

Ethnography, Colonialism and the Challenges of Representation: Is Anthropology in Africa Doomed by its Past?

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Abstract

No matter how hard they try anthropologists working in and on Africa cannot ignore the colonial baggage associated with the discipline. Anthropology’s close association with colonialism in Africa (and other parts of the world) has tainted any attempts at claiming a positive identity for the discipline and its practitioners among many people but more so among Africans. But was anthropology historically a handmaiden of colonialism? What about anthropology’s own self-critiques and attempts to reform the discipline from the inside? Can ethnographic work redeem the discipline from its assumed colonial past? In this presentation I assume the position that anthropology as a discipline has had a more complex and at times enigmatic relationship with colonialism, and thus makes a case for rethinking the historical relationship between anthropology and colonialism. I discuss the reasons the labeling of anthropology as a colonial science came about and the role ethnography plays and can play in decolonizing anthropology both in the past and the future. Examples of classic texts, new ethnographies, and my own experiences as an anthropologist frame much of this talk today, even as I conclude that time has come to move the narrative of anthropology as a colonial tool to a different space.

Introduction

We are gathered here today, I assume for two key reasons—first that we are interested in the ways of understanding humanity that are propagated by anthropology. Second, that we understand anthropology to be a discipline that has had its successes and weaknesses and that those weaknesses especially its history if not addressed well can end up killing the discipline.

Specifically, we are concerned with anthropology as a discipline that straddles both the past and the future. Its history has often been amplified more than its future because of the period it came into being in the late 19th century. Before I delve into that history and how it relates to what we are interested in today I wish to state that I am an anthropologist and proudly so. I came into anthropology after I already had had some taste of professional life in the academy having been trained up to masters level in language and linguistics. I therefore entered into the field of anthropology as an adult student by choice. At the time I was trying to formulate a research study in which I was interested in studying music as social text. It was almost impossible to convince my institutions directorate of postgraduate studies that such a study could be carried out within the department of language and linguistics. Fortunately, I had a mentor who was on my side and fought for me to be allowed to undertake the study. That experience intensified my thirst for understanding people and their ways in a holistic and contextual way. I therefore came into anthropology due to both a push (from a seemingly rigid department) and a pull (drawn by its willingness to expand my realm of social analysis to study things that interested me).

I came into anthropology as an adult student. Adult students come into learning very clear about what they want to learn and why. For me I wanted a discipline that would allow me to understand popular music as social text but through a process that culminated in conclusions made from multiple angles and especially from the perspective of the practitioners. As I have written in my book titled *Reversed Gaze* my own encounter with anthropology as an entity of intellectual curiosity came through a textbook introducing cultural anthropology, which I read during my master's degree study at Kenyatta University in Kenya. My professor and mentor, upon considering my desire to pursue a more holistic study of music, concluded that I would benefit from anthropological training and thus lent me a copy the textbook by Ember and Ember

titled *Introduction to Cultural Anthropology*. I read the work within a week—the fastest I had ever read any book, let alone a textbook. Its content intrigued me; it spoke directly to my own academic yearning for an approach that would incorporate multiple facets of life in an analysis of a cultural product like music. The authors talked about a holistic, comparative, and contextual approach to culture in which the researcher assumes the position of a learner. The effect that the Ember and Ember textbook had on me was so profound that I changed my graduate school focus from sociolinguistics to anthropology. I was at the time teaching Kiswahili language and literature at Kenyatta University and planning to pursue a doctoral degree in sociolinguistics. A year after reading the book by Ember and Ember, I moved from Kenyatta University to Egerton University, where Professor Nyaigotti-Chacha had moved and already established a vibrant faculty of arts and social sciences. He was in the process of recruiting faculty members from various institutions in Kenya to build the newly instituted departments. I became one of his recruits and joined the Department of Languages and Linguistics to teach courses related to Swahili culture and linguistics. My research interests, however, continued to lean toward popular music, and I hoped that one day I would channel those interests into a doctoral program. That day came when I joined the anthropology program at the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign in the US. The rest as they say is history. But anthropology as a discipline has always been challenged from many facets as I came to learn during my postgraduate studies and even today.

