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Remarks on Current Anthropology
In Africa:

A Critique of Functionalist Ahistoricism

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Introduction

Some years ago, Galtung coined the term "scientific colonialism" to characterize current conditions of the scientific enterprise of sociological research. It defined a condition under which the documented and literally organized sources of information about an area are reposited largely in the archives, libraries, and also academic chairs outside the area; in the metropolitan centres of the old colonial powers (I). What is probably not easily recognized, are the directions and extent to which this relationship has been allowed to drift into the present period in a variety of ways. The extended lease on life currently held by western social institutions on the non-western world was a condition borne out of the colonial connection between the colonial and the colonized. It permeated and dominated all aspects of human activity. In an essential sense, political independence in Afro-Asia during the last few decades has not altered the basic character of these relations. Neo-colonialism, or the lingering of unequal economic, political, and cultural relations, established between the colonial powers and the colonized in the era of colonialism still controls and guides contemporary relations.

In academic and scholarly endeavours, it is not only the institutional framework of African Studies which is be-laboured by neo-colonial ponstraints. Perhaps more importantly, the content of our disciplined efforts remain the crucial desiderata, and it is more difficult to usefully criticize such material, than the institutional structures in which they are encrusted.

Anthropology and Dialectics

Anthropology, or the scientific study of culture and man as a product of culture, suggests fundamentally a dialectical relationship between man and the culture he creates on the one hand, and on the other, the culture which makes him. Continuity in this process is maintained historically through the reproduction of humankind and the ceaseless production of culture. For these reasons, the proper enterprise of anthropological understanding requires from the anthropologist essentially a historically structured mind and approach, which continuously percieves the present cultural conjuncture as an extension of the past; born out of previous conditions but with unique contemporary features.

Both the object and the subject, that is, the culture (or its human product) and the anthropologist are bound by the twists and turns of historical conditioning. The anthropologist looks at the object of his enquiry through his own historical and philosophical inclinations, his own weltanschauung. But similarly, the object of study never stands still. His existance is propelled and shaped by the cultural dynamics of change of his society. These historical conditions which separately encapsulate the subject and object do not negate fruitful enquiry. However, they impose limitations which should be appreciated if they are to be meaningfully transcended in the effort of winning anthropological cognitive gold. There is also a level on which the realities of both the subject and the object interpenetrate, a dynamic dependant on the explicit and implicit responses and reaction of one to the other. How far have the above stated views been borne out by the experience of Anthropology in Africa?

Before the beginning of the 20th century, the study of African society and culture was an undisciplined effort, mainly the activity of western travellers, adventurers, and fortune—seekers who often made wild and distorted remarks about their observations. Otherwise, too often, they imputed meanings which were substantially incorrect.

All this reinforced and added fuel to western prejudices and hearsay about the savage and barbaric cultures of the dark continent. In an era, when Africa was turned "into a warren for the commercial hunting of blackskins" (2), so long as African were savages, their enslavement could only do them good. Thus the denigratory observations and misconceived statements of judgement served as useful rationalization for Euro-African relations. The emergence of imperialism in the late 19th century and the colonial arrangement which was consequently unravelled in Africa imposed new conditions. The needs of colonial administration were primarily pacification and the creation of conditions under which the extraction of raw materials and the colonial trade could be advanced. This in turn demanded a more systematized and scientifically grounded knowledge of the colonized people. Functionalism and cultural relativism replaced the Eurocentric evolutionism of the preceding period; the Victorian era. Largely dominated by Spencerian views, unilinear evolutionism had tended to regard the westerner and his culture as the ultimate in sublimity and superior achievement of mankind. The backward cultures of the non-western world were understood as cultural systems on rungs below the west, but which finally wound up as varieties of western culture. Although functionalism emerged as a reaction to crude evolutionism, its intellectual heritage was rooted in the theories of

Durkheim. The gist of the Durkheimian position was that in the explanation of social phenomena, we must seek separately, the efficient cause which produces it, and the precise function it serves. For Durkheim, the word "function" was preferable to "end", "purpose", or "object" because in his view, social phenomenon do not generally exist for the patent results they produce. The social scientist must find out whether there is a correspondence between the fact under consideration and the general needs of the social organism—and also in what order this correspondence consists; while avoiding the question as to whether it has been intentional or not. Engels and Marx on the other hand, while conceding the basic historist foundation of evolutionism, developed a view which took cognisance of unevenness in evolutionary social transformation. Transitional social formations are the realities of history.

