Speaking in the Name of the Real.
Monsieur Paul Stoller
Speaking in the Name of the Real*

In the last issue of this journal, J.-P. Olivier de Sardan published ‘Jeu de la croyance et “je” ethnologique: exotisme religieux et ethno-ego-centrisme’. The article is, in essence, Olivier de Sardan’s lengthy epistemological reflection on two books, *In Sorcery’s Shadow* which I co-authored with Cheryl Olkes, and J.-M. Gibbal’s *Les génies du fleuve*, both of which are about the religion of peoples living in the Songhay regions of Niger and Mali.

The crux of Olivier de Sardan’s argument is that Stoller and Gibbal commit severe misinterpretations about the nature of religion in Songhay. Using his reading of American sociological phenomenology to bolster his case, Olivier de Sardan writes that Stoller and Gibbal present the Songhay religion as an extraordinary phenomenon, whereas the people themselves—and Olivier de Sardan, I would assume—consider religion as being ordinary and banal. Asserting that the everyday dominates the religious in Songhay and many other places in Africa, Sardan suggests that the books of Stoller and Gibbal promote a pernicious exoticism, one that reinforces some of the more negative and racist stereotypes that Europeans maintain about Africans.

Although Olivier de Sardan asserts his admiration for the scientific and literary qualities of *In Sorcery’s Shadow* and *Les génies du fleuve*, his contention that such works are based upon significant ‘misinterpretations’ or ‘misunderstandings’ reads like a blanket condemnation of the works, a condemnation to which I choose to reply. I am writing this long response for a number of reasons. First, most of the readers of this journal will have read Olivier de Sardan’s critique of *In Sorcery’s Shadow* before they have had the opportunity to read the book itself. I do hope that it will be published in France so that readers can make up their own minds about it. Second, I have great respect for Olivier de Sardan’s work among the Songhay. In both of our cases, we have invested years of field time learning Songhay language and culture. I nonetheless do not feel that he or any other anthropologist should elect himself to ‘speak in the name of the real.’ Third, Olivier de Sardan’s critique affords me the opportunity to describe the intellectual ferment of the current ‘experimental’ moment in North American anthropology, the intellectual context that has nurtured books like *In Sorcery’s Shadow*.

In what follows, I shall deconstruct Olivier de Sardan’s argument. First, I underscore the utter contingency of ethnographic fieldwork and representation, demonstrating how and why it is easy for ethnographers (of the same society) to disagree. Second, I point out Olivier de Sardan’s own misinterpretation (contre-

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*The notion of ‘speaking in the name of the real’ is borrowed from CERTEAU (1983) by Ivan BRADY who used this evocative phrase to title his article (1983).

sens) of American sociological phenomenology, a misinterpretation which makes his argument, in his words, 'ideologically perverse and [...] epistemologically false' (p. 528). Third, I discuss how phenomenological sensitivity has led to the emergence in North America of 'experimental texts', one of those being In Sorcery's Shadow, in which authors avoid 'speaking in the name of the real'.

When Ethnographers Disagree

Olivier de Sardan’s example of a critical commentary of works on a people, the Songhay, about whom he himself has written, is nothing new in the anthropological literature. Given the utter contingency of ethnographic fieldwork, how could it be otherwise!

The most recent disagreement among ethnographers of the same society followed the publication in 1983 of Derek Freeman’s now infamous Margaret Mead and Samoa: The Making and the Unmaking of an Anthropological Myth. Given Mead’s international reknown, Freeman’s scathing criticisms of the great lady sparked a hot public as well as anthropological debate. Mead found Samoans to be sexually liberated; Freeman found them sexually repressed. Mead found Samoans gentle, peaceful people; Freeman found them tough and violent. Mead was a cultural determinist; Freeman is a biological determinist. Mead believed that the anthropologist needed only a utilitarian knowledge of the field language; Freeman believes one should master his or her field language. Freeman wrote that Mead’s methods were scientifically deficient and tainted her findings. Mead, who died six years before the publication of Freeman’s book, of course could not defend herself.