While preparing for this talk, I found myself nursing a number of questions related to anthropology and its historical challenges. This was in part due to some of the meetings I have been invited to recently as well as in response to a conversation that took place among anthropologists in Kenya recently sparked by a piece that I wrote for the Wenner-Gren

Foundation in which I discussed Jomo Kenyatta's role as an anthropologist and the lack of support for the discipline. Many of the respondents insisted that Jomo Kenyatta was not an anthropologist and shared reasons why. Someone said that "Jomo Kenyatta was arguably neither a freedom fighter, nor an anthropologist, he stole Malinowski's script it is alleged." It got me asking "Who is an anthropologist today? What constitutes anthropology? Is it a discipline or a way of knowing the world? Why is it that someone who self-identified as an anthropologist and took anthropology seminars be denied the identity of anthropologist? Before long someone else said, "Many of us have degrees and diplomas in Anthropology yet we do not engage in any activities related to the practice whereas some have no academic foundation in Anthropology but practice it." Another one added, "most of the first generations of anthropologist were not trained by anthropologists." I found myself asking even more questions: "Can a discipline's tools be appropriated by others and the source still remains a discipline? What is it that makes anthropology unique?"

Answers to these questions have their own history. When the first department or unit to train anthropologists was started in Kenya at the University of Nairobi in the 1980s the instructors came from literature, history, sociology, and political science. This was in response to a presidential directive to the Institute of African Studies to prepare a curriculum to teach about the cultures of Kenya. But anthropology did not take root in Kenya to an extent that would be considered enduring. Maybe this has to do with its history: within the University of London's social science curriculum that was exported to the colonies, social anthropology was seen as the sociology of primitive people. The University of London's sociology program was the primary location for social anthropology and students who specialized in anthropology ended up getting a degree in Sociology. Sociology students would often choose one of two options of study—the

first option would allow them to focus on industrial or Western societies, and the second option would allow them to focus on non-Western societies studied by anthropologists.¹ Within a context of a country seeking to assert itself in the larger “civilized” world there was no room for academic studies that focused on the “primitive.” The same happened in Ghana where the first president, Kwame Nkrumah rejected anthropology because it was focused on chieftancies instead of modern political systems.

Anthropology in Kenya has continued to be unlike those programmes in other countries where it is housed in distinct departments with many students majoring in the discipline and undertaking thick descriptions of communities, organizations and societies emanating from months and years of fieldwork and participant observation. Today anthropology in Kenya is accosted by many challenges, one of them being the need to justify its existence in the onslaught of neoliberalism on university education. Anthropologists are constantly forced to package themselves and their programs to “respond to the market.” Students are seeking “relevant” and “marketable” degrees, and constantly looking for programs that sound like they will land them jobs immediately upon graduation. Many universities respond to this demand by turning job titles into academic programmes. For academic staff seeking to remain relevant to this neoliberal agenda the emphasis is on their applied skills especially in the areas of development and which they put forth when seeking opportunities for consultancy. Interests are high in the fields of reproductive health and infectious diseases and many anthropologists are directly or indirectly engaged in some type of research project in those areas. The nagging problem of malaria and other tropical diseases as well as the emergent threat of HIV/AIDS, has also created a real need for anthropology in general, and medical anthropologists specifically, to navigate the delicate

¹ See, Ntarangwi, 2010.

terrains of health, illness, and their related social manifestations. More recently the challenge of Covid-19 has attracted the interest of anthropologists with colleagues from Moi University being part of a team working on tracking Covid-19 movement among long distance truck drivers in East Africa. But how does the discipline reproduce itself in order to endure the pressures of neoliberalism?

As a discipline anthropology is currently taught in a few universities in Kenya with the prominent ones being Moi University where we have undergraduate through doctoral level programmes focused in the Department of Sociology, Psychology and Anthropology; Maseno University with undergraduate through doctoral level programmes in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology; and at the University of Nairobi with also undergraduate through doctoral level programmes taught at the Institute of Anthropology, Gender and African Studies. That anthropology is currently taught in entities where it is combined with other disciplines says something more about its position in Kenya than meets the eye. It says that the discipline's major identity is based on content rather than disciplinary tradition. It is also a reflection of the challenges facing university departments in Kenya in the wake of reduced funding from the government, which these departments depend on. In this way anthropology tends to serve external demands rather than be oriented towards producing individuals with the kind of identity one finds in stand-alone departments of anthropology in Europe or North America. There is a growing chorus of leaders and politicians in Kenya talking about the valuable degrees to be taught in universities and sought after by students. Degrees in the STEM are taunted as the solutions for the future and humanities and the social sciences as useless. This is not limited to Kenya but I target Kenya because of its culture of job creation primarily based on the service industry. Besides if the trends in technological developments continue at the current pace, most