Societies did not always progress, sometimes they retrogressed.

Thus while certain social changes were slow others accelerated under the impact of differing historical conditions. In this way, Marxism threw out unilinear evolutionism from a distinctly different angle as Durkheim and the subsequent functionalists, although admittedly the evolutionist Spencer in his later years advanced modifications to his original views which vaguely echoed the Marxian law of uneven development.

Early this century, Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski emerged as the pioneers of functionalist anthropological methodology. With functionalism, African cultures ceased to be simply primitive. The concept of primitive was expunged of its perjorative notions. Africans were primitive, but more importantly they were different. African cultures became simply varieties of a general human culture with great possibilities for cross-cultural and comparative analysis on a global scale

In this sense, functionalism brought African cultures out of the cold; out of the spell of pervasive inferiority which the pre-imperialist western travellers and adventurers had cast on them. Functionalist anthropology presented us with a world in which a wide variety of cultures dotted the whole planet; some overlapping, acculturating, but by and large these cultural systems were conceived as discrete. disparate, and culturally holistic units, each with its own internally harmonized order. Cultural traits and features were conceived as relevant or rather functional parts of a totalized and integrated system. They were thus meaningfully only in the context of a given or specific cultural system. This approach served well the political and social purposes of the western world in the non-western societies that were largely under colonial tutelage. Anthropological research was placed at the service of colonial administration. Better knowledge of the colonised societies and cultures naturally made the task of control and administration more effective. These issues have been widely discussed in the 1960s and 70s. Anthropologists produced work which could find place in the general efforts of colonial administration and control.

In the introduction to their African Political Systems, (1940) Fortes and Evans-Pritchard made it clear that they regarded their study as essential reading for the administrators. In this respect perhaps few passages in the annals of anthropology are as direct, unequivocal, and unapologetic as Malinowski's contentions made in 1927.

The practical value of such a theory (functionalism) is that it teaches us the relative importance of various customs, how they dovetail into each other and how they have to be handled by missionaries, colonial authorities, and those who economically have to exploit savage trade and savage labour

underlined mine.

Functionalist approaches tended to emphasise harmony at the expense of conflict, evolution at the expense of revolution. Change was visualized as a piecemeal phenomenon. It defended a view of man and culture, as stable, constant, and basically conservative structures. The significance of conflict was marginalised and reduced to tension-inducing stimuli within a tension-management system. This fundamental bias towards harmony and integration, the dogged search for the cohesive basis of conflict was in some cases carried to catastrophic fault. In his <u>Custom and Conflict in Africa</u>, Max Gluckman took functionalist methodology to patent absurdity, and explained the <u>apartheid</u> system of South Africa, as a harmonized and functionally integrated system. For him the lesson of <u>Apartheid</u> was that "conflicts in one set of relationships lead to the establishment of cohesion in a wider set of relationships". (4)

Functionalism and History

In its quest for a totalized picture of cultural phenomenon, functionalism summarizes the general character of cultures in given moments of time without consideration for the historical derivations of the cultural traits which feature in the particular cultural system.

The dynamic of the culture is arrested, and a false qualify of timelessness is invested to cultural phenomena which are in perpetual flux. Culture
is thus reified, and the student is left to guess the historical differentials
between the traits in a given culture. In other words, the functionalist
method denies relevant historical measuring rods for the proper understanding
of socio-cultural phenomena. Practically, it describes the past as if its
the present and vice versa. Cultural traits observed for example 50 years
ago, and which indeed may be only a hundred years old then, are presented
as virtually timeless phenomena. Nothing has changed since time immemorial.

In his preface to The Social Organization of the Lowiili. Goody lays bare aspects of this issue. While largely subscribing then to the ideas of fortes and Evans-Pritchard, he admits that:

African Political Systems (1940), suffers from the ethnographer's classic dilemma. Although carried out in the colonial period, the studies contained in this volume deal not with the contemporary situation (of which little or no mention is made) but with an unspecified period in the past. For want of other evidence, the reader is left to guess that the account refers to the immediate precolonial period – though the situations described (or reconstructed) are often perceived as stretching back into the knowable past (5)

Elsewhere attention has been drawn to this dilemma by the present author. The full implication of the difficulty is that, what is often presented as a totalized ethnological or anthropological description of the social, political, or cultural system of a given ethnicity or nationality, in fact is a reconstructed assemblage, built out of aspects of a given culture, with varying ages, and histories, juxtaposed to represent a coherent whole according to the ethnographer's conceptualization. Such reconstruction is then invariably projected to the period immediately predating colonialism. While actually bearing no faithful representation of reality, such anthropological reconstructions, worse still have tended to ignore cultural transformations since the institution. of colonialism.

