

The 'Anthropologies of the South' Debate: African Anthropology and the practice of Anthropology

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Introduction

Prah (1997) avoids the bait, proffered by Gledhill, to indicate how anthropology in 'the South' might distinguish itself from anthropology in 'the North'. It was a wise move, knowing what awaits anything that looks, let alone pretends to be, different. His circumspection is less appropriate, however, with regard to the substantive question: do the reflections of anthropologists in 'the South' contribute to the progress of the discipline as a whole, and to the understanding of human culture? Prah almost dismisses the matter by ending his response with an appeal to reflexivity – an axiom of anthropologists everywhere! I do not disagree with Prah's sentiment, but reflexivity is the issue that anthropologists in the 'South' are questioning, albeit in convoluted and often confusing ways. Their questions can be paraphrased as, where is reflexivity taking the discipline in the context of current challenges facing the discipline?, and why and how it will continue to serve the discipline? Uribe (1997:256) indicated these concerns in his suggestion of the need for an "ethnographic undertaking on the actual practice of anthropology".¹

These concerns are not novel, but 'southern' anthropologists' emphasis of them, as opposed to theoretical interests emanating from the metropolitan centres of the discipline, has inspired the notion of 'anthropologies of the south'. Theirs is a particular strategy to address the contemporary, global re-organisation of scholarship. I refer here to the growth of inter-disciplinary research and the merging of academic disciplines (Mudimbe and Jewsiewicki, 1996). Their strategy is confusing, nonetheless, for it seems that they are trying to create different forms of the discipline, in order to keep their identity as anthropologists. Furthermore, their arguments about the future of anthropology seem to refer to more to the mid-century crisis of the discipline, than to the current debate about the reorganisation of scholarship.

Yet it seems to me that anthropologists in the 'South' are actually re-appraising the practice of the discipline in recognition of its contribution to the cause of integrating scholarship. A difficult aspect of this exercise is their

¹ My arguments here are derived from the Introduction I have written for an edited book- to-be which focuses on the practice of anthropology, and the idea of an African Anthropology.

implicit emphasis of the capacity of the discipline to transgress disciplinary boundaries. This emphasis suggests that the discipline has always positioned itself betwixt and between its patrons, 'subjects' and other sciences. Accordingly, anthropologists in the 'South' are drawn into trying to re-define what anthropology was, and is, and, in the process, they revisit old debates. A confounding factor is the temptation to describe the form of the discipline as if this was synonymous with its practice. It is difficult to describe the discipline in this way when a key issue is the tension between form and practice, and when investigations suggest that, perhaps, only now is the discipline doing justice to its original aims. The matter is confused further by the political imperative for disciplines to define themselves clearly, in order to facilitate the re-structuring of scholarship. The debate twists and turns, yet it deserves attention because it explores how the awkward positioning of anthropologists will serve the discipline in the future and to what end.

Anthropology and the critique of scholarship

For anthropologists in the 'South', a particular concern is how to keep politics and scholarship in constructive tension, in the face of 'modern' scientific injunctions to keep them separate and the post-modernist penchant to conflate them. This matter has been the source of heated debate in Africa recently. An apparent revival of popular and intellectual interest in anthropology has been countered by a spate of condemnations of the discipline by some scholars of the 'South'. There have been calls for the 'end of anthropology', in view of the discipline's colonial heritage (Keita, 1989; Mafeje, 1997; 1998; Mamdani, 1997; cf. Rigby, 1996), which coincide with public debate that resounds with charges of 'colonial mentalities' and 'euro-centrism' and, recently, with calls for an 'African Renaissance'. For the African anthropologist, the debate begs a solution in the form of a distinctive 'African Anthropology': an enterprise that would dispel the discipline's colonial heritage through its emphasis on practical and scholarly concerns of Africans rather than those of the metropolitan centres of the discipline.

Behind the hyperbole there is a common concern; namely, to what extent is the objectivity of scientific knowledge constrained by the context in which it is produced, and how does the context affect the dissemination of knowledge? In other words, political, economic and cultural factors influence how scientists order and categorise their objects of study. Therefore, when political and economic agendas for society have detrimental consequences, as in the case of colonialism, we need to question both the concepts that inform those agendas and how scientific knowledge is constructed, communicated and used. In short, the question is 'whose science for whose benefit?'