of STEM jobs that are seen at the panacea of wealth creation in Kenya will easily be performed by machines or robots. Already there has been a standoff between tea pickers and tea farm owners when the court in Kenya refused to support the move to ban machine tea picking that had been suggested by union leaders. Should the owners introduced machines to pick tea thousands of workers will be rendered jobless. This move has nothing to do with STEM but it points to the danger of not reading the horizon of what education needs may be there for the country. But let me not get ahead of myself.

From the short WhatsApp conversation among Kenyan anthropologists that was sparked by a piece I wrote about Jomo Kenyatta's identity as anthropologist, important issues were raised that I feel will lead to an understanding of how we generally talk about ethnography and decolonization. They addressed the issue of the relationship between anthropologists and the people they work with (in this case Jomo Kenyatta and Malinowski); they addressed the practice of anthropology and its relationship to anthropological training (does being an anthropologist entail being taught by an anthropologist and/or by practicing anthropology?) and the general desire to define who an anthropologist is. But this is nothing new. Anthropology is one of the few disciplines that has taken reflexivity seriously. As early as the late 1960s anthropologist Dell Hymes had compiled an edited volume calling for the reinvention of anthropology. Later in the 1980s anthropology was faced by what was called the crisis of representation championed by postmodern thinking that was suspicious of grand narratives and the need to question subjective identities. But anthropology has also been the discipline willing to take the thoughts ideas and utterances of the Other seriously. But that does not seem to protect the discipline from critiques of its relationship with colonialism.

Let me state upfront that these are issues I have had to study and engage with for a long time. This year marks the thirtieth year since my adventure into anthropology. I entered anthropology as a discipline in 1992 when I started my doctoral studies in the United States of America. As I have grown to become an anthropologist, I have watched anthropology from different angles and places as I have often wondered what makes me an anthropologist who might be different from other social scientists within my circles. Having been an adult learner when I came into anthropology, I can say that the same qualities of adult learners prevailed when I was studying anthropology. Adult learners know what they want to learn. They are not pushed to attend classes because they are motivated to learn, and they know what they want from their education. Coming into anthropology was, therefore, a move motivated by what I wanted to get out of it based on my prior academic experiences and perceived gaps. Learning of its association with colonialism dampened my spirit but never turned me against the discipline.

It is true that a lot has been said and written on anthropology's close relationship with colonialism and in its aiding of colonial operations. Having emerged as a result of the growth of colonial rule and settler economics in Africa and Asia particularly, anthropology has often been labeled the handmaiden of colonialism (Asad 1973; Fabian 1983; Mudimbe 1988). Undoubtedly the discipline took root in the era of colonial expansion that was particularly sparked, pushed and sustained by assumptions about humans and human history that assumed a linear progression from a simple and primitive state to a more complex and civilized state. This placed humans and their cultures on an evolutionary ladder with Europeans occupying the top and Africans all the way at the bottom. For the most part the thinking behind such assumptions also generated some panic among anthropologists who assumed that the ones lowest on the evolutionary ladder were quickly changing due to Western influence and that those changes would result in loss of a clear

record of where humanity has come from. The philosophy behind anthropology was very much similar to that which was prevailing among related disciplines at the time which posited that humans could be placed in a graded scale of civilization based on a theory of “cultural evolution.” The goal was to establish the human past by studying the one’s least developed and hence closest to the original sample of humans. The anthropologist of the time (mostly White and male) was, therefore, charged with the responsibility of studying the ways of the “primitive” through objective observation and interactions and then draw conclusions about the lives of those people before they disappeared into civilization. Interestingly the study of those simple societies was assumed to only be possible if undertaken by Europeans and not the locals. As American anthropologist Stanley Diamond stated in his 1968 piece on anthropology as a revolutionary discipline, “it is only a representative of our civilization who can, in adequate detail, document the difference, and help create an idea of the primitive which would not ordinarily be constructed by primitives themselves” (1964: 433). For Diamond the idea of studying self and bringing out a credible account, especially for the so-called primitive, was not tenable. This kind of thinking fueled even more contempt towards anthropology especially among Africans who might have seen in anthropology a discipline that could be useful to pursue. The most notable one here is the late South African anthropologist turned sociologist Dr. Archibald Mafeje. Mafeje, who received a PhD in social anthropology from Manchester in the 1960s, was disappointed by anthropology when he was carrying out research in Cape Town, South Africa when he found what he termed the practice of Western anthropologists taking their “mischief to the urban area [where] they found ‘tribal associations’ in virtually every African city” (2011:19). Mafeje had written about the idea or the invention of tribalism in a 1973 article reflecting his sentiments on the anthropological categories of tribe used to study Africans.

