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A Debate on Anthropology in Africa

Editors' Note: In issue 2-3/2012 we published an article by Francis Nyamnjoh: "Blinded by Sight: Divining the Future of Anthropology in Africa" (<<http://hup.sub.uni-hamburg.de/giga/afsp/article/view/551/549>>). We invited contributions to a debate on the topic and published the first responses in issue 1/2013 (<<http://journals.sub.uni-hamburg.de/giga/afsp/issue/view/89>>). As previously announced, we hereby conclude this discussion with two more contributions and a final response from Francis Nyamnjoh.

Not Studying White, Up or Down, but Around Southern Africa: A Response to Francis Nyamnjoh

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Keywords: South Africa, anthropology

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Nyamnjoh begins his invigorating and provocative effort at divination with a parable, which requires reciprocity:

During a service at an old synagogue in Eastern Europe, when the Shema prayer was said, half the congregants stood up and half remained sitting. The half that was seated started yelling at those standing to sit down, and the ones standing yelled at the ones sitting to stand up.

The rabbi, learned as he was in the law and commentaries, didn't know what to do. His congregation suggested that he consult a housebound 98-year-old man who was one of the original founders of their temple. The rabbi hoped the elderly man would be able to tell

him what the actual temple tradition was, so he went to the nursing home with a representative of each faction of the congregation.

The one whose followers stood during Shema asked the old man, "Is the tradition to stand during this prayer?"

The old man answered, "No, that is not the tradition."

The one whose followers sat said, "Then the tradition is to sit during Shema!"

The old man answered, "No, that is not the tradition."

So the rabbi said to the old man, "But the congregants fight all the time, yelling at each other about whether they should sit or stand."

The old man interrupted, exclaiming, "*That* is the tradition!"

Nyamnjoh's critique is not new: Of all the social sciences and humanities, none of them can match anthropology in the intensity of its critical and reflective self-examination. This is something largely absent from the other social sciences, be it geography with its origins in military conquest; psychology (let us not forget its enthusiastic embrace by the Apartheid South African military); that strange discipline which rather pretentiously styles itself "political science" and is responsible for some of the more outrageous Apartheid designs; or economics, which has probably caused more suffering in recent years than any other social science. What is it about anthropology that encourages this critical self-reflectiveness? This is the over-arching question that Nyamnjoh engages in, but fails to address. As far back as 1910, Haddon remarked that:

perhaps the most stimulating influence on Anthropology has been the succession of controversies in which it has constantly been involved in. It has always been regarded as a somewhat anarchical subject, advocating views which might prove dangerous to Church and State. (Haddon 1910: 50)

Perhaps the easy answer is that of Todorov:

Ethnology [is] at once the child of colonialism and the proof of its death throes: a dialogue in which no one has the last word, in which neither voice is reduced to the status of a simple object, and in which we gain advantage from our externality to the other. (Todorov 1984: 250)

For Todorov, what is distinctive about anthropology is precisely its externality, its outsider perspective, or if one were inclined towards Marxism, its factor of "alienation". One is reminded of the definition of the anthropologist as someone who rejects their own society before their society rejects

him or her. Perhaps Nyamnjoh's quest for *Gemeinschaft* in the South African anthropological *Gesellschaft* has a quixotic tinge and might even be counter-productive. Once the inner sanctum of the illusive camaraderie of the anthropological elite (whoever they may be) is breached, he might discover that there is no difference. Is it racism that he is experiencing or is it "outsiderism" (or a combination of both)? Several "White" foreign anthropologists, including some prominent figures, and even South African expatriate anthropologists have had similar experiences of feeling "unwelcome", especially at the more popular destinations on the academic tourist map.