The permutations of this question are amply reflected in Krotze's essay (1997), Uribe's (1997) rejoinder, Prah's commentary (1998) and in Giri's (1998) essay. In the case of Africa, the African Sociological Review has recently been the forum for a parallel debate. The catalyst was Mafeje's (1997) book review, actually a diatribe, of Falk Moore's (1994) assessment of

how anthropological research in Africa has shaped (and changed) the form and practice of the discipline. That was followed by Mafeje's (1998) elaboration of his criticism of anthropology, to which were attached five invited responses (Laville, 1998; Falk Moore, 1998; Nkwi, 1998a; Sharp, 1998; Vilikazi, 1998). Mafeje's fulminations stung African anthropologists for political as much as scholarly reasons; for instance, for implying that the intellectual and political rationale, as well as the financial demands, for the re-organisation of scholarship can be achieved by getting rid of "one or two 'rogue' disciplines" (Sharp, 1998:72). Valid points have been made by all, but the debate is in danger of losing its purpose in the confusion of polemical and substantive arguments. Rather than adjudge the merits of each contribution, we do better by starting with what they have in common. They share an aim to explain the knots that bind scholarship and politics.

In the case of anthropology, there is a very evident knot. The discipline, as Krotze (1997) outlined, was an intellectual project that respected, indeed, continues to celebrate cultural heterogeneity, and yet it was established within the context of a political project by one civilisation to enforce cultural homogeneity across the world. This political heritage has been cause enough for scholars, including anthropologists (Giri, 1998:383-384), to be ambivalent about the discipline. Further investigations have indicated links between the discipline and colonial governance: for example, equivocal explanations by some anthropologists of their relationships with colonial authorities (Prah, 1997:441) and, more significantly, the use of anthropological constructs of cultural heterogeneity to entrench racial ideologies and colonial authority. With regard to the latter link, the practice of *volkekunde* in South Africa is a telling example. In response, anthropologists can readily show that principal theorists in the discipline, since the early days of the discipline, have eschewed reduction of the concept of culture to suit political ideologies. This longstanding response to critics emphasises the intellectual aims of the discipline, and that many anthropologists sought to prevent specious use of their work. In short, both sides have tended to talk past each other. Critics can argue correctly that the response does not confront the evident links between the discipline and the political context in which it flourished. Anthropologists can assert correctly that the interplay of political and intellectual currents has underpinned a wide-ranging and intense debate within the discipline over how to define human culture.

The argument has been going on for many years, but there has been some progress. First, it has become evident that use of the discipline's political heritage alone, is a flawed premise for assessing the nature and future of the discipline. The discipline's intellectual celebration of cultural heterogeneity, for example, has suggested that it can contribute to the struggles of people against economic and cultural discrimination, through scholarship that is based upon, and is responsive to, the local cultural circumstances in which it is practised. An implication of this idea is that there should be different forms of anthropology, loosely designated in terms such as Mexican or Indian Anthropology or, more broadly, African Anthropology. However, the establishment of different forms of the discipline negates the ideal for

anthropology to be universally applicable. Furthermore, the alignment of the discipline to imperialism in the past is replicated, on a smaller scale, in the suggestion of different, 'nationalist' forms of anthropology. Consequently, there is reason to doubt whether these forms would transcend the discipline's political heritage. Secondly, both the internal debates over how to define culture and the criticisms of the discipline have gradually directed attention to the practice of anthropology.

The practice of anthropology

The aims of anthropology have been ambitious ever since its inception as a discipline in the late 19th century. The discipline took human culture as its object of study, but, in a move away from philosophy and towards the empiricism of the physical sciences, it sought to derive its theoretical contributions from 'what people think and do' (Keith Hart, pers. comm.). 'Participant Observation' formally described this practical orientation. The aspirations of the discipline were tailored, however, to suit the prevailing scientific conventions and conditions for securing political patronage. Anthropologists were to be impartial observers of social behaviour, but they were to work primarily in societies that had been colonised by Europe (and the USA). The 19th-century biological sciences provided a template for Structure-Functionalism, but, as a result, other societies were implicitly characterised as natural, self-sustaining organisms. Accordingly, the discipline supported a distinction between the 'evolved' civilisations of Europe and these other societies and hence, affirmed the colonial project to 'develop' the latter.

If anthropology had been practised so simply, there would be little credit to it. It was not so, of course, because the practice of Participant Observation was more complex than its formal portrayal. Participant Observation, with its demand for the researcher to immerse himself or herself in an unfamiliar society - the language(s), daily routines and rituals - shaped the researcher more than the 'subject'. This was novel in the sciences of the time and certainly not amenable to measured explanation. Not only was the discipline new, but it was finding its feet in a scientific context where recent advances, notably in theoretical physics, were only beginning to question the presumed distance between researcher and subject. In sum, there was tension between the form and practice of the discipline from the start.