This may explain why Mafeje, for instance, argued that anthropology is a colonial project more than sociology, economics, and political science are because anthropology is “ontologically based on alterity that is racialized,” (Mafeje 1998:3). It is true that much of anthropology’s methodological framing has been shaped by an analysis of otherness and the study of the Other, the non-Western object. Yet alterity, especially as framed by Western scholarship and imagination toward Africa and Africans, has been the dominant Western epistemology—and not just in anthropology. If anything, as Immanuel Wallerstein has argued, anthropology’s focus on the Other is a product of the larger Western academic division of labor that, in the nineteenth century, allocated the study of modern European and European-settler states to economists, historians, political scientists, and sociologists; non-Western areas with a long-standing culture to “orientalists”; and “backward” peoples to anthropologists,” (Wallerstein 1983:155). What dominates sociological studies in much of Africa? Are they studies of modern corporate people or are they trained on their various “others”, the deviant, the street children, commercial sex workers, and those with sexually transmittable diseases? Are those not categories based on some otherness? What about historians fixated with African history that only starts with European encounters mostly along slavery and colonialism? What about cartographers who show Africa as smaller than other continents while it is the second largest? In this way, anthropology is but a piece of a larger Western epistemological grand plan that was grounded in a Eurocentric regard and understanding of the world. Indeed, as Bernard McGrane has argued, Western perception and, specifically, its subsequent relationship to the alterity of Africa has been consistent in all disciplines and can be seen through an archaeology of Western epistemology. McGrane says, for instance, that before the eighteenth century, “it was Christianity which came between the European and non-European Other. Anthropology did not exist; there was, rather, demonology,

and it was upon this horizon that the Other took on his historically specific meaning,” (McGrane 1989:77).

McGrane identifies this Christian regard of the non-European Other, including Africa, within four paradigms that shape the dominant Western epistemology—theological, enlightenment, sociological, and cultural. Demonology falls under the theological paradigm, and it dominated European thinking until it was challenged and replaced by the Enlightenment, which emphasizes alterity as based on superstition and the lack of a scientific worldview. In the nineteenth century, when anthropology comes to life, the dominant paradigm is a sociological one that regards human societies within an evolutionary continuum, in which the Other—especially the African—is located at the base of the social ladder, while the European Other is at the peak. The prevalence, for instance, of Edward B. Taylor’s ideas on social evolution is grounded in this sociological paradigm. Finally, within the cultural paradigm of the twentieth century, alterity was based not on a continuum but on ways of living in which Africans were different because they had a different culture. In this most recent paradigm, postmodernism found its foothold—whereby, as Uganda theologian Emmanuel Katongole says, “there is something sinister about the postmodern celebration of difference, which at the same time renders differences ineffectual or inconsequential. In other words, the ability to recognize otherness and difference everywhere might just as well amount to an ironic shielding of oneself from listening or attending to the particular and historical claims of the ‘other,’” (Katongole 2000:240). So what am I arguing here? I want to make it clear that yes anthropology has had its share of carrying the Western academic flag in ways that have seemed more identified with it than with others. This has been a result of its initial stages where it focused almost exclusively on

the “Other.” But in focusing on the other it was possible for the West to come to terms with its own assumptions about its prosperity.

