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The Value of Outsiderdom, or, Anthropology's Folly

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Francis Nyamnjoh's engaging essay, *Blinded by Sight: Divining the Future of Anthropology in Africa* (2012) touches on several important issues – namely, race, Africanity, identity, visibility and invisibility, dominance and marginality, and also censorship. It is always refreshing to encounter perspectives that tend to undermine the dominant structures of a particular discipline, and Nyamnjoh's work does just that in many respects. Anthropology has always been an ambivalently regarded enterprise, but when a practicing anthropologist contests the inherent presuppositions of the discipline, it can also lead to an eventual rejuvenation of jaded anthropological tropes or the broadening of the discipline itself to accommodate re-invigorating trans-disciplinary parameters.

To begin with, the image of anthropology that Nyamnjoh presents is discomfiting. Admission into “the tribe of anthropologists” for a black African is usually fraught with many difficulties or obstacles. Within the South African context, the anthropologist is usually “white and middle class” and the subject of the anthropological gaze is normally the black underclass in the urban townships and rural backwaters. This social and professional divide has been maintained since the advent of colonialism. Nyamnjoh dwells on the power and influence of anthropology's gatekeepers, who determine who is to be excluded from, or included in, the practice. Admission to the tribe, I would contend, just as Nyamnjoh suggests, is never complete and does not offer lasting fulfilment largely because anthro-

pology, in spite of its purported respect for the values of accommodation, flexibility and reflexivity, is essentially a white-dominated discipline meant to objectify the marginalised, down-trodden black race and additional racialised Others. Viewed through this kind of disconcerting prism, anthropology appears somewhat tainted by a muted strain of fascism in unleashing the crushing weight of its superstructure on the silenced and dominated. One is obviously aware of the gravity of this accusation. But, really, whom does anthropology address? A pampered Western audience, invited to voyeuristically peer into a theatrical freak show employing somewhat hermetic disciplinary codes that rigorously maintain a disconnect with the black *dramatis personae* of said show? Or are those ambiguous codes meant to assimilate an unwitting black audience who really do not have the luxury of being concerned with such exclusionary intellectual games? The point is, colonialist anthropology has often been unkind to racialised Others. At its most unbearably exclusionary, anthropology becomes a monologue mocking the oppressed (rather than an exercise providing much-needed representation), exhibiting the differences and freakishness of racialised Others in sanctified anthropological museums, thereby excavating and breathing new life into the dead remains of colonialism. Anthropology, a formerly marginal discipline, newly whitened and admitted into a globalised academic marketplace and finally placed on a flimsy pedestal, then proceeds to assume the guise of the bona fide colonial master by donning a mask. This, to be sure, is not a productive or creative mask. It is very simply a mask of deception, and anthropology forgets that a mask separates it from the rest of the world. It then proceeds to convince itself that the mask is its real face and presents the same argument to the world. The mask which anthropology wears becomes the reflection through which it observes not only itself but the entire world. If anthropology finally realises its folly, it would still find it difficult to determine how to judge itself and the rest of the world without the agency of a mask. This raises the issue of the autonomy of the prospective black anthropologist. How does he or she negotiate the challenges of attaining credibility, respectability and dignity within such a supposedly hostile and self-destructive enclave? Again, Nyamnjoh is of the view that the virtues of tolerance, flexibility and reflexivity are what are required. Anthropology is never going to transform itself without an externally launched struggle. Accommodation, flexibility and reflexivity may in fact only lead to what Paulin Hountondji has termed “extraversion”, by which African knowledge practices and institutions lose a great deal of their originality and vigour in a futile bid for wider acceptance. In order to arrive at a truly creative and liberated space, nothing short of the disavowal of anthropology in its present form by its most honest practitioners is necessary.

In spite of his trenchant critique of anthropology, Nyamnjoh is of the view that anthropology has a useful future. Yet, the future remains bleak. The dominant actors of the anthropological tribe complain there are too few black anthropologists of the requisite calibre to impart the virtues of difference and diversity on the discipline. At this juncture, the image of anthropology becomes even more baleful. Notwithstanding its collision with the forces of imperialism in the age of classical colonialism, anthropology was in many instances a devalued discipline within the academic marketplace (van Binsbergen 2003). It was a marginal academic discipline that was transformed into a home for academic and social misfits in Europe. So it is surprising to observe how such a marginalised enterprise quickly evolved into an implement for suppressing an impressive range of racialised and oppressed Others by denuding them of voice and constructive representation. Is it then possible that this very discipline could possess the capacity to impose adequate critical attention upon itself in order to effect radical transformation? This would not appear so for the very reason that forces of oppression and conservatism never really yield ground unless compelled beyond all measure to do so.

The internal stratification within Africanist anthropology is truly remarkable. Nyamnjoh reveals:

Back to the anthropology tribe where I am not seen to fully belong, much as I might delude myself to the contrary. I am, willy-nilly, seen as a black elephant, needing to be studied and understood by members of the anthropology tribe, who are, to varying degrees, blind, even if not always aware that they are. I have, in my legendary stubbornness, refused to be defined and confined. If and when I attend conferences, my presence is a challenge to members of the tribe who refuse to embrace difference even as they have made the study of difference their stock in trade. Some hope to adopt and adapt me (the only language of relationship they understand), domesticate me to embrace their perspectives so they can show me off as a trophy, as a “Hottentot Venus” or “El Negro” [...] (Nyamnjoh 2012: 76-77).