The arguement here is that, Rattray's Ashantis, Evans-Pritchards'

Nuers, and Schapera's Tswanas are simply physically dead and gone, their progeny bear naturally the indelible marks of their agelong culturalhistory but, have also changed remarkably since they were first observed by anthropologists or ethnologists. It may be more useful to anthropologically analyse how they have changed under contemporary capitalism if more understanding and control over the forces of change are to be gained by human society in its entirety.

Admittedly, since African Political Systems, the first text to establish in any systematic way the comparative study of the political organization of traditional African societies, the pre-occupations and focus of attention of most Anglo-Saxon anthropologists on Africa. has shifted from descriptions, analyses, and classification of those institutional structures which served the political needs of society; above all, the need to maintain order and social control within a territorial framework, onto those processes of individual and group interaction which can be more or less directly identified as essentially political. Either because they are concerned with the dispensation of power, or more especially because they are practically involved in the making or implementation of matters and decisions concerning public affairs. Eloquent examples of this new slant can be found in M.G. Smith's studies of the Hausa, Gulliver's account of how disputes are resolved by Arusha Masai, Colson on the Plateau Tonga, the Kriges on the Lobedu. Ruel's account of the Bayang, veers intellectually in a similar direction, while Plotnikov, Tuden, Swartz, Turner and Cohen made the concern with political processes the rallying point for arguing the need for modified functionalist approaches. The collection put together by Radcliffe-Brown and Forde as African Systems of Kinship and Marriage (1950) is similarly inspired.

Evans Prichard appear to be more epiphenomenal than central. Key props in the theoretical edifice of the Fortes and Evans-Prichard construction remain intact. Thus while the concept of segmentary lineage and kinship structures has had use in our understanding of African societies, its validity in the analysis of so-called acephalous societies has often been stretched to the point of regarding it as phenomenologically abiquitous. Such studies have generally discarded the notion of a single political community and have tended instead to examine these contingently autonomous or segmentally corporate groupings as a system of groups conjoined to each other in crucially defined modes. The segmentary system, so conceived is defined by its reciprocated relationship of complementary opposition, evidenced in socio-political action by conflict of competition. Classical expressions of these notions can be found in the studies of, David Easton, Aidan Southall, the Bohannans, John Middleton, David Tait, and Lucy Mair.

Neither acephalous systems nor the state systems are shown to derive their basis firmly in history, such that their existance in time is specifically explained, with respect to their constituent institutions.

French efforts at the anthropological understanding of Africa have been generally more historically grounded than the Anglo-Saxon endeavours. The giant of recent french anthropology, remains Levi-Strauss. Although a non-Africanist in an essential sense, his contributions have been farreaching. In The Elementary Structures of Kinship, he argued against the functionalist anthropologists who refuse to examine kinship as a general system. They would only concentrate on the functions of particular institutions and beliefs in particular societies. In opposition to this, Levi-Strauss argued that kinship does not have the appearance, of a system. Nor is it a simple matter of all societies having certain key rules. These rules always entail some proscriptions within the clan or lineage, and stipulations for extra-group relations. Levi-Strauss suggests instead the analogy between kinship and linguistics. They are made up of the same elements, systems of difference, signs, relations of exchange. Kinship is conceived as a system of communication guaranteeing the possibility of reciprocity and therefore interaction between self and others. But most importantly, these relations are fashioned and determined by historical conditioning.

Other French anthropologists and social scientists take the role of the historical crucible further. They include Claude Meillassoux, Pierre—Phillipe Rey, Jean Copans, Catherine Coquery—Vidrovitch, Emmanuel Terray, 'Jean Suret—Canale, and Maurice Godelier. They are broady Marxian inspired, and have been more intellectually adventurous than their Anglo—Saxon counterparts.