Some anthropologists even tried to counter those earlier assumptions underlying anthropological studies of the “other” by advocating for more nuanced understandings of what constituted “evolution” and showing how the so called “primitive” people led better and more luxurious lives than the so called “civilized.” The work of Marshall Sahlins on the “original affluent society” is a case in point. Sahlins argues that hunter gatherers present the earliest affluent people despite them being treated as the least developed in anthropological terms because of their ability to meet their needs and wants easily and in the shortest time compared to more sedentary communities (Sahlins 1968). But such voices have to be more and amplified. They need to be voices coming from the “margins” from places where anthropologists are not looking. Places that are then elevated by what they are saying to counter any dominant narratives. Such alternative views should enter into the center of anthropology and its knowledge production so that those making the claims are read and cited. We know that a scholar’s “value” is often enhanced by citations of the work the scholar has produced, the frequency with which that work is used in the perpetuation of the discipline through assigned course texts in institutions where the discipline is taught, and through professional growth and visibility that comes with being invited to serve on editorial boards or contribute to edited volumes introducing students to the discipline. Victor Ray confirms this by stating that, “Citations draw our attention to the ideas that supposedly matter, they are a measure of one’s intellectual influence and they shape what we are able to think about a given field. Citations, or a lack thereof, bolster reputations and facilitate or exclude one from subsequent opportunities.”²

² Victor Ray, 2018, “The Racial Politics of Citation,” Inside Higher Ed, April 27, 2018
<https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2018/04/27/racial-exclusions-scholarly-citations-opinion>

Colonial Science or Missteps in Approach?

The biggest problem that has bedeviled anthropology, in my estimation, is not its association with colonialism but its evolutionary approach where it assumes, and correctly so, that humans and human life is an accumulation of progressive steps from low to high, simple to complex, and thin to thick. It is in what meanings we attach to that process and the stages and the practitioners that has brought problems. The assumption that simple is less sophisticated or that it is primitive is a big problem. There is nothing wrong with studying others to understand the expansive nature of humanity. If truly anthropology is a cultural critique—allowing us to better understand ourselves by virtue of understanding others then anthropology is a good thing. What is wrong is when we decide that our lives are yardsticks for measuring how civilized and important the other lives and practices are compared to our own. Through citing scholars who perpetuated this approach and calling their works classics that everyone entering the field of anthropology ought to read further cements this idea that anthropology is primarily concerned about the Other and alterity. It is therefore even in the architecture of academic disciplines where certain ideas and approaches are preferred that we find the label of anthropology as a colonial project enduring. When research is framed in those terms and references then it becomes dangerous.

As Thambinathan and Kinsella (2021) note, “Among the oppressive acts carried out in the name of research, have been the perpetuation of inaccurate stereotypes of Indigenous peoples, a focus on negative social issues, and adoption of a pathologizing lens.” Whether it is anthropology, sociology, history, or political science, the subject of the research and how it is

framed shapes perceptions and assumptions about it. This comes as a result of the nature of research and the identity or orientation of the researcher. All ethnographic research starts with assumptions of the researcher. These assumptions are derived from the guild (training, advisors, colleagues, etc.) and the individual's worldview or philosophy about life and the people being focused on whether consciously or unconsciously. These assumptions in turn inform the methods of research including the questions asked and observations made in the field. As Chilisa argues, a researcher's set of metaphysical beliefs, assumptions, concepts, and values inform their view of reality, what counts as knowledge and ways of knowing, which in turn guide research priorities, choices, and actions (Chilisa, 2012). We cannot, therefore, blame anthropology as a discipline for the products that its practitioners produce. It is not the tool but the tool user that is responsible for the results.

Decolonizing Anthropology Through Rethinking the Discipline

Decolonization entails dismantling colonial forms of knowledge, especially those categories and practices that constructed humans and cultures into entities that reflected/reflect assumptions and representations of inferiority, pathology, or invalidity that in turn conform to colonial categories, expectations and projects that legitimize empire, and any forms of scholarship or research that oppress, control, demean or ignore the locals in the assumption of superiority on the part of the anthropologist. We can decolonize by first accepting that we often are products of our own generations, cultures, and training and that we are what Francis Nyamnjoh terms "incomplete", always in need of partnering or collaborating with others to be able to build something bigger than ourselves and avoid binary caricatures of others (Nyamnjoh 2017). In that regard when we read the so-called classics in anthropology we ought to measure them against their levels of

incompleteness. We see them as accounts of a single author as well as products of the expectations of the discipline. Until the emergence of memoirs by and about anthropologists' experiences in the field, there was this assumption that one could provide a neat image of society. Indeed, the difference between what is presented as the anthropologist's experiences and views of a people and their ways of life can often be guided by the exegesis of the discipline than by the realities of the observed. Ethnographies can therefore be sanitized by the virtue of coming into public domain as a publication or presentation. Who can fail to recognize the two Malinowskis we find in his academic writings and in his Diary published posthumously (Malinowski 1967)? Anthropology in this sense is not just about the products and their producers but about the entire ecosystem of the discipline including expectations of the guild and assumptions about society prevalent at the time.

