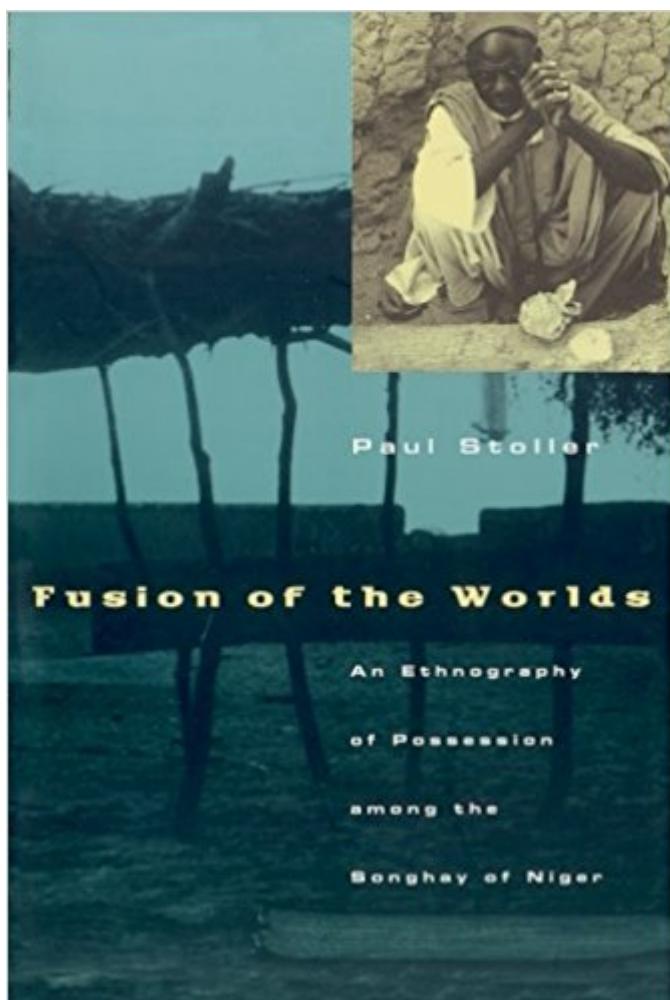


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# Fusion Of The Worlds: An Ethnography Of Possession Among The Songhay Of Niger



## Synopsis

"This ethnography is more like a film than a book, so well does Stoller evoke the color, sight, sounds, and movements of Songhay possession ceremonies." *Choice* "Stoller brilliantly recreates the reality of spirit presence; hosts are what they mediate, and spirits become flesh and blood in the 'fusion' with human existence. . . . An excellent demonstration of the benefits of a new genre of ethnographic writing. It expands our understanding of the harsh world of Songhay mediums and sorcerers." *Bruce Kapferer, American Ethnologist* "A vivid story that will appeal to a wide audience. . . . The voices of individual Songhay are evident and forceful throughout the story. . . . Like a painter, [Stoller] is concerned with the rich surface of things, with depicting images, evoking sensations, and enriching perceptions. . . . He has succeeded admirably." *Michael Lambek, American Anthropologist* "Events (ceremonies and life histories) are evoked in cinematic style. . . . [This book is] approachable and absorbing" "it is well written, uncluttered by jargon and elegantly structured." *Richard Fardon, Times Higher Education Supplement* "Compelling, insightful, rich in ethnographic detail, and worthy of becoming a classic in the scholarship on Africa." *Aidan Southall, African Studies Review*

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Paul Stoller teaches anthropology at West Chester University and Temple University. He is the author of numerous books including *Money Has No Smell* and *Jaguar*, both published by the University of Chicago Press.

This is one of the most interesting ethnographic texts I've read. Stoller presents the material clearly, with intent, action, and solid, grounded explanations. He created a story explaining their culture, beliefs, customs, and stepped out as much as he could to make the focus on the experience of the Songhay, rather than on himself.