In a conversation with Meyer Fortes, which appeared in the <u>PULA</u>,

Fortes in response to a question on the contribution of the new French

school of anthropology to the study of human societies in general and

Africa specifically, argued that, usefully, what the French Marxists have

done is rephrasing the available facts. (7)

While admittedly, Marxism in the social sciences today, enjoys a fashionability and trendiness in some academic circles which sometimes sporecrs vulgarization and analytical bluntness in the name of neo-marxism and new-leftism, all the same, Marxism provides methodologically a keener historical benchmark for anthropological studies than non-marxist analytical tools.

As the Dutch anthropologists, Van Binsbergen and Geschiere, intellectual disciples of the French Marxist school of anthropology admit;

the historical perspective built into Marxism would mean that one cannot claim to understand processes of production and reproduction within a local social formation, without tracing the past transformations of these processes. Marxist-inspired fieldwork implies the collection of historical data (8)

Earlier on in this paper, it was indicated that both the anthropologist and the culture he or she studies, or its human product are bound by the realities of historical conditioning. Obviously, the anthropologist scrutinizes the object through his own philosophical speciacles. This undoubtedly affects the perception of the material on hand. Van Binsbergen

and Geschiere also pose this question with refreshing candidness

"Any North Atlantic anthropologist doing fieldwork in Africa is connected with the North Atlantic, White, i.e. capitalist presence in that continent. His practical situation is therefore in contradiction with his ideology and only under very favourable conditions does it seem possible to overcome this contradiction ... Is the appropriate practice for a North Atlantic Marxist anthropologist to be found in e.g. Africa, or rather in the North Atlantic area itself (9)

Between them the Gallic and Anglo-Saxon anthropologists have from the start dominated the scene and continue to do so. This is not surprising in view of their long colonial connection. Other European anthropological and ethnological sources have largely fallen in line with either one of these two principal streams, or fallen somewhere between,or on the sides.

Anthropology in Africa, as a homegrown product has so far fared badly. Firstly, particularly in recent years, there has been an exaggerated and essentially misplaced tendency to identify Anthropology with colonialism. It is popularly misconceived that anthropological studies assert African backwardness, and certainly some of the older themes and titles have not helped. Witness:

- (a) Sex and Repression in Savage Society (Bronislaw Malinowski)
- (b) Witchcraft and Sorcery Among the Azande (E.E. Evans-Pritchard)

The result has been that the weaknesses of the experience of the discipline in Africa has became the tool of its contemporary denial of scientific respectability.

Secondly, and more importantly, African anthropologists or social scientists in general, have not as yet felt strong and independent enough to coart their own intellectual and scholastic routes, taking initiatives in the study of African culture. The nearest African social sciences have

come to defining issues and methodological conceptions on the basis of local conditions, experience and inspirational derivation as a distinct and distinguishable school of thought probably occured in the University of Dar es Salaam in the late 1960s and early 1970s. But even here it is arguable how much of this effort was indigenous and how much was a manifestation of purely western responses to local stimuli. African attempts at ethnological writing was probably most original in the early years of the colonial interlude, when such writing was in an essential sense a direct reaction and response to the colonial phenomenon. Such contributions were sometimes scientifically brittle albeit original. Mention here can be made of E.W. Blyden's African Life and Customs (1908), or better still J.M. Sarbah's Fanti Customary Laws. (1897). J.E. Casely-Hayford's Gold Coast Native Institutions (1911), or still nearer our times Mzee Jomo Kenyatta's Facing Mount Kenya, (1961) are also good examples.

If anthropology is to become truly a science <u>sans rivage</u>, an approach which both understands and practically aids the processes of social transformation, then it must come to terms with history. For, like all social sciences, it is also a historical method. As such, anthropological realities are only brought into sharp and precise focus when placed in a historical matrix. It is in this sense that the model of state and stateless societies which was brought into the African anthropological mainstream in 1940 by fortes and Evans-Pritchard, falls very short of offering a scientific explanation of African cultures. In English-speaking Africa in particular, this view has dominated the scene to the present. Suggesting "tribes without rulers", its fundamental ahistoricism purges in consequence the conceptual decisiveness of the term tribe. Ethnicities which have long ceased to be tribes in a stricter sense of the word, remain forever tribes.

They are frozen and fossilized in time. Groups which may more meaningfully be understood as nationalities remain trapped by the inconsistent application of the tribe concept, class categories are implicitly denied.