Part of decolonizing anthropology also entails a reconstitution of academic disciplines as they are currently constructed and coming up with a rebuilt body of knowledge that reflects the true spirit of anthropology that incorporates approaches and interpretations from multiple sources in what we have come to see as interdisciplinarity because social realities and even challenges do not come to us in neat and bounded categories to be addressed through one perspective. As Immanuel Wallerstein states

“The social construction of the disciplines as intellectual arenas that was made in the 19th century has outlived its usefulness and is today a major obstacle to serious intellectual work. Although the institutional framework of the disciplines remains strong, there are cracks in the structures of knowledge that make them less solid than most participants imagine. If the social sciences are to perform the social task demanded of them—providing wise counsel on the problems of the present—it is time that we harvested the

richness of each discipline for use in their reconstruction. Some possible foundation stones for a reconstructed arena that might be called the historical social sciences are here suggested” (Wallerstein 2003:453).

We also ought to see anthropological knowledge production as a collaborative project between the trained anthropologists and their collaborators often referred to in different ways such as informants, interlocutors, or research assistants. As some recent accounts by anthropologists have shown these people play a critical role in the success of the work of anthropologists.

We know of many instances where researchers who ended up writing some great books owe their research assistants or collaborators a big debt. And yet for the most part the structure of academic writing relegated such contributors to footnotes or acknowledgements. Even in other areas of professional work there is little known of individuals who assisted lead scientist or practitioners. Who, for instance, knows of Hamilton Naki, the assistant who was by Christiaan Bernard, the South African surgeon credited with performing the first open heart in South Africa?

As we see more and more of the people we study writing about their own cultures and challenging our representations of their lives, we have to reconsider the standard anthropological practice that often presents ethnography as an anthropologist’s show that is singularly constructed and performed. We can no longer write for a limited audience that excludes the people and communities that we often write about. I consider myself a very conscientious writer and often write my ethnographies with the hope that the people I write about will have a chance to read my work. I was, for instance, particularly excited to read a presentation by the late Ali A. Mazrui in which he favorably cited my work on Swahili gender relations in Mombasa, Kenya,

especially given that he is both Swahili and a Muslim from Mombasa.³ Such attentiveness to our research interlocutors or subjects as direct consumers of our ethnographies makes for an important turn in ethnographic writing as matters of representation become all the more contestable. I learnt this lesson in my own research when I was working with hip hop artistes in Nairobi for my book *East African Hip Hop*. I remember tracking down one artiste through my contacts and sat down for an interview. As we talked about music in general and his own compositions and performance he turned and looked at me and asked “who has rights to the lyrics that you will use of my own music and how will I benefit from it?” I fumbled with an answer because I had never been asked that question or even critically thought about how the words I use from the lyrics of music composed by the artistes I study. I told him I will only use those song lyrics that are in public domain and will all be attributed to him as the composer. I was surprised many years later to see an entry by the musician talking about his profile that said, “More importantly my work utilizes music as a tool for community empowerment and is now noted worldwide. This is captured in Prof. Mwenda Ntarangwis book titled “*East African Hip Hop: Youth Culture and Globalization*.” Needless to say I learned my lesson that day and have since sought to engage my collaborators in the work I do including in my 2026 book titled *The Street is My Pulpit* in which I focused on the music of one hip hop artist. I made sure to ask him at each step to confirm much of what I was writing about him. Once I completed the manuscript I shared it with him and after reading it he mentioned, “It is as if I wrote it myself.” He was more than happy to write the preface for the book. As I write I am always conscious that the people in my work will eventually read my work.

³ See Mazrui’s “Islam and Acculturation in East Africa’s Experience,” a lecture given at the National Defense College of Kenya (near Nairobi), on July 27, 2004 (online at http://igcs.binghamton.edu/igcs_site/dirton20.htm).