The skinny: Buy if you're an ethnographer, anthropologist, or if you are visiting Niger. Otherwise, skip. This ethnography is an academic upgrade to Stoller and Olke's *In Sorcery's Shadow*, which was their well-received memoir of Stoller's 10-year apprenticeship to a Songhay (Niger) sorcerers. Unlike the previous work of personal experience with more solitary sorcerers, *Fusion of the Worlds* attempts to show one spirit possession troupe's ability to operate in many different Songhay "worlds." That is, Stoller wants to show his readers how possession troupes often facilitate a variety of practices. These include the relationship between the individual and the group, remembering the past, engaging in political dialogue, relating Songhay religious practices with Islamic ones, and even negotiating rainfall. Possession troupes, like his from Tillaberi, Niger, are much, much more than performers--they are creating, maintaining, reflecting, identifying, mocking, celebrating, critiquing, and changing the Songhay world. Stoller claims they are fusing the world of the possession troupe and its performances with the rest of Songhay life. It is a mutually beneficial relationship, one which is actively and continually constructed by the troupe and its audience. Stoller uses large sections of quotation, either from tape-recorder transcriptions or field notes, and he argues that this is really the best way to understand the Songhay. This may be true, but it makes appreciating Stoller's thesis much more difficult. The long sections of stories can be enjoyable, but it can also be laborious for those of us who many read this book without a desire to learn the intimate details of Songhay life. It delays academic discussions to privilege the many stories that help show the troupe's activities. This is fair in one sense, but it fails to provide a strong narrative thread for readers to follow. When Stoller has theoretical contributions, they are often short or delayed until the Epilogue. While some readers may be thankful for this, it was a more serious problem for me. For instance, there are many useful implications of Stoller's suggestion that Songhay possession theater is much more than the framework for theatrical presentation of cultural history. However, when he argues that we should look to the "inner space" that is cultivated by these performances, readers should instantly recognize the cultural dilemma inherent in any interpretation he offers. Even as an initiate, the troupe's performances were never directed at him, and therefore the only access to the inner life of the Songhay is through language. Stoller must ask, and his participants must answer him. Thus, the entire work is one of translation where Stoller does his best to make sure that his translation is

recognizable to BOTH the Songhay (for accuracy) and his English-reading audience (for intelligibility). When he claims that more is going on inside, we should be aware that his translation has now moved into interpretation and theorizing. This isn't a bad thing--after all it is most scholars' goal to say something meaningful--but it may mean that the very idea that possession might act as a "microcosm of Songhay culture" is closer to what an observer (and not a participant) would say. Is this nitpicking? No. The integration of interpretation and transcriptions has been achieved with better results by others authors. If reading about possession is your thing, I encourage you to read Stoller. However, if you want a BETTER book about possession, I encourage you to read Mama Lola instead. *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn Updated and Expanded Edition (Comparative Studies in Religion and Society)*

Stoller does an excellent job explaining the various types of possession ceremonies among the Songhay culture. It's fascinating to picture how the spirits of the outside world can enter a medium's body to basically communicate with the people of Songhay regarding good and bad things occurring within the community. These people turn to the spirit world to receive help with settling disputes, having a good harvest in the future, venting their hate for colonialism, etc. But, not only does Stoller do a good job of explaining these various types of spirits, but he also does a wonderful job of interpreting many fascinating ceremonies that he attended. You feel like you're actually there, witnessing a spirit taking over a medium's body. I am currently a student of Stoller's, and it was our assignment to read this book. I liked it very much. I am continuing my research of spirit-possession in the future to learn all I can about a subject that's so intriguing. Stoller's book is awesome!

I am currently taking the anthropology class of Dr. Stoller (Magic, Religion & Witchcraft). He gave the class quite a few great books to read, including his. From reading his book, I learned what the title actually means: the social world, the one we live in & the world of the spirits. These are fused when the spirits leave their world and come in contact with ours by taking a medium's body, to transmit a message. It's the possession of the body and mind, the fusion we can't see, while the medium sees the natural & supernatural. I recommend his book and his teachings!

I would just like to say that I am taking a class on Magic, Religion, and Witchcraft from Paul Stoller at the present time. He is very insightful when it comes to not only his teachings, but his writings as well. In the *Fusion of the Worlds*, there are things I have never learned about before, even being an Anthropology major. His way of describing certain aspects of spirit possession in detail as well as

giving first hand experience stories give it more of a flair. If you are interested in learning something new, you should definitely open your mind to this!

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