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Paul Stoller. *Gallery Bundu: A Story about an African Past*. University of Chicago Press, 2005. 176. \$15.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-226-77524-1.

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A Fictional Anthropology

Readers will like this book, not just for its simple novel form, but for its significance as literature that explores storytelling as a method of analysis of the material as well as the visual culture of Africa. The literary technique adopted is the combination of narration embellished with flashbacks as the protagonist tells his life story to friends at Gallery Bundu. Indeed, as Philip Graham states on the dustjacket, “David, the narrator, is by turns sensitive and callow, but so disarmingly honest that his spiritual journey through a decade long apprenticeship in African art and culture grips the reader from the first page.”

Before he comes to terms with his innermost dilemma, which includes lack of affection, David Lyons realizes the vacuum created by his father’s untimely death. It drives him to pursue his intellectual calling with such vigor and zeal that his mentor Amadu eventually says “you have behaved well, but your brain boils like water. Lower the flame of the fire, learn to master what is inside. Be like the weaver; focus on the thread that connects the patterns” (p. 96). Perhaps it is in an attempt to cool down the boiling inside of him that David carves a niche for himself, in African studies and art history. “Warp and weft” becomes the vehicle for his success, as he makes a study of Songhai weaving, as well as the metaphor that defines the complex of ideas characterizing his quest for, and acquisition of, fame.

To escape being drafted in the late 1960s, David Lyons and some friends join the Peace Corps and are sent to

Africa. This mission is the platform that would change David’s life forever (both positively and negatively). His chance encounter with Zeinabou and a romantic affair is followed by the sudden news of her pregnancy, which David could not contend with before returning to America to complete his education. An opportunity to find her and the child motivate him to return to Niger when he has the opportunity to do so after graduation. Also, he had had an earlier encounter with Amadu, the famous Songhai weaver, with whom he hoped to apprentice. Therefore, when he secures the scholarship to do fieldwork in Niger, he is excited and anxious.

David is not only shown the secrets that surround the weaving tradition of the Songhai by his mentor Amadu, he is also introduced to the practice of oracular prediction. Moreover, he is taken on as an apprentice by Diop, an art dealer, enabling him to study the art market from within Africa. These experiences contribute to shaping his thoughts about and appreciation of the material as well as the visual culture of Africa. They also create the opportunity for him to venture into and decode the mysteries surrounding Songhai weaving. Amadu cautions David when he becomes his student that “one always pays a price for power” (pp.102). Just as Amadu paid by suffering the loss of his older children, David would have to lose something to gain what he wants, which is success in his intellectual quests.

The price of his success is losing the family he has begun, for though he eventually traces and finds Zein-

abou and his son, he did not take direct responsibility for them. This freedom enables him to pursue the activities that contribute to distinguishing him as a scholar. His experience may be likened to that of the traditional African artist who, selected by the deities and saddled with the responsibility of creativity, loses his ability to be ordinary. Although the artist becomes famous, he forfeits a normal life

Gallery Bundu introduces a hybrid form of methodology for the analysis of African art. Fictionalized, it recalls the anthropological fieldwork experiences of Marcel Griaule among the Dogon of Mali and his encounter with Ogotommeli.[1] Using the technique of flashbacks, the narrator is able to connect the threads of experiences as they occur during his spiritual journey. He uses stories to join the past to the future.

The methodologies that characterized African art studies in the past have been criticized by African scholars for their reliance on chronology or style rather than taking a holistic view of the culture.[2] The result has been only a partial understanding of the art.[3] The addition of storytelling as a method of analysis expands the scope and complements earlier eclectic approaches.

The book stresses the significance of dedicated fieldwork in the study of living cultures. David lives with the people in-situ, observing every aspect of the culture,

and masters the language of his hosts, winning their confidence. Indeed, his knowledge of the language proved critical to minimizing problems that ranged from inconsistencies in the flow of information to a deliberate warping of the original.

This book makes an interesting read and is highly recommended for those interested in African material and visual culture. It is a good introduction to the study of African art and is recommended for anyone interested in the Songhai people.

Notes

[1]. Marcel Griaule, *Masques Dogons* (Paris: Institut d'Ethnologie, 1938).

[2]. Babatunde Lawal, "The Present State of Art Historical Research in Nigeria: Problems and Possibilities," *The Journal of African History* 18, no. 2 (1977): 194; C. O. Adegbeba, "Split Identity and the Attendant Perspective Tangle in Post-Colonial African Art Forms," in D. Layiwola, D., ed., *Understanding Post-Colonial Identities: Ireland, Africa and the Pacific* (Ibadan: Sefer, 2001),180.

[3]. Ndubuisi Ezeoluomba, "The Form, Function and Motifs in Olokun Sculptures and Other Cultic Objects of Southern Nigeria" (PhD diss., University of Wales, Aberystwyth, forthcoming).

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