The result of these anthropological disputations was not so much to determine who was right or wrong, but rather a series of penetrating discussions on epistemology. What are the factors that shape what we see, hear, feel, touch and smell in the field? What are the factors that shape what we write about what we see, hear, feel, touch and smell? How and why do we grant ourselves the authority to 'speak in the name of the real' (see Certeau 1983, Brady 1983)?

What causes these wars of words? Why are they so heated? Heider (1988: 75-78) proposes the following criteria, many of which are germane to Olivier de Sardan’s disagreements with Stoller and Gibbal.

1) Someone is wrong. In his commentary, Olivier de Sardan asserts that he is right, which implies that Stoller and Gibbal are wrong. Academic combat was not a principal ingredient in Stoller’s or Gibbal’s academic stew.

2) They (the two ethnographers) are looking at different cultures or subcultures. Gibbal worked among Songhay in the inland delta in Mali, which presents ethnographic circumstances vastly different from those Stoller and Olivier de Sardan encountered in Niger. Stoller has worked extensively on Songhay religion among specific families of sohanci (Songhay magicians), which Olivier de Sardan, as far as I know, has not. Olivier de Sardan has examined the local economy, the impact of slavery on precolonial social structure, and ethnohistory (nineteenth century and colonial), which Stoller has not.
3) They are referring to the same culture but during different historical periods. Olivier de Sardan has more of a historical focus than does Stoller.

4) They are looking differently at the same culture.
   - What are the personalities of the ethnographers?
   
   From his published works Olivier de Sardan seems to be of an intellectualist bent, not tolerant of ambiguity or contradiction; he is a demystifier. Stoller, by contrast, has a more aesthetic bent, relishing the contradictions and ambiguities of lived experience; he has what Keats called ‘negative capacity’.
   - What are the values of the ethnographers?
   
   I cannot speak for Olivier de Sardan, but I am certain that our varying sets of values produce different approaches to fieldwork and to the representation of Songhay.
   - Are the ethnographers of different cultures?
   
   Olivier de Sardan is French and Stoller is American, which means there are fundamentally different cultural underpinnings that condition their ‘gazes’. Olivier de Sardan has been influenced deeply, or so it seems, by the central presence of Marx in the French social sciences. In his work, he has been principally concerned with history and social change. Stoller has been influenced profoundly by sociological phenomenology (Schutz, Berger), the American pragmatism of James and Dewey, and the neo-pragmatism of Richard Rorty. He has been principally concerned with the symbols and meanings of Songhay cultural practices.
   - What are other differing traits of the ethnographers?
   
   It is difficult to know whether differences in the traits of Stoller and Olivier de Sardan has promoted ethnographic disagreements.
   - Do the ethnographers have differing theoretical orientations or research plans?
   
   Olivier de Sardan has conducted extensive ethnohistorical research in Songhay. His theoretical orientation has been that of a Marxist. His methodology has been to conduct archival research and to collect a wide variety of interviews to reconstruct the recent past in Songhay (see Olivier de Sardan 1976, 1982, 1984). Stoller has conducted extensive research on Songhay symbolism, politics, and religion. Stoller’s theoretical orientation is that of a phenomenologist. Although he also conducts interviews, the foundation of his methodology has been to participate as fully as possible in the Songhay activities that he seeks to comprehend.
   - Have the ethnographers changed their views over time?
   
   I cannot speak for Olivier de Sardan, but any reader of In Sorcery’s Shadow will note how Stoller’s views about Songhay and anthropology changed—were influenced by Songhay beliefs and wisdom.
   - Have the ethnographers spent different lengths of time in the field?
   
   Both Stoller and Olivier de Sardan have spent long periods of time in the field.
   - Do the ethnographers have differing linguistic competencies in field languages?
   
   Both Olivier de Sardan and Stoller are fluent speakers of Songhay.
   - Do the ethnographers have different degrees of rapport with their others?
   
   This difference is difficult to determine. Readers of the various works will have to determine our different degrees of rapport. The nature of the rapport, of course, has a major bearing on what kind of information is generated and what kind of text is produced.