We often allude to this tension; for instance, when teaching students about the separation of the roles of the 'ethnographer' and the 'armchair anthropologist'/theoretician in the early days of anthropology. Having made the point, we may take the matter further and indicate differences between classical scientific method and anthropological research, and even between the latter and the methods of other social sciences. Ultimately, by whatever route, we suggest that there is something unique about anthropology. This is the crux of the matter. The tension is a defining characteristic of the discipline, but there has yet to be a definitive answer to the questions of why, how, and does this make anthropology unique.

A variety of answers have been proclaimed, of course, but they tend to describe what the discipline is not rather than what it is. We can draw upon post-modernist treatises, for example, in order to challenge the fiction that anthropologists were disinterested scientists only, and to indicate that they were, and still are many things – public intellectuals, advocates, facilitators, creative writers. Elaborating the multi-faceted role of anthropologists does not define the discipline, however, for we are left with the insinuation that the discipline can be anything one wants it to be. Severe critics of the discipline, for their part, argue disingenuously to the effect that the discipline was unique for being the embodiment of the colonial project's 'civilising' mission. They can proceed, to assert that the discipline should be dead and buried because it exists out of time and place now that colonialism is in the past. Proponents of African or other forms of anthropology all too easily end up grasping at loose ends and contradicting themselves. Is a multiplication of forms viable at a time when scholars are looking towards the integration of science? Is it possible to define 'African anthropology' without contradicting its political and intellectual premises; in short, the need for scholarship that places Africans in, rather than alongside world history?

My point is that the various projections of anthropology highlight the tension between the form and practice of the discipline, but tend to see it as undesirable rather than as central to the growth and vitality of anthropology. The mid-century crisis was the moment at which this tension was acknowledged. However, it also revealed anthropology as **the** discipline that stood betwixt and between patrons and subjects and other disciplines. This was, and still is an awkward position to describe, let alone to hold. It has been proclaimed, nonetheless, in terms ranging from the defiant, 'the anthropologist as hero' (Sontag, 1978), to the poetic, 'rebel angels' (Spiegel and Gordon, 1993), to the prosaic, 'homelessness' (Uribe, 1997).

The mid-century crisis was sparked by illustration of the political and epistemological limitations of the discipline's prescribed object and formal products: the study of other societies and cultures as viewed from Europe and North America, and their representation in monographs, respectively. These foundations were untenable in the context of the struggles against colonialism, and for 'development', particularly the demand for sciences that promoted 'modernisation'. If we acknowledge these broad parameters of the crisis, we must also acknowledge the contribution of contemporary anthropological research to them; notably, the experimentation with new methods in response to the rapidly changing circumstances in which anthropologists did research (Falk Moore, 1994). A catalyst was the growing number of studies on 'social change'. These studies, in Africa the ethnographies of the Zambian Copperbelt are a notable example, incorporated innovations in research methods to involve 'subjects' more

actively in field research (Epstein, 1958; Mitchell, 1969; Van Velsen, 1967).² The consequences were, perhaps, greater than had been imagined.

First, the studies revealed a vital process within human culture. They showed that people did not abandon their supposedly tribal, insular worlds. People manipulated, even changed their traditions, rituals and symbols in relation to circumstances that forced them to migrate to cities; to become wage labourers; to adopt imported religions; to submit to and resist the political codes of colonial rule. In other words, people did not discover new ways of behaving so much as create order out of change. The inescapable corollary was that anthropologists did the same in their research. However accurate their observations of people's lives, they composed their descriptions on the basis of their experiences in the field, and according to the conventions of their intellectual traditions. Anthropologists needed to examine people's experiences of social change, clearly, but they also needed to examine the influence of their own perceptions on what they wrote.

Secondly, the studies directed anthropologists to re-appraise Participant Observation; in short, to respect it less as a method and more as a methodology whose potential had yet to be realised. It became apparent that discussing the data, theoretical premises and ideas with the people with whom they were living, even designing research in collaboration with them, would help anthropologists to understand how people actually thought about, and made sense of the world around them. It would also help anthropologists to review the concepts and premises of their discipline.

The first result of these studies challenged the discipline's scientific credentials, notably, the claim to objective description. The second result directed the discipline to transcend its original form if it was to contribute further knowledge of human culture. In sum, the discipline had to confront a tenet of science in general: the separation of the researcher from the subject. That engagement, under the banners of 'reflexivity' and 'representation' has exposed the tangle of philosophical, theoretical, and political threads woven into the discipline. In particular, anthropologists have addressed difficult questions with regard to the nature of the data, to authorship, and to the recording of social behaviour. In general, investigations of the etymology of anthropological and other sciences' concepts have been essential for researchers who have to take into account the mixing of indigenous and imported ideas and behaviour that accompany social change.