Most diviners achieve success by making claims that their audience wants to believe. They do this by careful observation of past behaviour, yet Nyamnjoh's polemic is singularly atemporal. There is no sense of or appreciation for history. Tribes, even that of anthropologists, do not drop ready-made from heaven. Rather they are products of history, often reactions to larger more powerful forces – certainly not divine intervention or inspiration. Radcliffe-Brown, the inaugural occupant of the chair that Nyamnjoh currently holds, was dismissed by *Volkekundiges* and many US ethnologists because he preferred to refer to his discipline as comparative sociology. In one of the most influential essays to come out of South Africa, "Analysis of a Social Situation in Zululand", Gluckman referred to himself not as an anthropologist, but as a sociologist, and for good reason. Following Radcliffe-Brown and Schapera, he believed that Black and White had to be analysed as part of a single social system (however problematic its definition might be); there were several important studies done in this regard, even at the University of Cape Town. Gluckman, of course, followed this up by having many of his erstwhile Rhodes-Livingstone Institute members study the British equivalent to what they had studied in Africa.

Chatterjee (1993) and recently Steinmetz (2007) have argued that at the heart of the colonial project lies the "rule of difference" and many anthropologists have been implicated in this exercise; however, at the same time, as Gluckman's work demonstrates, there is also a long tradition of opposing these cultural constructions of "difference". But strangely, the dreaded C-word, colonialism, is not mentioned by Nyamnjoh despite the clear linkage of anthropology with colonialism. The linkage extends not only to "internal", but to "external" colonialism as well. The recent, definitive, two-volume *Cambridge History of South Africa* contains but a single reference to Namibia in the index, despite the fact that South African anthropologists played a key role in justifying and setting up an Odendaal Commission-style "Apartheid" in Namibia supposedly to show an increasingly antagonistic international world that Apartheid could work, as well as serving as a testing ground for the grand Apartheid fantasy in South Africa (Gordon 2005c).

As someone who works on the anthropology of colonialism (Gordon 1998, 2003a, b, 2005a, b, c, 2007), Nyamnjoh's call for studies of "Whiteness" must be applauded, since it is intrinsic to the study of the anthropology of colonialism.

As a somewhat peripheral member of the South African anthropological tribe, but admittedly lacking the acuteness that comes with peripheral vision, I have been fascinated by the heterogeneity of the tribe and their varying and sometimes contested spheres of influence and prestige. But who are these anthropologists who (seriously) believe in the possibility of objectivity, except maybe as a strategy to impress funders like the World Bank or the Development Bank of Southern Africa? And how do they differ from peers in other parts of the world? Let us not engage in South African exceptionalism. Indeed, how much of Nyamnjoh's plea for "Whiteness" studies is influenced by the fact that it is currently a rather trendy, faddish topic in the United States and Europe? Transcontinental connections make the boundary maintenance of the tribe problematic.

The elephant that Nyamnjoh is chasing is clearly African, not Asian. Had he observed Asian festival elephants, he would have realised how well trained they were to do their mahout's bidding. One does not have to be a Marxist to "follow the money". How have funders shaped the particular profile that is southern African anthropology? Most of us are quite adept at engaging in academic pimping and prostitution – in fact, that is perhaps what university administrators would like to have as the marker of status in our profession. In the final analysis, are we not simply a tribe of prostitutes?

For myself, the one lesson southern Africa has taught me is to beware of simply categorising, especially in an essentialist way, be those categories "tribe", "ethnic group" or "people". Categories imposed with bureaucratic certainty can kill. I do not study "people", but focus on the social interaction between people. Nor do I study "down" or "up", but "around". That is, I simultaneously strive to study up and down and reflect on how I am influenced by and subject to my research projects. As a youthful Gluckman reflected on his epochal Zulu fieldwork, "I was my own guinea pig." The future of anthropology, I believe (and I hope that it is a self-fulfilling prophecy – the best type of divination!), should be as "tricksters" to late capitalism. Like the court jesters of medieval Europe, we should be querying and sowing doubt about the taken-for-granted categories of those in power, by engaging – to extend the metaphor given our status as prostitutes – in a pornography of power. We should be stripping away the accoutrements and disguises. Perhaps we should humbly practise a dubious anthropology. No one but ourselves really takes us seriously – a pet peeve of many colleagues is that writers of popular books will sometimes style themselves as "keen

amateur anthropologists” but never as amateur economists, geographers, psychologists or, heaven forbid, medics! Actively engaging in “tricksterism” should be our point of departure in divining our future. And that is why I think this is a timely and provocative intervention by Nyamnjoh.

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