I have not compared myself to Olivier de Sardan to claim that my research strategies are superior to his or that I am the expert on matters Songhay. Given the complexities of what constitutes the anthropological gaze, such an assertion is both arrogant and nonsensical. Rather, I have presented these questions and comparisons to underscore the utter contingency of the ethnographic enterprise. Contrary to the intellectualist premise that reason can discover reality, the contin-
gency of ethnographic fieldwork and representation leads to a different conclusion: cultures are made not found.

‘Invention, then, is culture, and it might be helpful to think of all human beings, wherever they may be, as “fieldworkers” of a sort, controlling the culture shock of daily experience through all kinds of imagined and constructed “rules”, traditions and facts. The anthropologist makes his experiences understandable (to himself as well as to his society) by perceiving them and understanding them in terms of his own familiar way of life, his Culture. He invents them as “culture’” (Wagner 1981: 35-36).

Olivier de Sardan’s view that the ‘quotidienneté’ dominates religion in Songhay devolves from his academic training, his experience in the field (the people he talked to, which is an infinitesimally small percentage of the Songhay population in Niger, let alone Mali), his values, his personality, his research methods, and his interpretation of the phenomenological literature. Given the differences in our orientations, cultures, research methods, personalities, academic training, field experiences and inventions, it is hardly surprising that we should reach different conclusions about religion in Songhay. The Songhay I know consider religion reverentially—something which is not dominated by the banalities of the everyday world.

Is there a right and wrong in this matter? Olivier de Sardan seems to think so. For many of us in North America, however, there are no right or wrong representations of the world; there are only texts that capture fleeting moments of what is. These texts, in turn, are further shaped by our personal orientation to the world as well as by the constraints placed on us by our institutions. This process has been labeled the ‘politics of representation’.

Beyond the ‘politics of representation’ lies the utter contingency of language and social relations (see Rorty 1979, 1989) which blurs the putative ‘eagle-eyed’ vision of analytic philosophers and positivist anthropologists. The contingency of language and ethnographic fieldwork limits us to making interpretations which are neither true nor false; rather, they are either convincing or unconvincing.

Given the flux of sociocultural life ‘speaking in the name of the real’, which is not all that uncommon for academics, becomes an exercise in intellectual arrogance. In the next section, I will demonstrate that Olivier de Sardan’s misinterpretation of the phenomenological literature makes his view of religion in Songhay (as well as in other parts of Africa) unconvincing.

Phenomenology, American-Style

The major premise of Olivier de Sardan’s critique is that ordinary life dominates the religious in Songhay as well as in many other parts of Africa. He suggests further that authors of books like In Sorcery’s Shadow which, in his words, dramatize the religious, misinterpret the (real) nature of religious life in Songhay (Africa), which is banal. This argument is based largely upon Olivier de Sardan’s reading of American sociological phenomenologists, a reading which, I shall demonstrate, is itself fundamentally flawed.

American and European phenomenology emerge from the same source: Husserl. In his transcendental phenomenology, Husserl attempted to resolve, like so many

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others before him, the European crisis in philosophy, which emanated from the chasm that divided self and other, subjective and objective, idealist and realist, and so on. Husserl's solution was the *epoche*, a methodological device that would mystically fuse self and other, subjective and objective, idealist and realist.

'The strategy for beginning, in Husserl's case, was one which called for the elaboration of a step-by-step procedure through which one viewed things differently. His model was one of analogy to various sciences, often analytic in style; thus he built a methodology of steps: *epoche*, the psychological reduction, the phenomenological reduction, the eidetic reduction and the transcendental reduction. At the end of this labyrinth of technique what was called for was a phenomenological attitude, a perspective from which things are to be viewed... ' (Ihde 1976: 19).

In the end, the *epoche* was an effort to return 'to the things themselves' (see Husserl 1960: 12), to let things speak, to let them show themselves. In short, Husserl's version of phenomenology constituted a philosophy of experience, a kind of radical empiricism.