There are numerous examples of how this collaboration can be undertaken. I know that I am here as part of the African Studies Center or programme here in Ghent. As I have asked in *Reversed Gaze* when looking at the changing nature of knowledge production in the academy especially for disciplines oriented towards the world outside, “What is the relationship between anthropology and area studies— for instance, African studies? What lessons can anthropology learn from the experiences of African studies in an era of increased marginalization of area studies and heightened focus on global and transnational processes?” In that book I share the last chapter examples of the kind of discussions that were going on within the Association of American Anthropology (AAA) at the time in the late 2000s regarding possible strategies to engage with other anthropologies through collaboration and partnerships with organizations, departments, and individuals. At the time I saw anthropology as a discipline built on collaboration at the very basic frame of its operation, as naturally suited for such collaboration and even for charting the way forward in providing models of responding to global changes and area-specific academic practices. A decade after the publication of that book I still believe in that approach to academic studies especially now under the onslaught of neoliberal education proposals that are geared towards making everything about the market and market forces.

Decolonizing Anthropology Through Ethnography

Over the years I have come to consider ethnography the most important part of anthropology. But I am well guided by Tim Ingold’s discussions that seek to move us away from conflating anthropology with ethnography. Ingold acknowledges that “if we are not sure what societies are, or even whether they exist at all, could we not simply say that anthropology is the study of *people*? There is much to be said for this, but it still does not help us to distinguish anthropology

from all the other disciplines that claim to study people in one way or another, from history and psychology to the various branches of biology and bio- medicine. What truly distinguishes anthropology, I believe, is that it is not a study *of* at all, but a study *with*. Anthropologists work and study *with* people. Immersed with them in an environment of joint activity, they learn to see things (or hear them, or touch them) in the ways their teachers and companions do. An education in anthropology, therefore, does more than furnish us with knowledge *about* the world — about people and their societies. It rather educates our *perception* of the world, and opens our eyes and minds to other possibilities of being. The questions we address are philosophical ones: of what it means to be a human being or a person, of moral conduct and the balance of freedom and constraint in people's relations with others, of trust and responsibility, of the exercise of power, of the connections between language and thought, between words and things, and between what people say and what they do, of perception and representation, of learning and memory, of life and death and the passage of time, and so on and so forth. Indeed the list is endless. But it is the fact that we address these questions in the world, and *not* from the armchair—that this world is not just what we think *about* but what we think *with*, and that in its thinking the mind wanders along pathways extending far beyond the envelope of the skin—that makes the enterprise anthropological and, by the same token, radically different from positivist science.” (Ingold 20.

In that case what is ethnography? Ingold sees ethnography as more than a method. It is not a set of formal procedural means designed to satisfy the ends of anthropological inquiry. It is a practice in its own right—a practice of verbal description. The accounts it yields, of other people's lives, are finished pieces of work, not raw materials for further anthropological analysis. Ingold sums it all up thus Conventionally we associate ethnography with fieldwork and participant observation, and anthropology with the comparative analysis that follows after we

have left the field behind. I want to suggest, to the contrary, that anthropology—as an inquisitive mode of inhabiting the world, of being *with*, characterised by the ‘sideways glance’ of the comparative attitude—is itself a practice of observation grounded in participatory dialogue.” If we conceptualize anthropology as a way of being in and thinking with the world then our teaching of anthropology moves away from how to write ethnography to sparking their interests and curiosity towards the world and the way it is. Anthropological practice then becomes what we do in the classroom and in other activities and engagements we have with students rather than what we do with colleagues where theorizing and writing ethnographies seems to take center stage. If we are lucky the ethnographies reflect the world we inhabited and engaged with through anthropology. It is there where ethnography becomes important because it becomes our medium through which we deliver the richness of the world for someone else who was not there to witness and be with it. We cannot capture the magic of the world if we do not involve those with whom we engage in ways that position us as learners who are given the privilege of sharing that world with those we left behind, those not privileged enough to be there with us. How then can we depict or narrate those experiences in colonial and demeaning ways? How can we take those beautiful moments of being in the world and trying to make sense of it and turn them into caricatures that reflect our ethnocentric ideas and assumptions of how the world is and what its inhabitants are like? If every moment of our being in the world and trying to understand it is approached with the posture of awe of gratitude and of humility, we then cannot present it in any other way but as those who inhabit it see and feel it. That way when they read our attempts at conveying their world to others, they will say it is as if we conveyed it ourselves.

Thank you.

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