In turn, anthropologists have long since abandoned their prescribed role of documenting different cultures, and comparing them for insight into what it is to be human. The emphasis on practice during the last half of this century has directed anthropologists to examine how people compare what is going on around them with their own condition in order to construct (and re-

² Much of this research in Africa emanated from institutions outside of universities (e.g. the Rhodes Livingstone Institute), thereby suggesting another contention about the role and organisation of the discipline. (cf; Falk Moore, 1994; Nkwi, 1998b).

construct) their identities as human beings. Consequently, culture has come to be viewed generally, as a process of re-formulation of ideas, values and behaviour and, of the meanings ascribed to them. The questions that anthropologists now ask are aptly illustrated by Wright (1998: 9):

How are these concepts used and contested by differently positioned actors who draw on local, national and global links in unequal relations of power?; How is the contest framed by implicit practices and rules -or do actors challenge, stretch or reinterpret them as part of the contest too?; In a flow of events, who has the power to define?; How do they prevent other ways of thinking about these concepts from being heard?; How do they manage to make their meanings stick, and use institutions to make their meanings authoritative?; With what material outcomes?

In the light of the above, any suggestion that anthropological research supports or shackles the discipline to the form in which it was cast cannot be substantiated. The reflexive stance enables anthropologists to place themselves in the research frame, sometimes in the background, sometimes in the foreground in the case of post-modernist work. They have learned, in other words, to tread a fine line between being disinterested scientists and being participants within the grand experiment that is human culture.

The value of this positioning has not been lost on scholars and politicians beyond the discipline, for whom the promise of the discipline lies in its application to the cause of Development. For 'southern' anthropologists, this presents opportunities for translating the intellectual concern about 'representation' into political practice. The key here is the aspiration for interventions that fundamentally alter the status quo between 'developed' and 'developing' nations. A reflexive perspective underpins the aim to implement innovative projects that actually serve the needs and interests of the recipients. Put differently, the immediate purpose of applied anthropological research is to find out what is the usefulness of a project, to whom and why; in short, 'where people are coming from'. The broader purpose is twofold: to cultivate consensus amongst people on how a project should proceed, and what sort of environment it should help to create.

Participant Observation has been affirmed in terms of Participatory Research. This affirmation is double-edged, however, particularly for 'southern' anthropologists whose practical points of reference are national and international policies and plans that do not alter the subaltern status of their home countries in relation to the metropolitan centres of the world economy. There is no gain, of course, when Participatory Research is viewed simply as a method for improving the implementation of orthodox policies and plans. It leads inevitably to the conclusion that one can keep the method and dispense with the discipline. In other words, anthropologists in the 'South' have many opportunities today for consultancy work, but often, it seems, at the cost of undermining the integrity of the discipline and their efforts to re-define the logic and practice of development (Kareithi, 1998).

One might well respond that these are transitory problems, as Participatory Research is endorsed globally as a norm, and as more and more people attempt to practice it. There will be tensions in applied research, because a reflexive stance dictates that the researcher stand between sponsors, clients and other scientists, and promote redefinition of the notion of Development. Furthermore, given that effective solutions will vary from place to place, according to the particular circumstances and perspectives of the people involved, one might conclude that there will be a need for a discipline that continues to examine the peculiar, and the particular perambulations of human culture.

The course of anthropology cannot be so assured, however. Truly innovative projects presume what is commonly known as inter-disciplinary or integrated research; that is, an intellectual agenda to challenge the fragmentation of knowledge, particularly the separation of the sciences and humanities that has occurred during the modern era, (Giri, 1998; Wallerstein, 1998). This has been taken to heart by anthropologists in the 'South', for the majority live and work in conditions where the fragmentation of local, scientific and technical knowledge is stark. The problem is how to reconcile the threat to the existence of anthropology, as a specific discipline, with validation of the discipline's methodology.

Like Mafeje (1998), I perceive the 'end of anthropology', but not on his terms. A political solution addresses only half the equation. I am also sympathetic to those anthropologists who, after many years of treading that fine line between observation and participation, are impatient for an end in the form of different anthropologies. That hope is premature (Prah, 1997: 444). There cannot be specific forms of the discipline, nor can it be anything we want it to be. As Uribe (1997) noted, the central issue is the practice of anthropology and, by definition, the influence of context on that practice. While the political context has informed much of the debate to date, little attention has been paid to the key intellectual questions of the debate. This matter deserves attention in the search for an answer to the future of anthropology. In particular, I contend that the core of the debate amongst 'southern' anthropologists is the way anthropological practice has supported theoretical understanding of humans as the (imperfect) creators of their environments.