Like Husserl, but unlike Heidegger, who took the radical *epoche* as given, Schutz extended phenomenology to the social arena. Like Husserl, Schutz concerned himself with human intentionality. How do we make decisions in the social arena? Schutz (1962, 1967) suggested that our social decisions devolve from our biographically determined situations. Again, like Husserl, Schutz focused his attentions on what he called the 'natural attitude', which is tantamount to everyday life. But he also wrote about a variety of other 'attitudes' that constitute the social matrix: dreams, fantasy, and the scientific attitude, the latter of which Olivier de Sardan fails to mention in his breathless survey of sociological phenomenology. In his writing on 'multiple realities', Schutz demonstrated how these various 'attitudes' interpenetrate as experience in the flux of social life.

Schutz's work on social reality set the stage for a minority movement in American sociology. The principle players in this movement are not only Berger and Luckmann, authors of the *Social Construction of Reality*, which Olivier de Sardan cites, but also sociologists like Harold Garfinkle (1967) and Erving Goffman (1959, 1971, 1974, 1981), scholars who pondered the minutia of ordinary life in search of 'rules'. Goffman's work on the ritualization of everyday life is particularly relevant in light of Olivier de Sardan's critique. Goffman began his scholarly quest in search of 'rules' that would explain the complex dynamics of social interaction. What is 'face'? What is saving face? What is losing face? What communicative mechanisms do we use to maintain face? In his publications Goffman proposed a number of 'rules' to account for 'face work' and other interactive mechanisms—all part of the 'natural attitude'. This work led Goffman (1981) to the analysis of natural conversation, which, in turn, led him to the conclusion that the tangled complexity of conversation made the concept of 'rules' absurd.

From his reading of a small portion of this literature, Olivier de Sardan concludes that the everyday dominates the religious in Songhay and elsewhere. From a phenomenological vantage, Olivier de Sardan's contention is astonishing. Perhaps his baffling interpretation stems from Schutz, who labeled everyday life the 'paramount reality'. One could read 'paramount' to mean 'dominant', though I don't think this was Schutz's intention. The 'paramount' reality, for Schutz, is not monolithic; it is continuously interrupted, amended, and turned on its head. Everyday life is, in a word, chaotic; its bubble is frequently ruptured. Other realities are 'finite provinces of meaning' in Schutz's words (1962). When ordinary reality is ruptured, the individual enters finite provinces of meaning: day dreams, dusk dreams, nightdreams, science, fantasy, illness, euphoria. These ruptures, then, take us 'beyond the world'—the ordinary world.
Olivier de Sardan cites Berger and Luckmann (1967) in presenting his belief on the religious. But Peter Berger, the most prominent phenomenologist of religion in North America, does not share Olivier de Sardan’s view. Berger, in fact, holds that ordinary reality does not dominate religion, which for him is the experience of the supernatural and the sacred.

The experience of the supernatural is one specific “other reality” [. . .] From the standpoint of ordinary reality, of course, it, too, has the quality of a finite province of meaning from which one “returns to reality”—returns, that is, to the world of ordinary, everyday life. A crucial aspect of the supernatural, as against other finite provinces of meaning, is its radical quality. The reality of this experience is radically, overwhelmingly other. What is encountered is a complete world set over and against the world of mundane experience. What is more, when seen in the perspective of this other world, the world of ordinary experience is now seen as a sort of antechamber. The status of enclave, or finite province of meaning, is thus radically transposed. The supernatural is now no longer an enclave within the ordinary world; rather, the supernatural looms over, “haunts”, even envelops the ordinary world. There now emerges the conviction that the other reality opened up by the experience is the true realissimum, is ultimate reality, by comparison with which ordinary reality pales into insignificance (Berger 1979: 41-42).

Although Olivier de Sardan’s view of ordinary life dominating religious experience in Songhay in particular and in Africa in general may be consistent with a Marxist view of the sacred, it is categorically inconsistent with a phenomenological view of religion. As a result, Olivier de Sardan’s ‘phenomenological’ argument is flawed at its foundation. Phenomenologists don’t think religious experience can be collapsed into the profane and banal in Africa or anywhere else.