Indeed, there is much to be said about the excerpt above. Here is Nyamnjoh, a professor of anthropology and head of department in the most highly rated university (University of Cape Town) on the African continent, bemoaning the fact of his perennial disciplinary outsiderdom. If such a highly placed and highly regarded academic can complain about his vulnerability in his chosen area of expertise, then what is the fate of emergent black scholars of anthropology in such a context? Nyamnjoh also refers to the “Hottentot Venus”, whose fate as a primal figure of colonial violence is well known. Indeed, the metaphor of the freak show employed earlier is there-

fore appropriate (see Parks 1997). Furthermore, the most unsavoury tropes of feminisation are applicable here. The black anthropologist is reduced to silence while authoritative anthropological probes are carried out upon his/her person. The figure of authority is primarily a penetrative presence while the prospective black anthropologist waits meekly for the intrusive penile attentions of the detached and forbidding figure. Needless to add, this repressive anthropological sign is yet another disturbing spectre of colonial violence. The vulnerability about which Nyamnjoh complains cannot bode well for the state of anthropological practice in the current South African context because the venturing black anthropologist is compelled to work within a state of loss. He or she begins in a state of profound hesitancy, not knowing whether he or she is the main object of a freak show for the consumption of others, not knowing what sort of composure he or she must maintain – in short, not knowing quite what to do. Within such a professional and existential milieu, very little of worth can really be produced.

As such, it is better not to be where one is not wanted. Rather than struggling futilely in a profound state of loss, it is much more rewarding to create a parallel universe, no matter how rudimentary. Nyamnjoh is well skilled in this task, having done so many times. Kwasi Wiredu (1980, 1996), the great Ghanaian philosopher, made his mark (Osha 2005a, 2005b) by developing a novel philosophical practice that inscribed the African presence on what was basically an empty page. Wiredu did not seek acceptance within the Western canon; rather, his African peers recognised his contributions to developing a practice that made absolute sense to them, and promptly accepted him.

The route described above involves an ethic of self-sufficiency and inventiveness. This conceptual decolonisation would entail the deployment of the master's tools not only to dismantle the master's house but to build a new house entirely. Henry Louis Gates, Jr, the pioneer scholar of African American Studies in the United States, not only advocated this strategy but also employed it (1992). However, creative destruction can indeed be modified to exclude systematic violence. In this case, whereby disciplinary formations have to be fashioned anew, it could mean the creation of a parallel universe that orbits on its own alongside the old oppressive order of things. Thus the two mutually exclusive worlds travel on different planes, viewing each other suspiciously without colliding. Before Gates' re-invention of the field of African American Studies, Chinua Achebe (in the field of African literature), distressed by the image of Africa and Africans he gleaned from Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, took it upon himself to construct a more befitting image with a series of novels beginning with *Things Fall Apart* (1958).

In the field of African music, it is usually the artists who stay true to the sounds of their land that achieve the most lasting impact. Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, the inventor of Afrobeat as a musical form, explored the native sounds of the Yoruba and West Africa and went on to reveal an unassailable fount of musical originality (Olaniyan 2004; Schoonmaker 2003a, 2003b; Whiteman 2012). Discovering such depths of originality usually comes with a steep price. It means rejecting the all-powerful anthropological gaze that reduces a marginal and racialised Other into an object, and nothing more, for elite consumption.

Within the West itself, proponents of new discourses such as queer theory had to launch a concerted struggle not only to organise the discourse but also to find visibility, credibility and distinction. When a discipline becomes incapable of self-critique due to complacency, then perhaps such a discipline does not deserve preservation. And if new blood must find new vessels, then so be it.

Francis Nyamnjoh is quite modest about his stature and accomplishments as a supporter of the dominated. His efforts as publication director at CODESRIA¹ in bringing the world a wide variety of new voices are well noted. He persists in unearthing fresh voices through his involvement with Langaa RPCIG,² Bamenda, Cameroon. Such activities definitely have greater value than the deliberations of mainstream Africanist anthropology. If conventional anthropology refuses to shed the blindness of its rigid discursive gaze, then it is only a matter of time before it once again becomes a marginal subject. As mentioned earlier, marginality is the foremost positionality and concern of anthropology. It is as if anthropology could never outgrow the effects of its history of institutional oppression when it was deemed an enclave for academic misfits. In turn, it had to wreak that fundamental violence on the racially dominated in order to achieve a measure of structural legitimacy. Nyamnjoh wishes to save anthropology from itself, but does anthropology want to be saved? From his presentation of the discipline, it seems to be struggling feebly within the grip of chronic exhaustion and anomie. Not only does the discipline seem jaded, it also often comes across as insufferably intolerant. Nyamnjoh's disciplinary practice, on the other hand, is the exact opposite: dynamic, while at the same time on constant alert for the ravages of hubris.

1 Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa.

2 Langaa Research and Publishing Common Initiative Group.

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