Put differently, the attempts at social and physical engineering during this century, increasingly on a global scale, have emphasised culture as a critical variable in the creation of environments. As scientists and politicians began to acknowledge the value of a reflexive stance with regard to human interventions, so too anthropology could not help but feature prominently in debates on the pitfalls, dead-ends, and promising paths en-route to, what is loosely proclaimed as, an holistic perspective. For instance, taking a sanguine view, the discipline has been singled out for criticism less for the sin of creating 'other' cultures, and more for presuming that it could realise an holistic perspective before it had really understood its methodology. Neither this ideal nor the methodology themselves were in question, and these criteria have underpinned anthropologists' subsequent investigations of how

people, including themselves, construct and reconstruct the world around them.

Political endorsement of the methodology has suggested, in turn, an opportunity for anthropology in the 'South' to come into its own. 'Southern' anthropologists may justifiably transgress disciplinary boundaries, in the quest to redefine the logic and practice of Development. In sum, we can expect to see national and regional variations in the way anthropologists transgress the boundaries of other disciplines, and in the results of those transgressions. That is the foundation for a vital discipline in the 'South'. We may give labels to these variations, but the underlying purpose would be common to all anthropologists.

This is not to deny that this agenda is cause for momentary doubt amongst anthropologists in the 'South', bearing in mind past experiences such as being sidelined into Departments of Sociology, and the current re-structuring of scholarship which often seems to be driven more by financial demands rather than intellectual purpose. 'Southern' anthropologists are right to be concerned that the integration of social science departments into 'programmes', or incorporation of the discipline into 'schools of development', may be a disingenuous exercise to re-establish a 'modern', albeit broader, division of scholarship. If that is the case, then anthropologists might well consider Mafeje's injunction for the discipline to commit 'suicide'; not because it has outlived its purpose, but because the discipline would be a victim of daring to transcend that division.

Conclusion

I have argued that anthropologists learned an important lesson from the mid-century crisis of the discipline: in order to improve their understanding of human culture, they would have to explore further the methodology of participatory research. They have, in turn, answered much of the preceding, justifiable criticism of the discipline, but the criticism continues because the discipline has neither evolved nor dissolved as might have been expected. I have also argued that both the vitality of the discipline and the persistent criticism of it are due to the awkward position that anthropologists occupy between their patrons, 'subjects' and other disciplines.

I have gone on to suggest that the recent debate about 'anthropologies of the south' is an attempt to address these dynamics. However, I contend that this debate is not constructive when couched in terms of developing different forms of anthropology, be they 'African' or otherwise. To persist in trying to define the form of anthropology to the satisfaction of critics is misdirected. The debate has moved on, for the mid-century crisis directed anthropologists to explore the practice of Participant Observation in particular, and of social research in general. The outcome is that the discipline has supported the intellectual agenda for integration of scientific research, for the axiom of reflexivity has dictated the transgression of disciplinary boundaries.

Nonetheless, this agenda is particularly significant to 'southern' anthropologists. My questioning is directed at how we proceed from our practical point of reference, the gap between 'developed' and developing nations, in order to address this agenda. The global endorsement of Participatory Research in the cause of Development suggests that the content and form of effective projects will vary, according to local circumstances and how people choose to change their environments. The insinuation is that applied anthropological research supports cultural diversification that will justify the existence of the discipline in the 'South', yet encourage different forms that reflect this diversification. The confounding factor is that the practice of anthropology defies prescription of the discipline's role and organisation.

Herein lies the merit of the recent debate. It directs anthropologists and other scholars to take the discussion beyond the current restructuring of the social sciences. This integration is happening, but it is hardly path breaking. 'Southern' anthropologists' concerns about the logic and practice of development, in contrast, dictate consideration of how the axiom of reflexivity, and the discipline itself, might be woven into the practices of the Engineering professions, for example, or with schools of 'life sciences' with regard to understanding ecological processes. Beyond that, anthropologists should be looking at the remarkable developments in fields such as genetics, medical engineering, nano-mechanics and information technology and, specifically, at the anticipated changes in people's understanding of what it is to be human. Anthropologists can be there to provide a much-needed perspective on how scientists and ordinary people alike make sense of these developments.

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