From its beginnings, phenomenology, German, French, sociological, has been about the ‘return to things themselves’, a return to vivid descriptions of the world. Phenomenology, in short, provides the foundation for a radically empirical approach to anthropology, which, in the words of Jackson (1988: 391),

‘places thought, feeling, and activity on a par, which includes the seen and heard as well as the unseen and sensed, which encompasses the field of crisis as well as convention, antistructure as well as structure, the biographical as well as the sociological, the domain of the lived body as well as the domain of words and ideas’.

The aesthetic dimensions of In Sorcery’s Shadow and Les génies du fleuve place these works squarely in the phenomenological mainstream tradition that strives to represent sensually and fully the indeterminacies of the multiple realities of social worlds.

Emics, Etics and Representation

In his epistemological critique, Olivier de Sardan refers several times to the notions of ‘etics’, ‘emics’, and ‘representation’. He also refers to ‘rules’ that one follows if he or she is writing a ‘scientific’ ethnography (‘livre érudit’). These are, I would assume, what Mary Louise Pratt (1982) has called ‘conventions of representation’. The position Olivier de Sardan assumes here as well as in his published work puts him squarely in the intellectualist tradition, which I will discuss below.

First let us focus on the debate over etics and emics, which has been dormant in North American anthropology for fifteen years. The distinction of etics from
emics, first employed by the linguist Kenneth Pike, extended the ‘etics’ of phonetics and the ‘emics’ of phonemics to ethnolinguistic analysis. Pike’s contribution was not wholly original, for the distinction devolves, as any apprentice philosopher knows, from Kantian metaphysics. Marvin Harris, whom Olivier de Sardan cites, focused upon the emic/etic grids to underscore a cultural materialist view of society, in which the analyst uses emics (what they know) to refine etics (what we know or think we know). Local knowledge (emics), then becomes data which we can use to refine theory (etics). By considering etics, to put the matter more perversely, we protect ourselves from buying into the ‘native’s’ system of knowledge; we maintain our hallowed objectivity which enables us to discover real culture and real cultural universals.

The naive separation of emics and etics became the cornerstone of scientific anthropology in North America; it also became the foil that critical anthropologists used to probe the canons of anthropological representation. The assumption on which the emic/etic distinction rests is a pernicious one: namely, that we take their explanations of what they know and use our theories to uncover the real meanings of their experience. Many scholars have called this tendency academic arrogance; others have termed it academic imperialism (see Said 1979, 1984; Marcus & Fischer 1985; Clifford 1988). Whatever one calls it, this inductive practice has several significant epistemological ramifications:

- It underscores the Enlightenment view that although there are many realities in the world, there is one underlying reality that explains (almost) everything—the key to the mysteries of the universe. In his article, Olivier de Sardan suggests that his interpretation is closer to Songhay reality than is Stoller’s or Gibbal’s.
- It presupposes that others are powerless to write or publish counter-hegemonic texts which challenge what we know; it reinforces a kind of textualization that highlights logico-inductive relationships in a prose drained of local colors, sights, sounds, tastes—leaving a residue of ‘rules’, ‘principles’, and ‘structures’. These are the conventions to which Olivier de Sardan obliquely refers, and much of his published work follows these rules religiously.
- It creates ‘conventions of representation’, which totalize the other (the Songhay, the Nuer, the Trobrianders) and conceal the ethnographer (as well as her/his motivations, aspirations, strengths and weaknesses). In their texts, Stoller and Gibbal express quite openly their motivations; they are exposed. In Olivier de Sardan’s published work, the Songhay are totalized, as they are in his critique, but his motivations are concealed.

