashion in which they participate through selling their products and goods. All of these worlds constitute separate cultures, yet none of them can exist, or be understood, apart from the other worlds with which they are in contact. The *chauffeur* understands these worlds to various degrees, and in passing through them (both literally and metaphorically) he constructs a culture of the African diaspora and its associated commerce and trade.

### **Doing Fieldwork in all the Familiar Places**

There is something very familiar to me about Paul Stoller's book. Part of this sense of recognition comes from having spent time with African art traders who live and work in the same places where Stoller conducted his fieldwork. Thus, for example, when he recounts stopping with one of his "informants" at the Chase Manhattan Bank ATM machine at 73rd Street and Broadway, I can visualize the scene—I've withdrawn cash there myself. When he describes the grubby rooms that some of the traders keep at the Hotel Belle Claire on the Upper Westside, I can picture the rooms (and even smell them)—I've spent many hours there too. But while the book is so very familiar to me because of its well-known ethnographic setting, it is also familiar in perhaps a more meaningful and profound way—namely, that many of the issues Stoller addresses are central concepts that lie at the heart of the field of anthropology.

Reading between the lines of the text, I sometimes get the sense that Stoller is rather uncomfortable with his position as an ethnographer in New York City. He repeatedly refers to his previous fieldwork experience in Niger, and sometimes even lapses into speaking Songhay with the traders as a way of gaining entrée into their world. His authority as an anthropologist, as he presents it to both the traders and his readers, comes not from his field experience in New York City but from his more conventional anthropological work in Africa. Even the traders on occasion use Stoller's academic qualifications as an Africanist in order to validate his presence among them in New York City. Thus, for example, when Boubé Mounkaila introduces Stoller to some

Taiwanese counterfeit watch dealers, a tense situation is diffused by alluding to Stoller's African "expertise."

"This is my friend, Paul," Boubé said introducing me.

The Taiwanese men frowned and seemed visibly upset.

Sensing their discomfort, Boubé said: "He's been to my country and to my village and he speaks my language. He's really an African," he said.

One of the young men said he didn't believe Boubé.

"Listen," Boubé said turning to me. In Songhay he said: "Speak Songhay to me. These people think you're a cop who has come here to arrest them."

"Why do they think I'm a cop?" I responded in Songhay.

"They wonder why else would a white man wearing jeans accompany an African trader on a visit to his supplier of knockoff watches?" (p.61).

The tension appeared to break, and Boubé and the Taiwanese carried on their business.

The repeated references to the author's knowledge of Niger, and allusions to his language competence in Songhay, do little to underscore his capacity to appreciate African cultures in New York – indeed it is quite evident that the African traders in this ethnography have little to do with the spirit possession cults and colonial resistance movements that Stoller studied in rural Niger. Rather, I would argue, these references to African fieldwork are intended, perhaps even unconsciously, to qualify the author as a "proper" ethnographer who has cut his teeth on "real" anthropological subjects. Perhaps this is a symptom of the discipline's awkward shift from fieldwork in remote places to fieldwork in familiar places. While *Money Has No Smell* advances the field of anthropology in leaps and bounds—depositing ethnographic flesh onto the skeletal theories that Clifford (1997) has so eloquently laid out—Stoller, the ethnographer in New York City, is still wedded to the image of the heroic anthropologist on the windswept dunes of the western Sahel. Yet, as I suggested above, the issues that are presented in the book are all central to *any* anthropology; and the ethnography of African traders in New York City ought to stand on its own merits without being buoyed by the enchantment of a classical anthropological past.

One final thought. As anthropology moves its site of research from the far-away to the nearby, we find that it is no longer the ethnographer who is displaced through space and time but rather his subjects. The traders in New

York City are very clear about their intended mission: they want to earn enough money in America to go back to their families in Africa. They have no desire or intention to stay in New York City. "As they almost invariably put it," Stoller writes, "they've come to exploit an economic situation and return to West Africa as soon as they possibly can. In other words, they will leave New York when they've made enough money to return home with dignity and start a new enterprise" (p.23). How different is this from the goal of the anthropologist in Africa? Wouldn't we all want to return home with dignity to start a new enterprise? But when the anthropologist's field site is in or near his home in New York, he has nowhere to return. Our "subjects" are now the ones returning, while the anthropologist remains to contemplate the visit of his departed interlocutors who have all returned home and left *him* behind.

This splendid new book succeeds in throwing light on some of the mind-boggling complexities of transnational trade, travel, and migration. While engaging us in gripping accounts of individual triumphs and failures, Paul Stoller offers a glimpse of the many challenges that face ethnography today as we try to make sense of itinerant or immigrant communities that are deeply entangled in urban politics, national bureaucracies, and the multi-ethnic networks of global exchange. *Money has no Smell* charts a clear course for the future of anthropology that is on track or, better, right on the nose.

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