The Tribe, Myth and Reality

Classically, tribal organization is a specific form of ethnic grouping restricted to a definate type of social formation and political economy. Emerging out of the oldest form of organization, the primeval horde, it inherited a social from determined largely by natural relations. Tribal social structure was founded on kinship. Originally regulated through the mother. Women played historically a crucial role in the early development of agriculture. In the mythology and rituals of numerous precapitalist agricultural peoples, religious notions and practices attribute fairly central roles to fertility symbols mainly associated with the earth. The development of agriculture and the raising of domestic animals stimulated and induced the important divisions of labour between pastoral and agricultural peoples, depending largely on the ecological conditions in which specific groups are situated. Generally the use of metals was unknown although pottery—making, weaving, and other simple crafts and handicrafts may be developed. Tribal society was quintessentially based on common ownership operated largely through the cooperative organization of labour. A tribe consisted usually in a number of exogamous clans. Among particularly sedentary agriculturalists, often territorial divisions and the occupation of land was patterned along the structural divisions of the tribe into clans. Irihal solidarity was maintained through collective cultural institutions and consanguinity. Tribal organization was generally consensual but was permeated by a gerontocratic ethos. There was little or no socio-economic differentiation.

By and large, in contemporary Africa, few ethnic groups exhibit these features in any authentic form. In many cases, in the last hundred years, capitalism and the cash nexus has penetrated and irretrievably altered the structure of pre-capitalist Africa. Today it makes little sense to persist in the use of the tribe concept. It has become more useful to describe them as nationalities.

One of the striking features of the anthropological study of Africa is that, only relatively few realize, and do not loose sight of the fundamental unity of African culture. Africa displays the widest diversity in detail per sq. km as anywhere on the globe. But ethno-historically and linguistically, cultural promixity and affinity is close over wide distances on the continent. A Sotho from Lesotho or South Africa has little difficulty understanding Lozi in Zambia, Pedi or Iswana in both South Africa and Botswana. From Swaziland through Natal across the Cape into Matabeleland in Zimbabwe, natives have practically the same tongue, Nguni. A Jur from the Bahr el Ghazal or Anuak from the Sobat river area in the Sudan and Ethiopia, speak dialects of the same language as Luo in Kenya, Langi, Alur, Chopadhola in Lognota, and Acholi in the Southern Sudan. Instead of giving due recognition and attention to the cultural unities, anthropologists have been more inclined to magnify differences and overemphasise diversity. The Akan are preferably studied as Akwapim, Akim, Fanti, Ashanti etc. The Dinka are split into munitiae, Dinka Bor, Dinka Atwot, Dinka Abyei, etc. Anthropologist jostle, in response to their territorium drang, carving out little areas of the African cultural tapestry, before the niches become scarce. Anthropology as a search for the exotic in the Western mind is still fairly prominent. The old idea of Africa, land of explorers and discoverers, vaguely persists almost as tantalising mostalgia. For such minds, ideally, each valley in Africa

should have a different species and culture. The unity of African culture is denied by simply being ignored. When indeed without the understanding of its wholeness, the "forgotten valley tribe" cannot be appreciated. Anthropologists have been known to regard ethnic groups in Africa as their intellectual domain; people about whom they scientifically have the last word. And such academic authority is jealously goarded. Such authority is vested with such unassailable finality that in the end "the natives know nothing about themselves." In 1983, a young British anthropologist working in the Terakeka district of the Sudan, where he was studying the Mondari, the most northernly sub-group of the Bari-speaking people, remarked to the present author that he was often worried that his informants regurgitated to him Buxton, whose work in some form has been passed around in the area. (10)

This is where anthropology in Africa has arrived under neo-colonialism.

The non-westerner has finally been corraled into seeing himself as the westerner sees him. Where do the answers lie?

Concluding Remarks

While native anthropologists are clearly not necessarily the answer, since many simply reproduce faithfully what they have been taught, it is less precarious to suggest that anthropology must go native. The native must understand himself anthropologically but in his own conceptual order, or thought modalities while subjecting his procedures to scientific (11) criteria. But perhaps even more importantly, anthropology will have to rehabilitate history, for cultures do not only exist in space but also in time further, anthropology needs to thoroughly universalize its scope and methods.

It needs to be able to turn more consistently the methodological tools it uses to understand non-western cultures on to western cultures with equal vigour and enthusiasm. That way it will more effectively universalize its methods, instead of operating largely, as a window on the non-western world. (12)

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