In fact, much of Olivier de Sardan’s writing, here and elsewhere, is a good example of what Marcus and Cushman (1982) call ‘ethnographic realism’, a realism which devolves from Malinowski, British social anthropology and colonial power relations. It is a representation that conceals others under thick blankets of bland prose rendered all the more turgid by jargon.3

A growing group of North American anthropologists is worried epistemologically speaking, about what our writing communicates about power relations (dominance) in what Clifford (1988) calls a ‘heteroglossic’ world. North American anthropologists are increasingly anxious about the politico-cultural implications of the discourse we utilize to represent others.4

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4. On orientalist discourse, see Said (1979), and on the French in Africa, see Miller 1985.
This sense of epistemological inquietude has produced many critical essays (see Clifford 1988; Marcus & Fischer 1985), but also a series of 'experimental ethnographies', the discourses of which treat the politics of representation. In these works informants become real people with personalities, strengths, weaknesses, confidences and fears. In these works the ethnographer does not speak for the people (Sperber 1985); rather, they engage in dialogues with their others. In some cases, notably Crapanzano's *Waiting*, the other's discourse is decidedly monologic. It is from this intellectual and ethnographic context that spring books like Dan Rose's *Black American Streetlife* (1987) and *In Sorcery's Shadow*.

The underlying assumption of the latest 'experiments', is that to ignore, intellectually or textually, the impact of the ethnographer on her or his 'informants' is to practice ethnographic 'bad faith'. This ethic is spelled out eloquently in Rosaldo's *Culture and Truth* (1989), which calls for new ways of reading and writing ethnography—more narrative, more inclusion of other voices, other themes, other systems of 'worldmaking' (Goodman 1978).

Considering the depth of the literature on the issue of ethnographic representation, which has at least a ten-year history in North America, Olivier de Sardan's reading of *In Sorcery's Shadow* is at best only partially informed.

* And so we come to another instance in which ethnographers disagree. Olivier de Sardan writes that *In Sorcery Shadow* is a 'documentary novel', a category which casts doubt on the veracity of its contents. Stoller says that his work is a memoir, although reviewers state that it is a new kind of ethnography. Olivier de Sardan contends that Stoller—and Gibbii—commit a grave misinterpretation by rendering exotic (dramatic) Songhay religious practices. One reviewer of the book, however, points out that Stoller describes only five incidents of sorcery in the entire book. Although these recounted incidents were dramatic, the reviewer states, its strength is that it gives readers a feel for Songhay and the people—good, bad, or indifferent—who live there. Stoller contends that Songhay religious practices—sorcery and possession are dramatic and should be described that way. He also argues that Olivier de Sardan gravely misinterprets the literature of American sociological phenomenology, a misreading that leads him to assert that the everyday dominates the religious in Songhay and elsewhere. Stoller points out that the very American phenomenologists cited by Olivier de Sardan to make his point disagree with the latter's interpretation. Peter Berger, for example, writes that the experience of the sacred, the ultimate reality, reduces ordinary reality to 'insignificance' (Berger 1979: 41-42). Olivier de Sardan considers the problems of translating emics into etics as it relates to Stoller's admittedly subjective approach to fieldwork in Songhay. Stoller counters that Olivier de Sardan is out of step, for the debate over emics and etics was long ago put to bed. The current intellectual climate is one in which North American scholars focus on the aesthetic, epistemological and political implications of their discourse, a climate which has fostered books like *In Sorcery's Shadow*.

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7. I suggest Olivier de Sardan consult I. Watt's authoritative essay (1967) so that he might better distinguish novels from memoirs.
Our differences of interpretation stem from different philosophical approaches to ethnographic fieldwork and ethnographic writing. Toward the end of his article Olivier de Sardan intimates that wily Songhay magicians, who are pragmatic about their reputations, pulled the wool over my eyes; they told me what I wanted to hear. In his last paragraph he writes of Africans who are now used to manipulating their credulous anthropologists (Stoller and Gibbal, I suppose) as they conduct their 'epic expeditions of the third kind' I will not respond to Olivier de Sardan's impression that my experiences among the Songhay amount to nothing more than a series of fantasies on an extraterrestrial journey. But I do ask Olivier de Sardan to acknowledge his own fantasies: namely that by following intellectualist 'rules' he can discover the real Songhay culture, that by following intellectualist conventions, he can 'speak in the name of the real'.

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SPEAKING IN THE NAME OF THE REAL

WATT, I.  

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En réponse à J.-P. Olivier de Sardan, J.-M. Gibbal nous prie d’insérer la citation suivante :  
« Les terres, les villes sont inspirantes. C’est de nous seuls que viennent leur banalité »1.  